

SAFE celebrates 10 years of improving lives on Oct. 3

By Samantha Corona

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SYLACAUGA - It has been almost exactly 10 years since the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement first formed and set out on a mission to improve the quality of life for families and the entire community. Ten years later, SAFE executive director Margaret Morton still speaks with an undeniable passion for the organization and its mission - one that still brings her to tears.

"It just demonstrates what people can do if they have commitment and leadership. And I'm not talking about my leadership. I'm talking about the leadership from the SAFE board and different community stakeholders that came to the table," Morton said.

But whether she wants to own up to any of the credit or not, the fact is that Morton was a part of the team that decided Sylacauga needed a place for children and families to turn for a helping hand and she has sat been **SAFE's** director for almost all of its tenure.

On Oct. 3, Morton, several community leaders, critical residents who made SAFE happen and the roughly 4,500 families that it serves will join together to celebrate the **10th anniversary** of SAFE and the opportunities it has brought to the south end of Talladega County.

According to Morton, the idea of SAFE came from seeing a need, a lot of input for a lot of influential people and an aggressive mayor determined to make a difference.

In the spring of 1996, several community leaders sat together as part of the Drug Free Schools Committee with the Sylacauga School System to discuss the schools' need to take action against drugs and the system's recent honor as national winner of drug free schools initiative.

"We knew there were a lot of good things going on in the schools, but we said 'we've still got some major issues,'" Morton said. "We knew we had some issues related to drugs and underage drinking and juvenile delinquency and all those indicators that maybe things aren't as good as we'd like them to be. The schools were all things to all people and yet they couldn't be all things to all people."

Morton said it was then that former Mayor Jesse Cleveland came up with a plan.

"He said, 'I'm mayor of this community and I'm going to use my leadership to convene every stakeholder across Sylacauga to come together and we're going to find a solution. Where in the U.S. or in Alabama or anywhere have they come up with some solutions for families who are most at-risk'," she said. "It was a very comprehensive challenge, with a very comprehensive solution, as it turned out."

Cleveland convened about 70 people from across the community - business, faith based, schools, community officials, private citizens and people who had knowledge of what the problems were. He didn't ask for money, just a signed commitment that every individual would devote their time and energy to finding a solution.

"We had about 45 folks that said, 'I am on board and I am ready to roll,' and they did," Morton said.

The group then applied for and received a \$5,000 grant from the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation to spend time going across the country to find out what other communities were doing about similar issues. They ran with it.

"That \$5,000 grant has leveraged over \$8 million in this community for that solution, and that is phenomenal to me in and of itself," Morton said.

Their attention then turned to Gainesville, Fla., where they had heard about a foundation that was built specifically to support families.

"They were getting rid of their turf issues and really partnering and they were calling it a family resource center," Morton said.

The group found out there was a more local site - what is now known as the Alfred Saliba Family Resource Center - emulating the Gainesville idea and they went to Dothan to see it.

"We divided into two groups, the bleeding heart do-gooders and the pragmatists, those that just said 'this won't work, it's just another free giveaway program. We're just going because we committed to be a part of this, but it's not going to change anything,'" Morton said.

After that trip, everything changed.

"We spent two days in Dothan and we came away saying we're going to do this in Sylacauga because it was so phenomenal," she said, getting a little choked up.

"They saw it was empowering to people to be able to change their lives, to hear people tell their story of what this program had done in their lives. People who had never worked were working and being successful, children were going to school ready to learn and to see it all happening under one roof with all these entities working together to make it happen."

The next year was spent devising a plan, researching Sylacauga and its residents and figuring out how to get a family resource center up and running.

"We didn't have any money. We didn't have anything but a desire to make a difference in the lives of the families of our community, to strengthen those families and to build the infrastructure and capacity to continue that over the haul," Morton said.

Thanks to funding from the Alabama Department of Human Resources and the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect came an office building from the Sylacauga Housing Authority and donated services from several separate community organizations.

"It just began to happen. The community created it," Morton said. "The commitment on the part of those that did, the investment and the immediate growth, it was like train that started at the station and picked up speed beyond our ability to even comprehend."

Now officially known as SAFE Family Resource Center, the central office sits in the heart of the city and is exactly what the first dreamers envisioned it to be - "the go-to place for families."

SAFE went from five employees to 50 dedicated staff members. It began with three programs and now offers 22 programs to thousands of Sylacauga children, parents, young adults and elders, including after-school programs for children ranging from fourth-grade up to **10th**-grade, a healthy marriage initiative for couples, door-to-door parenting for those eager to learn techniques and strategies for dealing with 8 to 17 year olds, HIPPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters), medication assistance, public transportation and several more.

"Every entity in the community works hand and glove with us," Morton said. "It's about a shared vision, developing it and making it a reality. It's about the board of directors and the personnel. They make this work."

It seems that at this 10-year milestone, the status of SAFE is comfortable and accomplished, continuing to work hard to provide for the Sylacauga community.

As for when the 20th **anniversary** rolls around, Morton said she can't imagine. "I'd like to think in 20 years you wouldn't need a SAFE because SAFE had done its work, but we know that's not the case. We're always going to have challenges," she said. "I just see healthy families, children being successful in school. I see SAFE continuing to do what it does, but I can't predict what it'll look like because I don't know what the needs will be and I don't know what the resources will be. That's going to be for this community to decide."

Music teacher Suzy Hammonds leads students in their weekly music class at BRIDGES 21st Century Community Learning Center at First Baptist Church in Sylacauga. BRIDGES is one of **SAFE's** five after-school programs.