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- CityYouth Executive Director
Hannah Caddy

The Magic of CityYouth

Transforming Students' Lives in the Heart of Downtown Jonesboro

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

CityYouth Ministries, a faith-based nonprofit organization that provides after school and summer programming for underserved kindergarten through sixth-grade students in the City of Jonesboro, has been an important mainstay in Downtown Jonesboro for 25 years. Executive Director Hannah Caddy continues to grow the nonprofit's impact and offerings as she introduces new curriculum to the program's 100 students.

Caddy came to CityYouth Ministries three years ago with a heart for serving Jonesboro's children. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with an emphasis in elementary education, art and history from Arkansas State University, where she also met her husband, Anson, they realized they didn't want to leave their alma mater's hometown.

"While at A-State, we fell in love with the City of Jonesboro and the people there and decided we wanted to make it our home," said Caddy.

She began her work in mental health as a qualified behavioral health specialist at what is now Leadership Magnet School in the Jonesboro School District. When she got the opportunity to become executive director of a nonprofit organization that worked with those same children, she jumped at the chance.

"I came to CityYouth from the Jonesboro School District, so I have had a heart for kids in this community specifically, especially at-risk youth," said Caddy. "I knew many of these kids already because it was a building I had worked at."

CityYouth is able to impact the lives of 100 students in the Jonesboro School District each week. Of those students, 100% qualify for free or reduced lunches at school, and 80% of them live within identified underserved, low-income communities. After school, the students are bussed to the downtown ministry center, where they are greeted with a warm meal and a variety of programs and classes, including academic tutoring, homework help and extracurricular activities such as tennis lessons, dance, yoga and gym recreation. Faith is also a central part of CityYouth's daily mission; discipleship groups, praise and worship, and devotional time are all offered to the students.

Caddy has been instrumental in making space for more students and adding additional programming to CityYouth.

"One thing that has been important for me to address is that we didn't have a specific partnership with a school district," she said. "I knew then we could better serve our kids, our families and our community if we had a partnership with the schools. We partnered with the Jonesboro School District, and there were two really big things that came out of that partnership. Prior to our partnership, we had four passenger vans, and we were spending so much time and resources acting as an Uber between schools and our location. Now, through that partnership with four of the five magnet schools that we serve, we are now a stop on the district's bus route. Mandy Zipfel, who is also a board member, was a key



player who was able to get that partnership established.

"We have also changed our application process. Before, it was more of a community center, but with our partnership with the school, we now have a referral program where they refer most of the students in the program. Anyone can apply, but those students have a priority."

Zipfel, who was the assistant principal at what was MicroSociety at the time, first met Caddy during her time running the magnet school's after-school program. She was excited to partner with her again to be able to make a greater impact with CityYouth's resources.

"Once I realized that the bulk of CityYouth students attended Jonesboro schools, we begin to brainstorm how we could better serve those students after school, and transportation was a burden for CityYouth at the time," said Zipfel, the district school improvement specialist for Jonesboro Public Schools. "After a few conversations with our transportation department and building principals, we decided an easy solution would be for us to drop JPS students off at CityYouth. It was really a win-win for everyone. We are committed to supporting CityYouth and feel that it is truly an extension of our school. We share academic data, resources and try to help CityYouth best meet the needs of their students."

Zipfel is joined on the board of directors by Board President Jerry Halsey, managing partner and executive director of Halsey Thrasher Harpole Real Estate Group; Board Vice President Brittney Flowers, senior business development officer of Centennial Bank; Board Secretary Taylor Mitchell, co-owner of Chick-fil-A Turtle Creek; Board Treasurer Randy Reynolds, bank president of Evolve Bank and Trust; Kathy Buchanan, partner with Neil Stallings Properties; LaKisha Miller, program manager of the Division of Disability Services; Christina Berner with

Jetton Construction/University Lofts; Maddy Snyder with FMH Conveyors; Rob Watson, an ICU nurse at St. Bernards Healthcare; Ashley Moore, assistant vice president of Cadence Bank; Dina Mason, owner of MOR Media Inc.; and Bart Smith, licensed associate counselor with Piney Ridge Treatment Center. Together, these community leaders have partnered with Caddy, Hospitality Coordinator Amanda Smith and and CityYouth Operations Director Michelle Rogers to help secure more funding to make a greater impact.

Through donations, various community partnerships, grant funding, local churches and individual donors, CityYouth continues to be able to provide programs at no cost to students and their families.

An upcoming opportunity to support CityYouth is the seventh annual Best Under The Sun Banquet, which will take place on July 25 at 6:30 p.m. at the ballroom at A-State's Centennial Hall. For the event, the nonprofit has partnered with the Jonesboro Sun to honor Northeast Arkansas's best athletes under the sun. Fifty-dollar tickets to the banquet include dinner, a guest speaker and the presentation of athletes to receive their awards, and all funds raised by the estimated 600 attendees will help CityYouth continue its ministry at no charge.

"We recently saw a need to add another 20 students because our waiting list is pretty substantial, so we tried to get creative," said Caddy. "We were able to secure some funding through one of our grants, and we were able to make another class out of the wasted space in the lobby. Every little bit helps, and that is 20 more students we are able to work with now."

The curriculum has also expanded thanks to Caddy's vision.

"We are intentional; no part of our program is haphazardly thrown together," said Caddy. "We try to ask, 'Does this help

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their social, emotional needs, does this help get them caught up on education, does this help engage their family?’ So, adding a robotics program was something that was really important to us. Our demographic really doesn’t get the opportunities that some kids do to independently do those kinds of things after school because most of those things cost a substantial amount of money, so it was important for us to see how we could bring things that kids might be interested in to our facility, and again, at no cost to the families. With that program, we were able to hire in a certified robotic instructor. She teaches that class every Monday to our group of students, and they build and maneuver their own robots. It’s pretty incredible to see.”

CityYouth has also added a STEAM tinker studio for first and second graders. Caddy says that while it looks like independent play, it is really teaching the young students the fundamentals of engineering.

As the nonprofit kicks off its summer programming for its students, which range from rising kindergarteners through sixth-graders, Caddy is working to further involve the community in teaching important life skills. During the summer, students will be at CityYouth Tuesday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., which is for fewer days, but more time than the school year. The staff also has plans for many themed parties and a luau.

“For us, we are trying to find more community partners who can share their talents and skills with our kids,” said Caddy. “Having positive adults share life with the kids is such an underrated quality and something our kids need. It’s so important for them to see positive adult life skills that have to be taught.

“One thing that was really sweet, this past summer, they had a community garden nearby. One group of senior adults taught them how to turn their fruit into jam, and they got to take it home to their family. The students got to plant, grow and harvest the garden; they were able to see the final product, and that was so special. Any life skill people have is not too small or big or old fashioned or new school for them to want to share that with kids in our community.”

For those not able to share a skill, CityYouth is always in need of snack donations to help feed its students.

“We serve a snack and a meal every day, which is more than 400 each week,” said Caddy. “Individual snacks are something we need, and there are lots of different options for that – granola bars, peanut butter crackers – things like that go a long way in making sure that kids don’t go hungry.

“We have kids stuck in vicious poverty cycles. We have kids who if they are not at school and not at our programming, they don’t know if they’re going to get to eat at home. I don’t think people realize that happens here. If people realized that, it might not seem like a big deal to drop off a box of granola bars. That’s the reality.”

Caddy says the nonprofit’s Downtown Jonesboro location allows staff and volunteers to reach its students on a more personal level.

“We are in the heart of Jonesboro,” she said. “We are right in the middle of the kids and neighborhoods we serve. ...

“I love what I do. We get a firsthand seat to see how what we do impact people’s lives. Sometimes it’s easy to be removed from a donation or see how something actually helps, but we see every day how that child is impacted. It’s a big honor to get to witness that and one we don’t take lightly. But that’s also the hardest thing – we get a close-up view of the need that is there, and it’s really there.”

That dire and often unrealized need is why CityYouth’s staff and board of directors encourage the community to get involved with the nonprofit any way they can.

“I want people to know what we do here really feels like magic,” said Caddy. “If they ever have a chance to visit and learn about what we do here and tour the building, I think it would be really hard to look away from the need that is presented and to not want to rally behind us and get involved.

“This is one of the most fulfilling jobs I’ve ever had, and a lot of our staff feel the same way. It’s easy to love our kids and love what we do, so that makes the hard (part) a little bit easier, too.”

For more information about CityYouth, located at 118 Burke Ave. in Downtown Jonesboro, call (870) 932-9398 or visit cityyouthnea.org.

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