



# Decatur Family YMCA Puts Christian Principles in Practice to Reach Youth in Need

*by Joli Hohenstein*

**With a unique connection to both kids and the community, the Decatur Family YMCA seems the perfect conduit to link the two.**



Staff members of the YMCA pass out back packs filled with school supplies as part of their Back Pack Attack outreach effort.

Through its many programs, outreaches and missions, the Y does just that, providing families, individuals and seniors opportunities they may otherwise never experience. Though the Y serves all ages, races and creeds, it is its work with youths that most recently has been spotlighted.

“The mission of the Y is to put Christian principles in practice through programs that develop healthy mind, body and spirit for all,” says Executive Director Paul Stanzone. “We’re building children who become healthy, vital adults, and that’s vital for the community.”

That’s why the Y is working to establish collaborations community wide to fill voids and service unmet needs.

One of the strongest comes through its partnership with Decatur’s school District 61.

“One of our collaborations with District 61 is the Preschool for All program to get children ready so they can be more successful in kindergarten,” says Paul. “If a child isn’t successful in the first three years of school, it’s very difficult to recover. We’re also caring for children not only in preschool but also before and after care programs.”

Most recently the two organizations partnered again in a pilot program with Garfield School to get exercise and nutrition information into classrooms. “We’re helping kids in first through third grades take the first step [toward wellness],” says Denise Leonard, the Decatur Family YMCA’s Health and Wellness Director.

Denise, who serves on the Decatur Community Obesity Prevention Coalition with the Garfield Montessori School’s Scott Davidson, says the school was an ideal choice to introduce the program to the district. “They were ahead of the curve as far as wellness, introducing healthy eating and healthy habits with healthy alternative concessions and several school gardens,” she says. “We knew we needed to get into schools with a high incidence of obesity, and with being the most obese county in the state.”

Achieved entirely in the classroom through teachers, the new 12 week program equips them with kits including activity sheets, games, lessons and other fun information-packed teaching tools. The Y obtained funding to purchase



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five kits at \$400 each for Garfield classrooms. This first wave will reach 100-125 kids in three classes with tips on healthy lifestyles, sensible eating and overall wellness. With this program's success, the Y hopes to expand it to more schools next year.

As this pilot leaves the ground, another product of the two partners reaches even more urban youth in its sophomore session. The Urban Swim Program, a water safety effort incorporating the Y's Splash curriculum, has been trialed in the past on a smaller scale and is expanding. "It's free or \$5 for the week, and we target kids who can't afford lessons or haven't been introduced to water," says Denise.

To start the program, made possible thanks to Karla Miller and a grant from the Rodney T. Miller Foundation, the Y worked with Robinson Charter School. They reached 144 sixth through eighth graders in just 10 days. Each received 45 minute sessions, consisting of 40 minutes of instructor-lead swimming and 5 minutes of free time. Y swimming instructors rotated through groups of kids, and by the end many had passed the test to be in the deep end of the pool.

They're now working with Mt. Zion, reaching nine classrooms of kindergarteners, as well as more Decatur Public Schools kids plus Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. "The program can be modified for any age group," says Denise. They estimate they've reached more than 250 kids so far. "There are so many urban kids who don't know how to swim," says Paul. "What we do goes back to that community need."

In fact seeing the need is what drove the Y to take over another vital program for the community. When Project Success shuttered its doors earlier this year, its Back Pack Attack program was left in limbo. Which also left hundreds of school children questioning how they'd be able to afford school supplies.

When the Y staff realized the predicament, they went straight to Paul, telling him in no uncertain terms they wanted to help. After all, this was the perfect fit for the Y's mission. "As the mission fit our mission with youth development, social responsibility and make sure children are healthy, all of us thought it was a fantastic cause," says Property Manager Don Stolz. "This is what the Y stands for."

With just six weeks to organize, the Y moved its annual Kids Day to create a combined event with Back Pack Attack. "It was the right thing to do, and there was obviously a need for it," Paul says. "There are so many partners who are part of it, and so many more who stepped forward. It simply proved to me that the staff made the right decision."

With games, bounce houses, treats, and lunch, the event reached at least 3,500 people. And more than 2,000 students received backpacks full of school supplies. But for the Y, that's just a stepping stone to growth. "We think we can do better next year," says Don. "Next year we'll have more time to plan, get the right materials,



*Kids get a kick out of the new Urban Swim Program which incorporates the Y's Splash curriculum. With support the program plans to expand.*

organize. We'd like to see if we can have 4,000 or 5,000 here next year."

They'd like to involve clergy and churches, plus reach out for more community help to meet their goals. They've already connected with the local Big Brothers Big Sisters, as the Y supports their mission fully. Hoping to work with them on a variety of initiatives, including recruitment and other outreach, the Y looks forward to future collaboration. "We have a special place in our heart for the group," says Don. "Anything we can do to touch somebody's life, to help somebody else."

Nurturing collaborations like these has become a faithful foundation for the Y, and one that reaps rewards for youth and the community alike. "There are a considerable number of children who have limited direction or need additional guidance," says Paul. "We need to not only educate but give them a place to go. We're proud that a significant population of the Y—youth, families, seniors—comes to us for healthy activities, and we're devoted to continuing and increasing that outreach. It's the right thing to do."

For information on how you can get involved or donate, call the YMCA at 872-9622.



*A couple of new friends negotiate part of the obstacle course together.*