



Jasmyne Allen, 8, paints a rainbow on Owens Corning intern Lucian Cesarz during the 5th Annual Field Day at the Friendly Center of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio, in July 2013. Photo by Lori King/*Toledo Blade*.

Gathering Up the Neighbors

THE FRIENDLY CENTER IN TOLEDO, OHIO,
HELPS MAKE NEIGHBORS OF ALL IN THE COMMUNITY.

by **MARY BETH COUDAL**

"I feel better when I am here because I'm less angry," one middle school boy recently told Amelia Gibbon, executive director of the Friendly Center in Toledo, Ohio. Ms. Gibbon frequently hears this kind of comment. The Friendly Center inspires a positive change for the people who need and use the center—volunteers, community members or children. Some recognize the transformative power of the center, and others learn to cope and care for one another without even realizing it.

The Friendly Center has offered creative and relevant programs and services to the North Toledo community since its inception in 1923. Earlier, in 1908, the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal

Church founded the center as a home for immigrant women.

The Friendly Center, one of United Methodist Women's nearly 100 national mission institutions, provides women, families, teens, preteens and children encouragement and opportunities to make healthy choices in a rapidly changing neighborhood. Once home to new immigrants from the Middle East, mostly Lebanon, the North Toledo neighborhood is now home to a mosaic of many faiths, races and family structures.

When asked how the Friendly Center celebrates such diversity, Tina Basinger, West Ohio Conference United Methodist Women secretary and member of the center's board, re-

marked, "Every time the Friendly Center has an event, it celebrates diversity."

Terry Robideau, the president of the Maumee Watershed District United Methodist Women, is another United Methodist Women member who volunteers at the center and serves on its board. At first, she was reluctant to participate.

"I was raised in the country—whites stayed with whites and blacks with blacks," Ms. Robideau said. "God puts us in places and we don't know why. We are to be faith, hope and love in action. This is God's doing and our doing together. It doesn't matter the color of your skin or where you're from, you are welcome at the Friendly Center. We are all God's children."

When asked how the Friendly Center is different from other community centers, Ms. Robideau replied, “It’s different because they care. They care about everyone. Not just one person or one group.” Like many people interviewed for this article, Ms. Robideau mentioned the gracious hospitality from the caring and dynamic Ms. Gibbon.

A new attitude

Zaniyah, a child at the center, reported that the best parts of the Friendly Center are “the activities, the places we go, the helpers and assistants and all of the other people.” The Friendly Center allows the neighborhood a place “to gather up and play nicely.”

For children, the Friendly Center is a haven, a sanctuary to try new things. Among recent offerings, the children have had a chance to try meditation and yoga. The children, giggling, enjoyed stretching beyond their comfort zones.

“Where else would they have tried it? Not school,” said Ms. Gibbon. “We have to look outward, beyond our own concepts.”

On field trips, the children have traveled to the new neighborhood swimming pool, met the mounted police, visited with firefighters and toured the Toledo Museum of Art. At the museum, the children made masks and constructed mobiles. As they created the Calder-style mobiles, the children engaged in a lively debate, metaphorical and literal, about the meaning of balance.

Many children, like Navaeh, enjoy celebrating holidays at the Friendly Center. Navaeh’s favorite event is the annual Easter Egg Hunt. Ms. Gibbon’s favorite holiday tradition is the Pumpkin Patch. Children arrive in strollers and leave with pumpkins in their stroller



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Maurice Green, 13, sets up for a shot during the 5th Annual Field Day at the Friendly Center of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio. Looking on is Owens Corning intern Jesse Baker.

seats. Toddling happily beside their strollers, the toddlers show off their pumpkins.

For adults, the center is a place to learn life skills. The center offers GED classes, tutoring, emergency food sustenance and other direct services. A healthy eating initiative, Health By Choice, offers free meals and conversations about nutritious meal planning for parents and caregivers. In a neighborhood some have called a “food desert,” the community learns and

shares the possibilities for nutritious and tasty meals.

Meeting challenges

Like most nonprofits, Friendly Center continues to face funding challenges.

“Like any good business we have to be concerned with keeping the lights on and providing a safe place for our families to gather, and transportation services are urgently needed as well,” said Ms. Gibbon. “Many neighbors are faced with transportation barriers and

depend on us to pick up their kids for field trips. We are also partnering with our neighborhood clinic to pick up families for health services. Unfortunately, many funders only want to give money for direct service, not operations. This is where our United Methodist Women partners become vital to our sustainability. ... Without the donations of unrestricted dollars we could not continue to serve our community.”

United Methodist Women members give their resources and time to the



Dave Zaporosky/Toledo Blade

Youngsters from the Friendly Center, including Chloe Wentworth, 8, facing camera, try out donated towels following the opening of the Jamie Farr Park pool Wednesday, July 23, 2014, in Toledo.

Friendly Center through its guild; volunteers like Ms. Basinger and Ms. Robideau encourage fellow United Methodist Women members to give to and help at the Friendly Center. Ms. Basinger has volunteered since her adult children were small, lending a hand by tutoring preteens, planting flowers and helping to send mailings, among other tasks as needed. Ms. Robideau regrets that she did not know about the center when she needed support as a single mother with two young children.

Ms. Robideau enjoys entering the center, hoisting cases of Campbell soup through the front doors. She receives such a hearty welcome. When her United Methodist Women-appointed term ends at the center, she plans to stay on as a volunteer. She reports having gained many life lessons.

Inspired by the people she has met at the center—individuals struggling with disabilities, low income or unemployment—she has begun to reframe her own family of origin struggles. Realizing that a conflict between her parents that has persisted for years must be addressed, Ms. Robideau said, “I have to be the one to mend the wedge and make things better. We need to get this family back together and get along.”

The meaning of community

On a recent Saturday night, dozens of middle school children came to the center’s gym to play basketball. One boy sat on the bench, taking off his gym shoes.

“What are you doing?” the coach asked him.

“My friend needed shoes to play. I’m giving him mine.”

From the sidelines, Ms. Basinger remarked, “To me, that’s community.”

“God has a plan for all of us,” she continued. “Sometimes when times are tough, we forget God has a plan. We don’t see beyond the present, and Friendly Center is trying to show people that plan and let them see that there is hope.”

The volunteers and community members at the Friendly Center are living up to its motto: “Friendly to every-

If you’d like to support the Friendly Center, visit www.unitedmethodist-women.org/nmi. There you can choose to support a specific national mission institution or give to the general national ministries fund. Your giving changes lives.



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one who uses it and central to the community it serves.” Or as Destiny, a child at the center, put it, “I get to make friends, be around good people, become a better person and behave better in school.”



Phyllis Barner, 7, puts a pie in the face of Owens Corning intern Moshood Olowu, 27, during the 5th Annual Field Day at the Friendly Center of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio.

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