

## **In a changing world, our youngest citizens are supported even more**

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Where will the leaders of tomorrow in Sanford and Lee County be nurtured, taught and developed? In Sanford and Lee County. How? In a changing world, this community supports its youth in a variety of significant ways. In Part 6 of this series of stories produced by the Sanford Area Growth Alliance in conjunction with The Herald, we look at a few of the organizations created to support our youngest citizens. The series concludes today.

**SANFORD** — The world isn't what it used to be.

There was a time when more families were intact, living together, when parents could make a good living without a high school or college education. Getting ahead in life today is more complicated than it was before, but the good news in Lee County is that youngsters here have a lot of people on their side, neighbors helping them overcome obstacles and succeed in life.

When you think about helping young people prepare for a bright future, you immediately think of schools. Lee County Schools teaches the vast majority of local students — more than 10,000, in fact, each year — and have been posting some impressive results, including a graduation rate well above the statewide average.

But the mosaic in Lee County includes much more. There are vibrant private schools — Lee Christian and Grace Christian being two of the largest that combine to teach another 650 students with curricula reflecting a Christian worldview.

And over the last decade or so, many other agencies and organizations devoted to elevating young people have grown and flourished. Three of them — the Lee County Educational Foundation, Lee County YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs of Central Carolina — give some insight into how people across the community have united to give youth a strong foundation for success.

### **Enhancing Achievement**

Recognizing that so many young people are shaped by the public schools, engaged citizens led by former Lt. Gov. Dennis Wicker of Sanford formed the Lee County Education Foundation 14 years ago to foster innovative ideas in the classroom and enhance student achievement.

The foundation's flagship initiative is its Head of Class Project. Head of Class awards \$50,000 annually to the faculty and staff of Lee County's best performing elementary school. Bill Horner III, chairman of the foundation, says the award creates incentives for innovation and improvement and is the first program of its kind anywhere in the state.

Many people are involved in supporting the project. Business, industry and private donors have already contributed more than \$1 million to endow and fund the award, and Horner says the foundation won't stop looking for ways to help students achieve.

"We've literally put our money where our mouth is," Horner said. "It's easy to pay lip service to education and to supporting the schools. It's something else entirely to reach deep into your own pockets, like those associated with the foundation have, to try to make a difference. We see the year-over-year improvement in the winning schools, so we know we're making an impact."

### **Developing Character**

While the Lee County Educational Foundation makes its impact by working through elementary school teachers, other nonprofits work directly with young people. One of those, the Lee County YMCA, emphasizes character development through programs that “build healthy spirit, mind and body.”

That fairly broad mandate makes it difficult to capture everything the organization does to support local youth. There are recreational facilities. After school programs. Summer camps. And even two initiatives offered free of charge to children and their families. Energize! combines food and fitness to help families enjoy healthy lifestyles and avoid diabetes. Y Learning provides after-school tutoring — complete with a certified teacher and snacks — for students performing below grade level.

Zac West, executive director of the local YMCA, says changing community needs are constantly reshaping what the Y offers. But two things never change — its emphasis on helping young people develop positive character and accomplishing that by becoming involved in their lives, something that many young people need now more than ever before.

“We’re building relationships with kids,” West said. “We’re giving them an opportunity to have an adult figure in their life, for those who don’t have one. We’re providing an opportunity to make friends.”

### **Assisting Parents**

Many of the same goals drive another well-known organization in Sanford with a particularly strong outreach to local youth.

Like the Lee County YMCA across town, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Central North Carolina provide popular recreational facilities and athletics that give young people a place to play in a safe and encouraging environment. The clubs also offer members a large menu of educational programs stressing literacy and academic success, two keys to living a happy and productive life.

Daniel Simmons, CEO of the local Boys and Girls Clubs, says the organization isn’t designed to be an academic institution, but to reinforce what members are learning at school. And it’s not designed to be members’ “parents,” but rather to serve in place of parents during critical hours when parents are at work and school is not in session.

“While parents are working hard at their jobs, our staff are making sure that our club members have meals to eat, learning experiences, and the tools, opportunities and expectations to succeed in academics, in careers and in life,” Simmons said. “Our alumni tell us constantly how the club improved their lives.”

### **“Pretty Impressive”**

Of course, those are just three examples, and highlighting so few among so many is perilous. Many more organizations chip in as well, and all of them work together. There’s the Coalition for Families in Lee County. The Lee County Partnership for Children. And VolunteerLee.com, a website that helps youth find volunteer opportunities to strengthen college applications and recruits tutors and other volunteers to assist in local schools.

Nearly everyone believes there’s more to accomplish. Still, local officials generally agree that what a relatively small community like Sanford is doing for youth is pretty impressive.

“There is tremendous support for youth in Lee County,” said Simmons. “I have lived and worked in Mecklenburg, Gaston, Randolph and Guilford counties. I believe we’re doing great, but we have to maintain the philosophy that there’s always room for improvement and we must continue to adapt to the changing needs of our youth.”

Nobody seems to be backing off the challenge.

The Lee County Educational Foundation is now exploring new ways to recognize and reward outstanding teachers. The Lee County YMCA purchased the former Sanford Nautilus facility last fall and is now completing renovations to expand its programming. And the Boys and Girls Clubs operating in Sanford merged last summer with a sister club in Chatham to strengthen their collective outreach.

As economic and social change place even more pressure on families, the need to support young people will only grow. Groups across the area have already stepped forward to help by enhancing students' educational achievement, developing their character and assisting parents. And that will surely give local youth an even better chance for success.