

UNITARIAN CHURCH IN CHARLESTON' S ASSISTANCE TO CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

Introduction

Beginning in 2003 the congregation of the Unitarian Church in Charleston has undertaken, through its Social Justice Program, an effort to assist children in our community who live in poverty. Approximately \$40,000, raised through donations from the congregation and a series of benefit concerts, has been directed toward after-school programs and academic enrichment activities conducted at schools which serve some of the poorest communities in Charleston County.

The program got underway in 2002 shortly after then Minister Jacqueline Collins called on the UCC to form a Social Justice Committee. The committee decided, after some deliberation, to focus its attention on the plight of children in the Charleston area who were living in poverty and more specifically to concentrate on how to enhance educational opportunities for these children.

The funds to support these needs have come from two sources: (1) donations from the UCC congregation, primarily at the Christmas Eve service, and (2) from a series of nearly 60 concerts (Gage Hall Coffeehouse) conducted by the Social Justice Committee. The annual Christmas Eve contributions and the monthly Gage Hall Coffeehouse have now become traditions at UCC.

This program supplements and is coordinated with other UCC Social Justice initiatives such as the Community Outreach Giving Program, Assistance to Crisis Ministries, Green Sanctuary, and Welcoming Congregation.

Support to After-School Programs at Charleston Progressive, James Simons, Fraser & Mitchell Elementary Schools (~\$30,000)

The first initiatives supported the after-school programs conducted by the Charleston County Parks and Recreation Department at the Charleston Progressive, James Simons, Mitchell and Fraser elementary schools, schools which serve families in the Charleston peninsula. The after-school programs are staffed with certified child-care providers, who assist the children with homework, provide snacks and supervise play activities. Many of the children who attend these programs come from low-income working families, some with only a single parent, so that after-school programs are a necessity for these families. Most of the funding for low-income children to attend such programs comes from federal grants administered by the state but parents are expected to also contribute to tuition based on a sliding scale. The original plan had been to support academic enrichment activities at the after-school programs but more pressing needs during school years 2002-3 and 2003-4 were to help the poorest families pay their share of tuition and to help maintain the required number of staff at the after-school programs in the face of reduced federal funds.

Once the crisis in federal funding had passed, significant needs remained. Academic achievement at low income elementary schools is too low and the subsequent dropout rates in the high schools are too high. Something needed to be done. At the after-school programs in well-to-do neighborhoods around Charleston County students who can afford the fees can attend special educational programs to supplement the academic experience they receive during regular classes. This is just not possible for the downtown elementary schools. The UCC Social Justice Committee has worked with the Parks and Recreation Department and with the Charleston County School System to identify a number of ways to enrich the academic components of the after-school programs at these downtown elementary schools in the hope that academic performance can be improved. Some of these initiatives are as follows:

During School Year 2004-5 we supported a Native Peoples Cultural Heritage Program involving handicrafts, story telling, Native American and African games, nature awareness, early human history and primitive technology. Rhythm games, storytelling games, and nature awareness activities emphasized character development, physical fitness and math skills. We also sponsored a senior from Burke High who served as an intern to the after-school staff at James Simons, assisting with homework.

During School Year 2005-6 we sponsored three different science enrichment activities involving a total of 120 students at the four schools: (1) Super Science-consisted of a series of 10 one hour sessions involving environmental and biological science. The children experienced hands-on individual involvement in a variety of activities to make them more aware of how our environment can be understood based on science and analysis. (2) The Charleston Museum Program included a series of 5 classes introducing the children to archaeology, ornithology, geology, zoology and paleontology using the resources of the Charleston Museum. (3) Mad Science involved 8 sessions focused on the physical sciences such as electricity, magnetism, optics, heat, sound, aerodynamics, mechanics and fluids. This program was augmented by high school students from Charleston County Academic Magnet School volunteering as assistant teachers.

During School Year 2006-7 we supported a program in which elementary school teachers would remain after school three days each week for six weeks to assist students with homework. Prior to this such assistance was only provided by teacher aides.

Beginning in School Year 2007-8 the focus of UCC support shifted to Mitchell Elementary School which had just hired a new Principal, Dirk Bedford, who established a concentration on science with the objective of achieving Science Academic Magnet status for Mitchell. During that school year both Mad Science and another Science Program, High Touch High Tech, both emphasizing physical science, were sponsored as enrichment activities during the After-School Program.

Mitchell Science Curriculum Field Trips (~\$6000)

Then in School Year 2008-9 a new science coordinator was hired at Mitchell. This led to a new approach to UCC support to academic enrichment. We are now sponsoring field

trips and in-school activities which occur during the normal class period and which are directly linked to the science curriculum. Rather than just the after-school kids, now all of the approximately 260 students at Mitchell participate in one field trip or activity each quarter, not just those attending after-school. For School Year 2009-10 we are continuing to support the field trip program at the same level as 2008-9.

The Carolina Youth Development Center's Freedom School (~\$4000)

This project serves children ages 5 to 18 who are identified by the Charleston County District Schools as "at risk" and who need prevention, assessment, intervention and treatment services in order to reach their full potential as healthy and well-adjusted individuals. The focus of the Freedom School is to achieve improvement in communication skills and self-empowerment as well as changes in levels of interest in reading and in awareness of social issues. In 2008 UCC sponsored Children's Defense Fund led training for 6 college age interns to assist the children in achieving these goals, as well as a site coordinator to provide oversight.

Conclusion

Mitchell Principal, Dirk Bedford visited UCC last year and spoke at a Forum and the following Church service to express his appreciation for our support.

At the beginning of School Year 2009-10 Mitchell was named a Science Magnet School.

Unitarian Church support to Mitchell was recognized by Mitchell Principal Dirk Bedford at the meeting of the Charleston County School Board on October 26, 2009; certificates were presented to several representatives of the Social Justice Committee.

By the end of the 2009-10 School Year we expect to have provided approximately \$45,000 to enhance education enrichment for just a few of the school children of the Charleston area who are living in poverty.