



Board of Directors Meeting

June 9, 2011

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St. Petersburg Times tampabay.com

April 30, 2011

USF, center partners aim to develop Hispanic youth leaders

By Joey Flechas, Times Staff Writer

A new program aims to boost Hispanic students.

CLEARWATER - When Simon Pimentel came home from Ecuador last fall, he carried a special piece of paper.

The 52-year-old New Port Richey man traveled back and forth to Ecuador for the better part of seven years, working toward a dentistry degree. He had always pushed his children to do well in school and go to college, and he was determined to lead by example.

"This is to show that you don't let anybody tell you that you can't do it," he said, as he handed his daughters his diploma.

Now his daughter, Liliana, a University of South Florida student, is working on a project to nurture budding leaders among Hispanic middle school students in Clearwater.

Clearwater's Hispanic Outreach Center, with the help of Liliana and some other USF students, is developing the Youth Leaders Partnership, which aims to address the Hispanic community's need for positive role models and greater success in school. The program will identify promising Hispanic students and provide guidance and support to them and their parents.

"We need to grow some leaders in this community," said Sandra Lyth, chief executive of the Outreach Center. "They don't have the number of role models they need."

Funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board, a group of about 20 University of South Florida students is developing a curriculum for the leadership development program. Organizers plan to recruit an inaugural group of 10 to 15 middle school students and stay with them as they go through high school, while adding a new class of 10 each year.

Once the program launches, the students and parents will meet regularly at the Outreach Center for sessions that will cover many topics, including goal-setting, preparation for college applications, involvement in sports and communication issues between parent and child.

Organizers want to help parents and students reconcile the differences between their traditional culture and the local culture, and help them deal with the isolation that may arise from feeling out of place. Youths feeling isolated might join gangs - an activity Lyth said the center would like to prevent.

"We're going to have to deal with issues of belonging-ness," she said.

The Outreach Center's collaboration with USF was not planned from the beginning. In the late fall, USF electrical engineering juniors Yohannes Samuel and Jean Weatherwax formed Fundamental Learning for Interdisciplinary Technology Education, or FLITE, to promote higher education goals to at-risk youth.

"There's not a whole lot of guidance for kids from certain demographics," Weatherwax said.

Within a few months, a call for help from Lyth landed on the desk of Philip Bishop, a philosophy professor and FLITE's faculty adviser.

"It was stunning," Lyth said of the coincidence.

FLITE was chosen to develop the modules for the program. Lilita Pimentel, a chemistry sophomore, recently joined the group because she wanted to help the community in more tangible ways than just raising funds or awareness.

Samuel, the son of Ethiopian immigrants, said he's helping with the program because he struggled in his high school environment to find guidance when he had questions about how to pursue college.

"They're going to face the same things that I did," he said of today's Hispanic middle schoolers.

The Outreach Center has already used part of the \$50,000 Juvenile Welfare Board grant to begin creating a computer lab at its office on Franklin Street for use during the sessions. It will be available for students and parents to use as they meet the goals of the program.

Lyth said mostly existing personnel from the Outreach Center will staff the program, which is slated to start in the coming school year.

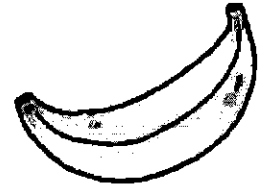
Contact Joey Flechas at jflechas@sptimes.com or (727) 445-4167.

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May 25, 2011

DCF leader in Tampa to determine what lapses led to baby's death

By John Barry, Times Staff Writer

He says his agency was left out of the loop when three agencies didn't agree what to do.

TAMPA - Florida's chief protector of children came to Tampa this week to try to figure out what went wrong when a year-old baby under close state supervision died May 18 from a beating.

David Wilkins, secretary of the state Department of Children and Families, said Wednesday he doesn't have all the answers yet. But he said he has learned that when three agencies in Tampa couldn't agree on how to protect little Ezekiel Mathis, no one told the DCF.

"Multiple organizations disagreed," Wilkins said. "We needed to be in the situation."

Hillsborough County's child protection system is different from those in nearly all other counties in the state.

Under the system, the DCF partners with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Hillsborough Kids Inc. and the state Attorney General's Office. The Sheriff's Office does child protective investigations. Hillsborough Kids Inc. provides services for families in need. The Attorney General's Office handles the legal work.

The DCF pays the Attorney General's Office \$8.4 million a year for legal services in Hillsborough, Manatee and Broward counties. In almost all other Florida counties, the DCF relies on its own legal team for those services.

Officials say the arrangement here was a pilot project instituted by the Legislature about a dozen years ago, during the tenure of Attorney General Bob Butterworth. It was a time when lawmakers sought to streamline and privatize many services. Butterworth had a reputation for improving bureaucracies.

But over the years, the pilot project never expanded past Hillsborough, Manatee and Broward.

This month, when child protective investigators found danger in the Tampa home of Ezekiel Mathis, the agencies couldn't agree on what to do.

Ezekiel's 2-year-old sister was removed from the home after investigators found bruises all over her body.

But the Sheriff's Office and the Attorney General's Office split on what to do about Ezekiel. The Sheriff's Office wanted him removed. But the Attorney General's Office disagreed. It said Ezekiel had no bruises. There was no evidence of abuse. Ezekiel was to be monitored, it decided, but would stay with his mother.

Then on May 18, Ezekiel was killed. Investigators said the mother's boyfriend, Damarcus Kirkland-Williams, 21, admitted throwing him against a dresser and pounding on his back when he wouldn't stop crying.

Kirkland-Williams is being held without bail on charges including first-degree murder and aggravated child abuse.

Investigations of what went wrong are under way by both the DCF and the Attorney General's Office.

The DCF's Wilkins said Hillsborough's peculiar arrangement has had its plus sides. "Bringing so many bright minds together," he said, "can be a real strength in child care."

But when those bright minds can't agree on how to save a child, Wilkins said, the buck will stop with the DCF.

St. Petersburg Times

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May 10, 2011

St. Petersburg recreation center summer camps will focus youthful energy

By Carly Hart, Times Correspondent

Eleven St. Petersburg rec centers are set to foster involvement as well as provide fun.

ST. PETERSBURG

Summer means more free time for students, but teenagers and pre-teens often need constructive things to do to stave off boredom and mischief.

"One of the hardest things about being a parent is leaving your kids somewhere and not having the peace of mind as to whether they're going to be safe and whether they're going to have fun," said Alexis Shuder, public information specialist for the city of St. Petersburg.

"I learned a lot about being a better parent by learning about the programs and seeing the things they do with children, like getting involved with the community," said Shuder, 48. Her son Josh, 14, has been going to the city's recreation centers before and after-school program and summer camps since first grade.

"When children are very young," Shuder said, "you know they need to be cared for. When they get to be around 11 years old, people tend to think, 'Oh, they're okay to be left alone now.'"

"Guess what? That's the age where they need the most supervision," Shuder said.

"When it comes to their freedom, they can take the same amount of energy and intelligence and use it to get into trouble as they can being put on the right path. Our coaches are all about keeping kids in positive environments and they're supervised all the time."

At the city's 11 recreation centers, camps offer more than 100 classes at any given time in addition to field trips.

Youth camp is for students entering first to sixth grade, and teen camp is for seventh- and eighth-graders. There's also a drop-in program for high school students.

Andy Chee, 28, was part of the drop-in program when he was in high school. He said he appreciated the great role models who enforced positive behavior and showed him the value of having a good working

relationship with the community. Chee has been a teen supervisor for almost seven years at J.W. Cate Recreation Center.

"We like to see our participants getting involved in community service projects, it gives them a sense of ownership within their community and, hopefully, when they are older, they will want to continue this way of life," Chee said.

Each month the centers participate in a community service activity. During the summer, some of the campers will participate in "Scrubbin Da' Burg," a city cleanup and beautification program, which includes a party as a reward for participants.

Nicholas Adams, 13, says he has been having fun and making friends at the recreation centers since he was in kindergarten. "All the coaches are able to go on a one-to-one level with the kids, and understand what's happening, and answer any questions," Nicholas said.

...

About 1,375 kids use the recreation centers during the school year, said Richard Craft, the city's recreation manager. "During the summer our numbers increase to 2,850," he added.

Teens don't pay during the school year for the after-school program, Craft said. And during the summer, most don't pay for camp, either, thanks in part to a grant from the Juvenile Welfare Board, which pays for the staff for the programs.

One specialty camp that is popular with teens is Teens Art Social and Cultural Operation (TASCO).

The technology group stays busy learning photography, graphic arts, digital audio, videography and more.

Fast Facts

To learn more

There is a tier structure for enrollment, which began Friday. Call 727-893-7441 or go to www.stpete.org.

The Azalea Recreation Center offers therapeutic recreation programs for people with illnesses and disabilities.

All recreation centers are designated Safe Places, even if children are not enrolled in a program.

St. Petersburg Times

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DCF secretary in Bay area for child death investigation



Thirteen-month-old Ezekiel Mathis was found dead in Tampa.

By Holly Gregory, Reporter
Last Updated: Wednesday, May 25, 2011

CLEARWATER - The Department of Children and Families secretary is in the Bay area personally overseeing the investigation into the Ezekiel Mathis death case.

DCF Secretary Dave Wilkins said he wants complete transparency into the agency's handling of this case.

He met with the Juvenile Welfare Board, a conglomeration of child protection workers from around the Bay area.

Wilkins also met with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and the Attorney General's Office.

The 13-month-old Ezekiel Mathis was beaten to death, allegedly by his mother's boyfriend, Damarcus Williams.

Williams was under state order to stay away from the baby.

Case workers knew this, but on the day of the murder, they left the child with Williams in the house.

DCF acknowledges that never should have happened, and calls the entire situation "demoralizing."

"That a human being could do this to a child is just incomprehensible," Wilkins said. "It's demoralizing that we spend millions of dollars and thousands of case workers are trying to help families live the Florida dream. This is not why we do this job."

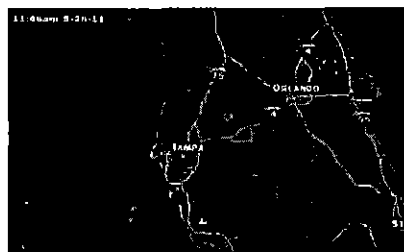
As DCF conducts its investigation, the Attorney General's Office is doing the same.

Three times, child investigators tried to get the legal authority from the Attorney General's Office to remove the child from the home and all three times that request was denied.

Thursday, DCF is expected to release documents into the case history of this family.

Furlough days ahead for Pinellas school workers?

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