

THE ASCENT™

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Community Development Corporation

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Update on the Beltline Youth Enrichment Center

By Leigh Bonner, Interim Director, BYEC

The Beltline Youth Enrichment Center seeks to enrich the lives of young people in the Beltline community by offering classes and guided play to allow personal and spiritual growth; working in the community; and providing a safe place to play and learn.

On a typical day during our Summer Arts Institute, children arrive at 11 a.m. for indoor games, puzzles, and art. We have community lunch at 11:30, and after lunch the playground swarms with children playing basketball, swinging and using their imaginations. Quieter children draw and color or play games inside until

class starts at 1 p.m. When class begins, a temporary lull overcomes the center as structured learning begins. The lull doesn't last long, however, because soon students get excited about learning and ask their teachers endless questions about what they are doing.

Theater students watch old films and learn about how people get into character. Responding to what they have learned, the children then act to prepare for the performance of the end-of-summer play. This year, the production will be based on the Moses story, adapted for a modern setting. The art class, which meets each Thursday, is currently learning basic art techniques, which they will use to make costumes and props for the play. The woodworking class, which meets on Wednesday mornings, is learning techniques that will help them make the sets and backdrops. The music class will be singing in the production, while the computer class will create advertising materials and a playbill. The cooking classes will prepare and serve refreshments during intermission using the cooking techniques they have learned this summer. The children are nervous but excited about putting on a play for their neighbors and the larger community.

Outside of class, the children are learning how to play with one another peacefully and how to use their manners with adults and with each other. It is motivating for the staff and children alike when a line forms at the kitchen window for receiving snacks or lunch and the children thank their friends for serving them. Throughout the day, the staff has noticed the children using their manners more and more automatically, requiring the same respect from everyone. The children encourage each other to use their manners, clean up after themselves, and play fair.

Though we have occasional setbacks, we have made tremendous progress in helping our children learn love and respect. Above all, we seek to *show* the children love and respect so much that they will learn by example as well as by verbal prompt. Our stoplight system and Good Choice Awards system keep our children motivated towards good behavior. At the end of the day on Thursday, our children who have earned enough stars for good choices are allowed extra snacks or prize box drawings based on the number of stars they earned during the week. Seeing how the children react when they are rewarded for good behavior motivates the entire BYEC community to make similar choices. Gradually, our community is developing



Belt Line children and adult staff and volunteers recently visited Memphis Children's Museum.

behavior like those who set good examples, and we expect great things of everyone as a result.

Working at the BYEC is a challenge for our staff, but our reward comes in more than just a paycheck. Knowing that we provide a safe haven for community children, keeping them off the streets and away from as many negative influences as possible, reminds us that we play a vital role in these children's lives. When a child's grades improve in school, when a child gains confidence, or when a child learns something new, we rejoice that God has accomplished great things through our center.

Our staff, in addition to myself, includes, Deshonna Lewis, Assistant Director and Director of Communications; Antonio Quinn, Theater Director; and Geraldine Bean, Housekeeper. Andy Mrkva, a graduate student at the University of Memphis, is conducting a neighborhood oral history project (See story below.)

Hours of Operation

The center opens at 10 a.m. for staff, 11 a.m. for children, and closes at 4 p.m. Once school starts, our hours will go back to 2-7 p.m. for staff and 3-7 p.m. for children. At the end of the day before closing, the children have helping jobs, which include washing cups, sweeping, cleaning mirrors, straightening up the center, rinsing cans and bottles for recycling, taking out the trash, stacking the stools, and wiping down countertops and tables.

We will be having a play at the end of the summer, on **Saturday, August 2 at noon, at the Mount Pleasant MB Church** across the street from the center.

Volunteer opportunities

Volunteers are much needed and are most helpful if they can come before the children, about 15-20 minutes before 11 a.m. Volunteers can either take a shift from 10:45-1:30 or 1:30-4, or they can stay the entire day. If volunteers are teaching a class, co-teaching a class, or helping class teachers, they can come just for that class if they wish.

Volunteers are also needed for greeting the children at the door as they come in, making sure the ones who do have class sign in and wash their hands, serving water in the kitchen and monitoring kitchen ins and outs, monitoring the playground and mentoring kids as they play ball, chaperoning monthly field trips and numerous other tasks.

For more information on volunteering at BYEC call Leigh Bonner at 763-1611 or Bill Marler at 338-7055.

Beltline Oral History Stories

By Andrew Mrkva,
BYEC volunteer and U of M graduate student

This summer, several youths are joining Andrew Mrkva, an intern from the University of Memphis, in an oral history project in motion to gather stories of the community and tell their story within a film of their own.

Each youth will learn how to perform intensive ethnographic and oral history research, interview residents on video, and edit their video into a film using the facilities of the Beltline Youth Enrichment Center. The project will require youths to learn these various skills and how to tell someone's story using sounds and visuals while supporting facts with resources they obtained through research.

We will then hold a film festival to screen each youth's video to community residents at the end of the session. The project also presents an opportunity to publish the youth's videos onto the web so that their stories may be heard by even more people. The project will also facilitate the creation of a Beltline cultural archive that will contain traces of the community's culture and past. This undertaking will emphasize the reclamation, preservation, and expression of cultural heritage within the context of the Beltline community.

The program will provide an opportunity for youths in the community to learn valuable skills in writing, researching, communication, leadership, and team work. The youths will also acquire valuable skills in computers, video production, and utilizing the latest tools of online technology for publication and information gathering. Finally, this undertaking will emphasize the reclamation, preservation, and expression of cultural heritage within the Beltline community by gathering the stories of the people who have lived here and developing the foundation of the Beltline Cultural Heritage Collection.

If you have questions, please contact Andrew Mrkva, University of Memphis graduate student in Anthropology, at 419-902-3431.



Belt Line children and youth cross the railroad tracks on their way to the Memphis Children's Museum. The Belt Line youngsters also have to cross these tracks each day to go to school.

Beltline Advisory Task Force formed

In a collaborative effort between the University of Memphis Department of Anthropology and Jacob's Ladder Community Development Corporation, the Beltline Advisory Task Force has been formed to provide residents of the community an opportunity to give meaningful input concerning the problems, hopes and aspirations of the neighborhood they call home. The group meets at Mt. Pleasant Missionary Baptist Church, right across the street from the Beltline Youth Enrichment Center.

Geraldine Bean of Lundee Neighborhood Watch, Sharon Stone of Beltline Neighborhood Association, and Jerry Jackson of Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church have lead the way for the new group as tries to become a unified voice and force for good in the Beltline. Dr. Keri Brondo, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the U of M, and Rev. Bill Marler, Jacob's Ladder's Executive Director, have been there to, as Rev. Marler puts it, "serve as midwives for the process."

Others involved in the planning process were Katherine Lambert-Pennington of the U of M, Andrew Mrkva of the U of M, Sutton Mora of Cooper Young Development Corporation, Mike Ryan of Christian Brothers University, Carl Shields of Memphis Area Teacher's Credit Union and Fenton Wright of the Memphis shalom Project.

The task force has met with the City of Memphis Code Enforcement Division, the Memphis Police Department and others to discuss the challenges of problem properties and crime in Beltline. The group is also hoping to engage in direct talks with the developer and the city concerning redevelopment of the Fairgrounds and the future of Beltline in the light of the changes to come at the old Fairgrounds property. Both the city and the developers have pledged

to treat the community with sensitivity as the changes come, but it is as yet unclear just what those changes will look like.



Children from the Beltline enjoy playing basketball on the BYEC playground. Though the area is small, it is one of the few good places for kids to play in Beltline.



Some of the youth from BYEC who visited the Children's Museum on a recent field trip with center staff and volunteers.
-Photos by Andrew Mrkva

A study by Dr. Brondo and a team of anthropology faculty and students from the U of M has completed a survey of the Beltline neighborhood, identifying community strengths and assets such as long-term relationships among neighbors, easy walking distances between residents, senior citizen role models, commitment to the neighborhood, family networks and the overall residential flavor of the area. Liabilities identified include gangs, prostitution, shootings and killings, vicious dogs, lack of public recreation space, truancy and loitering, thefts and problem properties where housing has deteriorated and drugs are used and sold.

From the perspective of the neighborhood's children, the major assets of the community are Jacob's Ladder's Beltline Youth Enrichment Center, involvement in sports through schools and churches and a trampoline owned by one of the neighbors.

We welcome and are deeply grateful for your financial contributions and gifts of time to Jacob's Ladder Community Development Corporation.
To learn more about how you can help financially or volunteer your time, contact Rev. Bill Marler at 327-3771.

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