



PATHWAY

# WALKING alongside

strengthening congregational community ministries

## » Kids Hope USA «

### » KIDS HOPE USA - FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF KNOXVILLE, KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Carol McEntyre, Buckner Director of Community Ministries at First Baptist Church of Knoxville, Tennessee, has seen miracles in her own church through their work with Kids Hope USA. This program has helped her and others to hold on to the hope that more students would graduate high school and stay out of prison. "Buckner introduced the program to our church," she said, as she explained how Buckner's guidance and the grant Buckner provided started the program that made it all possible.

Through Kids Hope USA, McEntyre has watched adult mentors at her church develop loving, caring relationships with elementary school students and their families. She has spoken to adults who have become so invested in children that they grieve over a parent with cancer or a family without electricity. She has heard stories about teachers asking mentors for help because of the strong influence the mentors have become. As she sees mentors ages ranging from 20 to 80 years, she discovers that the one-on-one relationships are as meaningful to them as they are to the children.

#### Goals of the ministry

A national program involving more than 400 churches, Kids Hope USA began in 1993 to provide at-risk children with at least one continuous relationship in their lives. It recruits member churches to partner with local elementary schools to provide one-on-one relationships. Its motto, "One child, one hour, one church, one school" translates to a church commitment of finding at least 10 mentors who will spend at least one hour weekly with 10 children at a public elementary school. Since 2005, First Baptist has collaborated with South Knoxville Elementary School. Although the program began with the required 10 mentors, the number has risen to more than 30.

"The idea is to have your church engage one local elementary school," McEntyre said. "It is a faith-based program. Although we don't go into the schools and talk openly about Christ, we try to go and be Jesus with skin on, to be that unconditionally loving, caring presence. We have many relationships that have been going on for multiple years—some for four years. They go to the school, meet with the child, and focus on academics and relationship-building." Although academics make up part of the hour mentors spend at the school, tutoring is not the main goal. According to McEntyre, "The most important thing is making sure children know that there are caring adults in their lives that will show up when they say they will."

She has seen amazing results. After mentoring a child for four years, one gentleman was asked by the teacher to talk, during the school day, to a child who was having a particularly difficult day. Another mentor arranged for his mentee to shadow a veterinarian for an afternoon because that is what the child wanted to be.

#### Funding the ministry

Churches pay an initial affiliate fee to Michigan-based Kids Hope USA. As a requirement of the program, they must also pay a person in the church to direct Kids Hope. McEntyre estimates the cost at about \$140 per mentor-child match, which is cheaper than other mentoring programs. "It works so well because the church has ownership over the program," McEntyre added.

MORE ON BACK

**Recruiting volunteers**

The program has grown every year. "Every year we publicize it and get new mentors," McEntyre said. Recruiting mentors is not difficult because the success of the program spreads by word of mouth. "You must have training to be a mentor, and we do that a couple of times a year. We also do background checks."

**Structure of the program**

Kids Hope USA requires that churches adopting the program partner with only one school so that the church can be really invested in that school. Each church must also provide a director for the program, conduct background checks of mentors, and work with the school's teachers to match each student to a mentor. After that, the school-church relationship takes its own form. In the spring, a team of volunteers from First Baptist Knoxville goes to the school to mulch the grounds and get them "spring ready," McEntyre said. The church invites teachers and students to church events, including annual Easter egg hunts and church festivals.

**Promoting the program to the community**

Since Kids Hope USA is a church-based program, churches recruit mentors from within their own membership. "People in the community do want to mentor children," McEntyre explained. "If they are involved in other churches, I encourage them to start a program at their church." First Baptist was the first church in Knoxville to start Kids Hope USA. It adopted a goal of matching all elementary schools in the community with a church, McEntyre said. After four years, it has helped establish 10 programs. "Once a new church gets on board, they reach out to their church network and we draw more churches in," she said.

**Program as evangelism**

Kids Hope USA operates in public schools. Once mentors get to know the children, they often invite them to events at the church. Sometimes whole families start attending services. "There are ways to share (faith) with the children" McEntyre added, "They will know there is something different about this person who will stick with them through thick and thin. It does not matter if you are liberal, conservative, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian or non-denominational. Everyone can agree that mentoring children is a good thing."

By: Barbara Elmore

**Stepping Stones**

*Brief descriptions of how to implement specific ministries. For each of the five broader areas above, many ministries can be envisioned. We have identified a few of these for each area and have articulated the steps for how that ministry might be planned.*

**Backpacks**

*The Walking Alongside Web site provides a Backpack of additional resources and examples for this specific ministry. Included are published articles, Web sites, selected books, testimonials and existing ministries with contact information.*

**Food for the Journey**

*A short devotional based on scripture that can be used in church bulletins, as a Moment for Mission during worship or as an introduction to a Bible study.*