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Serving Edmonton Heights “Connecting a Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) Community to Higher Education”

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Serving Edmonton Heights  
“Connecting a Low-to-Moderate Income (LMI) Community to Higher Education”

Impoverished communities are experiencing challenges in acquiring the necessary resources (i.e. financial, knowledge-based, physical, food, etc.) to survive. Many low-to-moderate income (LMI) communities that have been ravaged by drugs, crime, poor education systems, lack of access to healthcare and violence are often located in urban settings near colleges and universities. The connection between institutions of higher education and adjacent, impoverished neighborhoods need to be made in order to improve the social, academic and financial levels of attainment of those families residing in these communities. The bridge that is established between the two will improve the lives of those who living in poverty. At Alabama Agricultural & Mechanical University (AAMU), Prof. Joseph A. Lee initiated a community-based participatory research program (CBPRP) that was created to connect faculty, staff and students in civic engagement initiatives that implemented service-learning programs to a LMI neighborhood located adjacent to the campus. Faculty and students collaborated in designing and implementing service-learning research projects that addressed local needs and issues within this specific neighborhood. The targeted area that was chosen for action and research was the Edmonton Heights neighborhood.

Tyler K. Pearson is a first year graduate student at Alabama A&M University pursuing and Masters in Urban and Regional Planning (M.U.R.P.) specializing in Transportation Planning. Currently, I am an AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteer for the Huntsville Network for Urban School Renewal, Inc. (HNUSR, Inc.). The organization is an education non-profit dedicated to raising academic achievement of students residing in low-income neighborhoods and attending Title I Schools. Vista has changed his goal. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Higher Education Leadership and Policy to build and develop institutions of higher learning that include in their missions and core values service-learning and community engagement.

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Edmonton Heights is an historic, African-American neighborhood in Huntsville, Alabama, located adjacent to the Alabama A&M University campus. It has experienced a lot of turnover from wealth to poverty over the span of 30 years. Once a promising neighborhood that wealthy, educated African-Americans resided in who taught at the university and worked a variety of occupations in the city has now been ravaged with violence, crime, drugs and financial disparity. Property values of homes have decreased steadily and abandoned homes have grown to become a common site. Trash inhibits the natural beauty of this neighborhood as well as stray animals roam the streets frequently. In addition, the education attainment of residents is very low. Many residents have not attained a Bachelor’s degree (B.S.) or H.S. diploma. Each of these factors have stagnated the progression of this neighborhood over an extended period of time. As of January 2013, four murders have been accounted for due to drugs being sold inside and outside the neighborhood within a 6 month span. The need for change is paramount in order to re-direct the path many have resorted to survive before more lives are lost. Violence seems to have become the mantra of gaining respect and survival for the majority even at the risk of losing their very own. It is very disheartening and something must be done expeditiously. Social change through community development initiatives and educational programs are tools that can fulfill this goal of implementing positive stability socially and academically. The AAMU Community Campus Partnership has brought these fascinating changers to the Edmonton Heights community.
As an urban planning student at Alabama A&M University and resident of the Edmonton Heights neighborhood, I felt an obligation to assist in improving the state of mental and social incapacitation the community was experiencing. To aid in the quest of ameliorating the area’s problems, I became involved in the AAMU Community Campus Partnership and the Edmonton Heights Neighborhood Association that were designed and formulated to benefit the community greatly by our staff and community members. These roles have considerably improved my character and leadership skills to fight for justice and be a voice for those who are often left unheard.

Other roles and responsibilities in our various programs that I took on have proven to be very beneficial to not only me, but others as well. I served as a tutor for our K-12 after-school tutoring program, social media publisher to promote our activities via our social media links and Vice President of the Edmonton Heights Neighborhood Association. Included in our service-learning opportunities for the community I assisted in recruiting students for our General Educational Development (GED) classes we offer for residents who didn’t complete high school. The dynamic relationships that I have

Photo Caption: AAMU Community Campus Partnership Staff: (Left) Ms. Robin Arnold, (Center) Mr. Ron Humphrey and (Right) Ms. Pamela Chester

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forged with my fellow colleagues and neighbors have been invaluable and rewarding. By helping everyone become better servants to not only their community, but to themselves as an individual. To see change was very gratifying. None of it would’ve been possible without the guidance of the remarkable staff that I was very fortunate to work with.

The AAMU CCP After-School Tutoring Program

The K-12 after-school tutoring program was the most memorable moment for me because I built so many fond friendships with all of the children participating. Instructing and educating the students proved to be advantageous in a multitude of ways. Tutoring them provided a valuable service in raising their academic scores and behavior in the classroom. However, the most important aspect that exceeded any test score while including their improved behavior was that glimpse of hope each student acquired in seeing the improvement in their studies. The smiles that we received when students got off the bus to show us their A’s and B’s on their report cards over the course of the school year were priceless. I look forward to creating and building an even stronger educational program to see these children attain higher levels of academic success.

Photo Caption: Jaylin Love, 2nd grade, excited about achieving A’s on his report card and sharing with us at the Edmonton Heights Family Life Center.
Social Media

As the AAMU Community Campus Partnership social media publisher, I was able to promote our programs and events, inspire followers with daily quotes about uplifting others through education and civil service, and connect with organizations in the city and across America. Using social media as a tool in advocating positivity to the university and the Edmonton Heights community has proven to be indeed beneficial in attracting passionate volunteers and local agencies that focus on community development and service-learning opportunities. One organization that has given us their support is United Way of Madison County. I am very grateful for their willingness and commitment in aiding such a social and academic epidemic that has plagued the Edmonton Heights neighborhood for many years.

Edmonton Heights Neighborhood Association

Currently, the Edmonton Heights Neighborhood Association (EHNA) is underway in re-organizing its members and establishing a strong presence within the neighborhood. Thus far, there have been several meetings in which we have invited residents to come and share their concerns about the future of the neighborhood. Our first meeting sent a resounding wake up call to everyone in the room about what needs to change. To hear the outcry for help and assistance in mitigating the problems that they’ve endured was heart-wrenching. Their cries stirred a sense of responsibility in me to make a difference. Therefore, as serving as the Vice President of the Edmonton Heights Neighborhood Association board I am committed in seeing the community change for the better in the upcoming years through research and formulating strategies to solve the community’s problematic issues.

Social Events to Develop Social Cohesion

We’ve held community events to gain social cohesion amongst community members throughout the year as well. In October of 2012, we held a community awards ceremony on the campus of Alabama A&M University to honor our county, city and university police force. Their dedication and commitment in keeping everyone safe was very honorable and we wanted to recognize them for the diligence
Photo Caption: The AAMU Community Campus Partnership honoring the Madison County, Huntsville City and AAMU police department at the Community Awards Program. (New School of Business/AAMU)

Also, we’ve held two holiday events for the Edmonton Heights community to engage in citizen participation. The two events were our Chilly Willy Wednesday and Easter Eggstravaganza. During the Christmas break, we hosted a Chilly Willy Fun Day for community residents to come together and celebrate Christmas and have a warm, delicious meal for those who didn’t have anything to eat. It was a wonderful experience to see the joy on everyone’s faces.
Photo Caption: Hand-made ornaments created by the students of the Edmonton Height K-12 After-School Tutoring Program.
In March, the AAMU Community Campus Partnership (AAMUCCP) staff and volunteers created the Edmonton Heights Easter Eggstravaganza to celebrate the international holiday Easter. Families and friends joined together in the James Crawford Park to fellowship with one another on such a joyous occasion. Three events were played by the children and adults. They were Chubby Bunny, Egg Relay and the Golden Egg Hunt. Each game brought unity amongst everyone to work together according to the game’s rules, happiness and laughter. It was wonderful to see parents spend time with their children.

Photo Caption: Mother enjoying time with her beautiful daughter.
Photo Caption: Enjoying the delicious taste of marshmallows. All smiles and laughter.
(Chubby Bunny game)

Chubby Bunny Rules

- Anyone can play with as little as two players, but you can incorporate as many players as you like.
- The game can be taken in individual turns.
- After each marshmallow is stuffed in the person’s mouth, the player must say "Chubby Bunny”.
- When the player’s mouth is so filled with marshmallows that he cannot recite "Chubby Bunny” or spits one or more marshmallows from his or her mouth, their turn is over and are out the game.
- The player who successfully inserts the greatest number of marshmallows into his mouth and says "Chubby Bunny” wins.
Egg Relay Rules

1. Divide players into teams and then place them into two, separate lines.

2. Pass out a spoon to all players in each line and place an egg onto the spoon of each person in the front of the line.

3. Standing in front of both teams a whistle blower will signal the start of the relay. Each player with a spoon and egg must carry the egg (arm extended) on the spoon to and from a designated spot (to the whistleblower and back to their respective positions).

4. As soon as each player returns to the line, he or she will pass the egg and spoon on to the next person in line without the egg hitting the ground.

5. Whoever teams finishes first without dropping an egg wins the game.
In conclusion, it is imperative that we continue to engage community residents in attaining higher education and civic responsibility. In doing so, the chances of improving the Edmonton Heights neighborhood academically and socially can increase significantly. Service-learning programs enable this goal to be fulfilled by engaging the university and community through various opportunities to elevate residents’ civic duties and academic standards. The Alabama Agricultural & Mechanical University Community Campus Partnership (AAMUCCP) will continue to seek for new ideas in ameliorating the

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service-learning programs that we currently provide and create new opportunities that will be beneficial for everyone. It is necessary that we initiate this process of leading and guiding this community into a brighter future. Having the opportunity to see this vision through is worthwhile. Our journey in uplifting each individual hasn’t stopped; it has only begun.

Works Cited

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