

Lowcountry Camp Bridges Gaps

Recognizing the significant lack of programming in East Charleston neighborhoods, the Mozaik group, Class II in the Lowcountry, sought to fill this void through the creation of Camp Hope. While a variety of summer day camps are available in the area, keeping traditionally at-risk children safe and engaged in the summer evening hours was particularly important to these group members. The strong vision of group members to create a night-time summer camp to keep at-risk or high-potential youth positively involved in their community came to fruition during the summer of 2007. When Charleston Chief of Police Greg Mullen and YMCA President Paul Stoney were serendipitously placed in this group, Mozaik's far-reaching ambitions could be realized. With the active involvement of more than 30 partners, Camp Hope is currently wrapping up its second year.

The program has been an unprecedented success, with attendance of around 32 children per night of the 5-week program. Through the dedicated work of group members, community partners, and, in particular, the YMCA of Greater Charleston and the Charleston Police Department, Camp Hope is able to provide a wide variety of programming to the participants – everything from safety lessons to health screenings to etiquette training to swimming and tennis lessons. This year's camp also included an educational component. Two nights a week, campers work to keep their math and reading skills on level with invigorating exercises designed by new Camp Hope partner College of Charleston. By including these lessons, Camp Hope sponsors expect to give these young people a jump start for the coming school year.

In an effort to give these children opportunities and experiences they wouldn't have otherwise, Camp Hope also includes local field trips. This year, campers went to a baseball game, toured the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry, and enjoyed a Fort Sumter harbor tour. Generous donations from community sponsors made these varied trips possible.

Each week of the Camp includes a mentor night where local residents volunteer and spend time with the campers. This year, several mentor nights saw record community turnout, with a 1:1 ratio of mentors to campers. Charleston Chief of Police Greg Mullen, a member of the Mozaik group, notes that the most important impact of the camp has been these "life-changing" connections. The Camp counselors, program instructors and mentors give the campers "people who care about them" and "people who follow through for them."

Paul Stoney, Mozaik group member and President of the YMCA of Greater Charleston, points out that "Camp Hope has, I believe, single-handedly bridged the gap between the police and the community." Providing campers, and by extension their families, with positive experiences with area police, Camp Hope has fostered an important sense of trust and respect in the community. Chief Mullen shares that "to have kids in some of the toughest areas in Charleston, who attended last year, see me in public and just run to greet me is one of those Mastercard moments – priceless."

Very pleased with program progress, Chief Mullen is optimistic that the program will continue to grow and develop. Next year, Camp Hope plans to include programming for campers' parents. Feeling that "we lose a piece without the parents involved," Chief Mullen hopes to encourage family involvement as a way to have camp lessons carry over into the home environment.

Interest in Camp Hope has been widespread, with communities across the state hoping to implement similar programs. Camp Hope staffers are preparing a thorough program template to distribute to all interested parties.