Duplin Hospital Foundation

IT'S IN OUR DNA!

These smiles show the joy the participants at the Diversity Nurtures Achievement Community Youth Center (DNA) have while gardening!

One of our Community Benefits grant recipients, Diversity Nurtures Achievement Community Youth Center (DNA), was started in 2015 by Earlean Rivers and her sister after working several years in childcare in partnership with their church. Initially providing after-school care, DNA now provides the full educational experience—and more—to about 25 youth ages 5-17. The big change from after-school programs to full-time school happened because of COVID-19. The public schools were alternating their weeks of in-person and remote learning. Parents did have the option, however, to choose fully remote classes for their children.

“We became concerned about COVID exposure and a possible outbreak with our students going back and forth between the schools and us,” said Earlean. So she called the parents together and told them, for safety, their kids would have to attend DNA full-time or not at all. All the parents chose DNA.

With at least 25 kids now full-time at DNA, Earlean knew she would have to make some changes and upgrades—and soon. Over the first month, she added modems to increase the internet access for the additional students for on-line classes. She developed a “memorandum of understanding” with the public schools, adding a certified teacher to her own staff and maintaining contact with students’ regular teachers to assess student progress. Now serving or preparing three meals a day, she added a commercial sink and refrigerator to meet health regulations. All the while, she constantly looked for funding sources, and prayed she would be able to find the resources needed. (Con't on page 2.)

Grants and assistance from the community make it all work, Earlean explained. “Finances are always our biggest challenge. But grants like Vidant’s keep us going, and we’re very grateful,” she said.

Asked what makes her program unique, Earlean said, “The gardening—and the animals.” Much of DNA’s outdoor area is devoted to vegetable gardening and farm animals. Students learn about nutrition and other lessons by caring for the vegetable gardens and the chickens, ducks and goats they raise. “Most of these students are town kids,” said Earlean. “They used to think all food came straight from the grocery store.”

With the impact of COVID, continually searching for finances and all her other challenges, Earlean’s optimism can be contagious. “You know, I always believe good can come from a bad situation,” she said. “I love my community and want to do good for it. I want to be positive, not negative. When you deal with these kids, they are the future. If you don’t set a foundation for them, where are we going to be? You never know what impact you’ll have, but if I make a positive difference even for one, it’s worth it.”

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