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More H.E.L.P.

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More H.E.L.P.

by Becky St. Clair

What began as a small group of MDiv students deciding they wanted to make a difference in the nearby community of Benton Harbor has grown into an initiative that hopes to reach all the Grades 1–3 children in the Benton Harbor School System this year. More than 110 students, faculty and staff have signed up to be part of H.E.L.P. (Human Empowerment Life Project), which aims to improve literacy for an anticipated 624 students during the 2016–2017 school year.

During a seminary class on church planting in spring 2015, students were exposed to software they could use as ministers to understand the demographics of the communities surrounding their churches. As a result of this software demonstration, Master of Divinity student Carlisle Sutton was struck by the needs of a neighboring community.

“When the professor [Tom Evans] entered ZIP code 49022 into the program it generated a profile on Benton Harbor,” Sutton recalls. “When I read it I was moved that this is a community with multiple challenges.”

Benton Harbor is a township 15 miles from the campus of Andrews University. The profile revealed that this community has concerns greater than the national average that relate to the availability of food, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and the need for spiritual guidance.

Poverty is a major issue in Benton Harbor. Due to the high levels of poverty, as many as 94.1 percent of the children are eligible for the government-funded Free and Reduced Lunch program. Benton Harbor is number two among the top 101 U.S. cities with the number of people below the poverty level (does not include cities with 15% or more college residents and median age of 28). In addition to the high levels of poverty, Michigan education data reveals that the schools in Benton Harbor fall below the tenth percentile.

Sutton and some friends decided they needed to do something. So the Human Empowerment Life Project (H.E.L.P.) was born.

“H.E.L.P. was designed to share resources from Andrews University such as music, science, counseling, engineering programs and others,” Sutton explains. “We wanted to share those resources with the individuals in Benton Harbor. It is also well established that literacy is a critical requirement for academic success.”

At the same time, Sarah Kimakwa, marketing and reference librarian for the Andrews University James White Library, was working on building a children’s literacy program for the schools in Benton Harbor.

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“I wanted a way for us to celebrate National Library Week with others in the community, not just by us talking to ourselves,” she says. “In 2014 we collected kids books and toys for a homeless shelter in Benton Harbor, and last year we decided to focus on literacy in the community.”

When Sutton approached Kimakwa about the literacy portion of H.E.L.P., they discovered they were working toward the same goal and decided to join forces. In the spring of 2015 the James White Library and H.E.L.P. took a trip to

Benton Harbor and read to students in grades 1–4 at one of the township’s schools.

It wasn’t just reading; at the end of the story they had a discussion with the kids about what they had just heard, then passed out art supplies and let the kids illustrate what they learned from the story and subsequent discussion.

“With every visit we brought them a different story—which emphasized a positive value,” explains Sutton. “We engaged the students by identifying key words in the stories to expand their vocabulary. Our goal was to add six to ten new words to their vocabulary each session. We talked about the stories to evaluate their ability to comprehend what they were hearing and articulate their understanding of the story. Then we offered them the opportunity to be creative.”

These illustrations were taken to the James White Library and displayed in the gallery as part of National Library Week 2015 for the Andrews community as well as the children and their parents to enjoy.

“We know that if we equip these children at an early age with reading skills it will be a great contribution to their lifelong learning,” says Kimakwa. “It will help them become responsible citizens. Our goal is to share Andrews resources with the community, and our dream is for them to look to us as partners.”

The program continued during the 2015–2016 school year, initially at the same

Story Telling Artwork

Art by students from Arts and Communication Academy in Benton Harbor



school for the fall semester and then at a new school in spring 2016. In March the group took a special Black History program to the Benton Harbor school. University-based vocal ensemble Journey sang spirituals, Alicia Dent performed a piano solo and Patience rapped. The idea was to expose the children to various positive styles of music which they may not have been used to hearing.

University leadership has been very supportive of this initiative. President Andrea Luxton and Niels-Erik Andreasen, president emeritus, have both verbalized their support for H.E.L.P. Provost Christon Arthur has also been extremely supportive. While dean of the School of Graduate Studies & Research, he provided financial assistance to cover the purchase of art supplies, and coordinated meetings between Sutton and different departments on campus to talk about the

literacy program and how they could be involved. Larry Onsager, dean of libraries, provided sponsorship to cover the cost for those who needed the background check required to work with children in Michigan. He also addressed participating University students at the first event, encouraging them in their work in 2015.

Kimakwa related this process of her own experience growing up in a small village in Kenya, “One day when I was a young girl my father took me out of the village into the city. I was so shocked at how much more there was to the world than what I could see in my own community. These children need the opportunity to see that education can open doors to them that they may not otherwise get the chance to walk through.”

“One of the key goals of H.E.L.P. is to teach Andrews’ students the value of volunteerism,” says Sutton. “The University’s motto is ‘Seek Knowledge. Affirm Faith. Change the World.’ We want students to realize they don’t have to wait until they graduate to change the world. They can start here now.” Thirty-five University volunteers from various departments and backgrounds reached nearly 180 children in grades 1–4 each visit during the 2015–2016 school year.

What started as an initial spark is quickly growing into a concerted effort of a team of committed Andrews University students, faculty and staff to bring about change in Benton Harbor. H.E.L.P. is expanding the program to include all the grades 1–3 children in the Benton Harbor public school system. Over 110 individuals have already signed up to be part of this initiative to improve literacy for an anticipated 624 students.

Recent meetings between Andrews University administration and Benton Harbor Area Schools, facilitated by Desmond Murray, associate professor of chemistry, look favorable. Murray is working with Provost Christon Arthur in the newly established Community Engagement Council.

Sutton says his definition of Christianity is what drives his passion for this program, as well as his career as a minister. This definition comes from Ellen G. White’s “Ministry of Healing,” page 502:

“There is a picture representing a bullock standing between a plow and an altar, with the inscription, ‘Ready for either,’ ready to toil in the furrow or to be offered on the altar of sacrifice. This is the position of the true child of God—willing to go where duty calls, to deny self, to sacrifice for the Redeemer’s cause.”

“We are the flagship university of the Adventist church,” Sutton says. “Our motto means that we need to be willing to engage—we need to dare to engage. Dare to make a difference.”



To learn how you can participate: Email carlisle@andrews.edu or call 269-281-6733 or Leila Celestin at leila@andrews.edu



Larry Onsager (center), dean of libraries, encourages students as they prepare to head out on their first visit to Benton Harbor schools to read and get creative with the children