



DEANIE HARPER

Ohio County Takes Youth to Heart



Quick-take

ON OHIO COUNTY

Location: Western Kentucky, including the communities of Hartford and Beaver Dam

Population: Over 5,300 of the county's 22,000 residents are under age 18

Initiative launch: 1997

Annual budget: \$25,000 in state funds with substantial in-kind staffing from county and state health and education departments

Staff: Director and 10 staff are all employees of other entities, which have reoriented their jobs to address asset-building objectives

Plans for award: Hire an asset mobilizer to broaden participation in schools, businesses, and churches; fund a mini-grant process for community projects; expand public relations.

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It's no accident that the official logo of Together We Care is a big red heart. Spread across the rolling green hills of western Kentucky, rural Ohio County plunged into the economic doldrums with the death of its chief industry, coal mining. But it's the heart of this county's 22,000 people, not money, that is the resource driving this initiative. "People have pretty much lost everything and had to start from scratch, but they're just tough," says Together We Care's asset mobilizer Marianne Pieper. "The fact that people here have been through so much is why they don't give up, and they're not willing to give up on their young people."

Still, a statistical profile reveals that the hurdles this county faces are very real: A shocking 42 percent of the county's children live in poverty and 48 percent of the adults over 25 have not received a high school diploma or GED. High rates of youth pregnancy, violence, and alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use sparked the formation of Together We Care (TWC).

But results from the 1998 administration of the *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors (A&B)* survey also reveal an extraordinary strength in Ohio County children—75 percent of 6th to 12th grade students reported regularly attending religious services or activities. Faith and tradition form TWC's foundation, says its director, James Robinson. "People here have a lot of faith that things will work out, and they'll help each other out. Our commitment is first and the money usually comes."

Citizens turn out for true coalition

Designated a Jostens Rising Star in 2001, TWC now boasts the involvement of more than 50 organizations and community sectors. A 19-member board of directors works hand-in-hand with a 25-member Youth Ambassador Council to address the four asset-building priorities identified from the 1998 *A&B* survey: expanding adult role models, developing youth as resources, improving school climate, and increasing

community mobilization.

The school district's Hartford office houses a staff of 10, though until the Jostens grant allowed TWC to hire long-time volunteer Pieper as its asset mobilizer, not a single staffer was paid by the initiative. Instead, creative networking shored up support from many fronts. In addition to being TWC's director, Robinson, for example, also coordinates social services for the school district. The state's departments of education and health, the Kentucky Agency for Substance Abuse Policy, and the school board fund the team's youth, mentoring, community education, and prevention educators; the sheriff's department, United Way, and the school board fund the DARE office; and the United Way and local contributors chip in for the clothing closet coordinator.

"I've been part of other coalitions," says McDonald's manager Valorie Tanner, "and this is the only one not dominated by one group. Everyone is there, and when you say it's for TWC, it happens."

"Before TWC, if you wanted to help kids, it was hard to know how," says Robinson. "But now, there's a go-to. Now there's direction. If someone comes in off the street and says they want to help kids, we know where to send them and how to put them to work."

The ability of this initiative to rally a significant number of Ohio County residents on behalf of youth is impressive. Consider: 4,000 folks turned up last spring (in the rain!) for the Celebrate the Child festival, and 1,200 young people generated 12,000 community service hours in Youth in Action Projects.

"Before TWC first started, everyone did their own thing," says 17-year-old Youth Ambassador Council member Katie Barnard. "Now everything's up—the number of youth involved, the number of service clubs participating. Everyone comes to community meetings and talks. There's more community involvement in the youth, and we always feel like we're making a difference."

Taking on tobacco country

That young people in Ohio County feel empowered is clear from a group of middle schoolers who decided to tackle tobacco advertising right in the heart of tobacco country. Funded by a small grant they got themselves and supervised by supportive adults, the students visited 30 stores to assess advertising and product placement.

One store, Midway Market, was extensively decorated with memorabilia from the collection of owner Gail Grimes, whose tobacco-farming family had often had to depend on the crop to make ends meet. Still, when the young researchers arrived with their clipboards, Grimes took them seriously and, like all but three of the stores, made changes they suggested. When the students returned for a follow-up visit, they saw all tobacco ads had been moved to ceiling level, shelves holding tobacco products were covered with Plexiglass, and new vertical blinds replaced the window screen that advertised cigarettes.

School mentors increase self-esteem

Interactions between the area's young people and adults are on the rise. TWC's Special Friends Mentoring Program was started in response to A&B data showing that only 30 percent of the county's young people reported having adult role models. Begun with three matches in 1999, Special Friends now has 90 mentors from 19 businesses and agencies working in every elementary, middle, high, and alternative school in the county. Teachers report significant increases in self-esteem and positive behavior among mentees.

Young people serve as mentors, too, with high school students mentoring middle schoolers and middle schoolers, in turn, mentoring elementary kids. The Screaming Eagles Academic Team, made up of special education students from Ohio County High School, has a monthly reading date with K-3rd graders at the local McDonald's Reading Buddies program. "I love reading to the little kids," says Roger Stewart, an enthusiastic team member who has cerebral palsy, "and they really seemed to like it, too!"


"All these kids have just blossomed," says special education teacher and Screaming Eagles founder



MARIANNE PIEPER

Deanie Harper. "They've gone from being wallflowers to just being regular kids in the high school. They eat lunch with everybody else, and some of the team members have now started joining other clubs in the high school."

TWC Director Robinson describes the initiative as "on the 10-yard line and running pretty good." In addition to expanding its own community mobilization efforts, TWC staff and volunteers, including its young people, frequently serve as trainers and technical support for other communities under the aegis of the statewide asset initiative, Kentucky Child Now.

As Katie Barnard contemplates her future, she reflects on what she's learned in becoming an asset builder with Together We Care. "I've learned I have lots of options I can take with me everywhere I go. No matter what I do in my life, my community involvement will stay. I'm hoping I can contribute my ideas in ways that will help youth grow in Ohio County." 

Seattle writer Deborah Fisher is a frequent contributor to Assets.

STOP SMOKING: To assess tobacco advertising and product placement, Lauren Pieper and Logan Sims interview clerk Paula Embry at the Fastway convenience store in Beaver Dam, Ky.

(opposite)
LISTEN UP: Ohio County High School student Roger Stewart has the rapt attention of children in the McDonald's Reading Buddies program.

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—James Robinson, Director, Together We Care