

Serving communities: SAFE exceeds wildest expectations

By Denise Sinclair

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What if Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement failed to get started in 1996? Today there would be 7,000 individuals who would not be served by more than 20 programs - not only in Sylacauga but also in surrounding areas.

The state and nationally recognized program was started as a grassroots effort in 1996 by a group of volunteers who set out on a mission to improve the quality of life for families and the community.

Margaret Morton, executive director of SAFE, said the program began with two programs - case management and Child Resiliency Interactive Bonding, or CRIB.

Case management is the coordination of services, including providing information, referral and follow-up with other child and family serving agencies and entities. Case management activities include advocating for families in accessing resources, making appropriate referrals to other service providers, and the practice of identifying or addressing systemic barriers to accessing needed services.

CRIB is primary a prevention program for families of children - prenatal through 3 years of age - that promotes parent and child bonding while deterring child abuse and neglect. Pre- and post-natal hospital visits are made to expecting parents and parents of infants from birth to 6 weeks of age.

"These programs are about partnering with families," Morton said.

Shortly after the startup of SAFE, the nonprofit group got its first Home Instruction Program for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, HIPPY, grant.

Morton said that, when SAFE began it had five employees and the two programs. Today, there are 60 part-time and full-time employees providing services from the beginning of life to helping with prescription drugs, wellness and Medicaid for senior citizens.

"It is phenomenal how over the last 10 years SAFE has grown with the beginning of the process in 1996. I give all the praise to then Mayor Jesse Cleveland. He identified a need in our community on dealing with issues involving families before crisis happened. You do it on the front end instead of the back," she said.

For example, in making a case for family resource centers such as SAFE, Morton said, "Prevention is an economic issue. Every \$1 spent on prevention saves \$19 on health and mental health issues, law enforcement, investigative activities, school remediation, youth services and incarceration expenses." She said this is based on a University of Michigan research study.

Morton said there is one thing she would like everyone in the community to remember about SAFE : "We have brought over \$9 million in new dollars to this community over the course of the last 10 years.

"You go back to that research study and use the \$1 on prevention saving \$19 on those issues mentioned and we've saved \$171 million on health and mental health issues to incarceration expenses locally," she said.

SAFE is so comprehensive in scope it has been a catalyst for addressing many issues in the community. Morton said it isn't just SAFE, though, but the other entities that have partnered with the organization.

"We have all worked together in this community. We came together to meet the challenges and developed the mechanisms to do this. We created a support system to strengthen families in the community. We are helping make a difference in our community," she said.

Ten years ago, the idea of SAFE came from seeing a need, and input from lots of local people and the aggressive nature of Cleveland made the difference.

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

The committee knew there were issues related to drugs, underage drinking and juvenile delinquency - all indicating things weren't as good as everyone would like them to be.

Cleveland came up with a plan. He used his leadership to convene stakeholders in Sylacauga to come together to find a solution.

Some 70 people came together from across the community, including those in business, religion, schools, private citizens and others with knowledge of the problems.

The group 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.

The group ended up at the Alfred Saliba Family Resource Center in Dothan. After seeing what was being done there, the group decided it wanted to do something similar in Sylacauga. The end result is today's tremendously successful program at SAFE, with the entire community working hand-in-hand to make life better for families.

Cleveland, who is still president of SAFE's Board of Directors, said SAFE has done phenomenal things.

"I was mayor at the time when the group of citizens and educators came to me dismayed over Sylacauga's drug education program and where it was going. SAFE began out of that drug program. ... I said yes to the group and started inviting citizens to meet. There were from 70 to 80 that met at the Chamber of Commerce to listen to what we felt would be a good program for all citizens," Cleveland said.

After visiting several programs, including Dothan's, Cleveland said the group wanted to follow that city's initiative.

"We hired a consultant and started the program. Today it is a success story. I never would have believed it would have taken off like it did," he said.

Cleveland said SAFE started with two programs and a small budget, then began the process of getting new leadership with Morton and forming new partnerships in the community, expanding SAFE's vision and looking at how to strengthen families from health care to pre-school and much more, including workplace development.

"SAFE nurtures the entire family from birth on. There are little things you can do with small resources. SAFE took nothing and became something. That's the American way. So many people have no idea about SAFE," Cleveland said.

SAFE is a big part of Sylacauga once again being named one of the 100 Best Communities in the nation for young people by America's Promise - an alliance for youths. Sylacauga was the only city in the state to receive that recognition.

This designation is just one of many efforts SAFE provides for citizens in the community. Others include a Fatherhood Program, Reality Work Center, BRIDGES, Turning Point, SAFE Latino, Life Skills Classes, Rural Health Outreach, Sylacauga's Public On-Time Transportation (SPOT), SenioRx/Wellness and more.

These programs involve thousands of children, parents, young adults and senior citizens. BRIDGES is an after-school program for children ranging from fourth-grade up to 10th-grade in city and county schools. And there is the healthy marriage initiative for couples.

HIPPY, which is also going countywide, is a primary prevention program where there is door-to-door visitation in the home. It targets families of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds that helps ensure and strengthen family bonding, enhance school readiness and empower parents to improve their quality of life.

SAFE is a community-based, nonprofit organization whose purpose is to provide meaningful opportunities for families, to contribute to the growth of the community and to serve others while promoting community cohesion.

Morton and Cleveland both believe the organization has done this and the future is even brighter. Morton, who became executive director in 1998, said her job with SAFE has been a blessing in her life.

"I have so enjoyed it - the wonderful people I've worked with and the experiences of a lifetime I have encountered. I've seen peoples' lives changed here. It has been a journey far beyond my imagination. I don't think anyone had an idea what this would turn into. It is the right thing to do," she said.

Morton recalled an official with America's Promise coming to Sylacauga to visit SAFE and Sylacauga's Promise.

He said he went to communities that touted what they were doing and then came to Sylacauga. "He said he came here and saw what we do day to day. 'You have no idea what you have done. I have never heard anything quite like it,' he told us," Morton said.

The executive director is amazed at how SAFE has seen what it does bring people from not just Sylacauga but Talladega, Moody and Vincent.

For example, at this year's communitywide Thanksgiving dinner, Sylacauga Promise fed more than 1,000 people. This is after only five years, and the first year, only 250 got a Thanksgiving meal.

"We had a Honda executive with his family drive down from Moody to volunteer Thanksgiving Day for this. We have people from other cities coming. We have seen such a commitment from the community. This is the comprehensiveness of SAFE. There is a synergy working together. We couldn't bring the financial support into SAFE if not for people working together. The community commitment, I am saying again, for 10 years has been phenomenal," Morton said. And she said she is looking forward to the next 10 years.

She is confident that SAFE's mission, vision and values will continue to change the face of the community and through partnerships, collaborations and a willingness to create strong, interconnected systems of support for families and children will touch lives as a catalyst for change.

Margaret Morton, executive director of Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement, is shown with some of the children who participate in the nonprofit organization's many programs. Jerry Martin/The Daily Home