

the **Stand** south side news

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Syracuse, NY

November 2013 Issue 30 FREE

AFRICAN TRAVELS

Vanessa Johnson
heading to Ghana to
live there permanently

More business training youth jobs

ANGEL keeps teens
out of trouble by
finding them work

Special for veterans

Eastwood Dental Office to offer
free dental services Veterans Day

REDOING MUNDY LIBRARY



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PHOTOGRAPHERS**STUDENTS AT THE
S.I. NEWHOUSE SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS**SPECIAL THANKS THIS MONTH**DEAN LORRAINE BRANHAM,
AMY FALKNER, VANIA MYERS, DOUG
WONDERS**CONTACT US**SOUTH SIDE NEWSPAPER PROJECT
(315) 882-1054
ASHLEY@MYSOUTHSIDESTAND.COMTHE STAND IS BASED OUT OF THE
SOUTH SIDE COMMUNICATION CENTER
2331 SOUTH SALINA STREET
SYRACUSE, NY 13205**COMMUNITY** | The Mundy Branch Library will undergo renovations in early 2014 to create spaces for all ages, but the library won't lose its wide-open places.**HEALTH** | A local dentist is honoring military veterans by providing free services this Veterans Day for the second year. No appointment necessary!**COMMUNITY** | Team ANGEL, or Avoid Negative Garbage Enjoy Life, provides an alternative for South Side youth who struggle to find employment.**FEATURES** | One promise more than 20 years ago led one woman to establish Africa Bound, an organization that educates youth about African culture. Now she will live there.**BUSINESS** | The South Side Innovation Center, a hub for 27 small businesses, receives a JP Morgan Chase grant, which will be used in part to educate about health insurance.**FEATURES** | Sharon Owens, CEO of the Southwest Community Center, reflects on the accomplishments that have contributed to her professional success.**■ Cover photography of Vanessa Johnson by Madina Toure**

> DuRi Kang was born Sept. 26 to Ashley Kang, director of The Stand, and her husband, HeeRak. She joins brother Yoon-Mo, who is 21 months old. | Photo Provided

**SEND A PHOTO OF YOUR
NEWBORN TO THE STAND**

We'd like to start featuring photos of South Side newborns in The Stand. Interested?

All you need to do is send us a digital photo and fill out a short form.

To request a form and receive more details about this feature, send an email to The Stand's director, Ashley Kang, at ashley@mysouthsidestand.com

CALENDAR | NOVEMBER

What: Thomas Jackson Thanksgiving Dinner**When:** Thursday, Nov. 14, 3 – 7 p.m.**Where:** Southwest Community Center, 401 South Ave.**Cost:** Free**Contact:** Jenny Pennington (315) 474-6823**More Info.:** The community center will put on a Thanksgiving dinner that will be open to the public. Food and drink will be provided as well as activities and entertainment.**What:** Basic Skills for Entrepreneurship in the Construction Industry**When:** Wednesdays Nov. 6, Nov. 13, Nov. 20, Nov. 27, 6 – 8 p.m.**Where:** South Side Innovation Center, 2610 S. Salina St.**Cost:** \$25 per session or \$75 for all four sessions
Contact: (315) 443-8631**More Info.:** Sessions are for small business owners who want to learn project management, comprehensive blueprint reading, specification reading and scaling, and basic construction mass and material estimation.**DISCLAIMER**

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DJ ZU PLANS A PARTY

It's a Thanksgiving Homecoming Reunion with a '70s Blast theme

By | Reggie Seigler
A *Friendly Five* columnist

'I want the music to have an old-school feel so people can reminisce and ... have a good time'

Back in the 1980s, his name was “DJ Grand Electric Shock” when he used to DJ at Top Cats, Gardenia and Nowhere City. Shock was widely known then because he had a reputation for playing good music and promoting “positive events.”

Shock grew up on the Southwest side of the city. It's an area he endearingly refers to as “One-ten.”

“It was all love back in the day when I used to live on One-ten,” he said. I had a lot of brothers and sisters, and I knew everybody in the neighborhood.” To him it was like one big family.

“That’s the way it was, everybody always enjoyed themselves because everybody knew everybody.” Shock always tried to bring people together around that premise at his events.

That’s been a few years back, though. Shock now lives in the Washington, D.C., area and goes by the name DJ Zu.

Zu is short for his real name, which is Zulu Bey. Zulu has found the same type of niche for himself. He has been successful because he uses a formula that he believes in — when people are comfortable, listening to good music and in the company of friends and family, the effect is always positive. Zulu also knows that complimentary food and drinks help as well.

Zulu wants to bring back that “one big family” feeling for Thanksgiving. His idea is to bring everybody together to enjoy a Thanksgiving Homecoming Reunion Party. “I’m going have a ’70s blast, Zulu said. “I want the music to have an old-school feel so the people can reminisce and think about old times and just have a good time.”

The event will be held at Sophistications Jazz Cafe in downtown Syracuse. Sophistications is spacious and comfortable with a stage and cocktail lounge seating. It also has a beautiful view of Salina Street. It is located at 441 S. Salina St., inside the Galleries of Syracuse Mall.

Tina Hills, who co-owns Sophistications with her husband, Kenyatta, welcomes Zulu’s idea.

“Zu has done this event with us in the past, and it has been very successful,” Tina said. “I’ve always known him to try to do positive things.”

Tina said she expects this to be a good one. “We’re

looking forward to having a good crowd and a nice evening,”

Zulu has invited two popular bands that are proficient with the ’70s era and the legendary DJ Cole to perform.

The event is planned to have a mellow opening beginning at 7 p.m. with a blend of ’70s classics played by DJ Cole. At 8 p.m., Trump Tight 315 will take the stage. They are going to perform a blend of “grown and sexy,” said Eric Jones, who is the lead singer for the band. “Most of our music is older music anyway,” he said. “We just do it with a twist. We are going to learn a few more for the show.”

Brenda Jones, who works in a shop next door to Trump Tight 315’s rehearsal hall, said, “They just sound so good. When we’re working in the shop, and they’re rehearsing, we just turn our music off and listen to them. The customers like them too. Oh, they are just so good.”

Trump Tight’s lineup consists of Terrance Robinson, bass; Jamar Lacey, drums; Bernie Wilford, keyboards; Donnie Clarke, guitar; Marty Klueber, saxophone; Eric Jones, vocals; and Belinda Allen, vocals.

After Trump Tight’s performance, the Soft Spoken Band will take the stage. The SSB is going to put up a big production. They will have a full sound system and an LED light show for effect. The production will be used for both bands.

Miles Tucker, 28, plays saxophone with the SSB. “We are going to “replay” the ’70s,” he said. Miles is a virtuoso saxophonist and will be driving in from Buffalo to perform with the show.

“I feel that although many of the ’70s musicians didn’t bring it with really high technical skills, they always brought it with so much soul every night,” Miles said. “That’s why the music is still so good. I believe Soft Spoken is going to bring up the intensity with some old-school soul and new-school skills.”

Members of the SSB are: Robert Brown, keyboards, trombone and musical director; Benjamin “Ben Jamin” Terry, drums; Miles Tucker, saxophone; Reggie Seigler, bass and founder; Donna Alford, singer.

The DJs will take over the night with an after party that will run from 11 p.m. until 3 a.m. There will be complimentary food and drinks.

Bring the family. Let’s bring back peace and love.

Have A Friendly Five suggestion? Contact Reggie at reggie@softspokenband.com or (315) 479-9620

EVENT DETAILS

DJ Zu’s Hip Hop Unforgettable Tour features a Thanksgiving Homecoming Reunion Party. Theme: ’70s Blast

Date: Saturday, Nov. 30

Time: Doors open at 7 p.m.; show starts at 8 p.m.; after party starts at 11 p.m.

Where: Sophistications Jazz Cafe in the first floor of Galleries of Syracuse Mall, at 441 S. Salina St.

Tickets: Available at Life Style inside the mall, 441 S. Salina St., or visit www.eventbrite.com and search for ’70s Blast

Cost: \$20 in advance; \$25 at the door

More Info.:

Complimentary drinks and food. Live bands Trump Tight 315 and Soft Spoken Band. Legendary DJ James Cole.

Contact: (240) 277-3682 (315) 863-6589 (315) 479-9620

BEHIND THE NAME

Reggie Seigler’s “A Friendly Five” column is named in memory of a singing group in which his two uncles — Mango Gray and George Gray — were members. The group was called “The Friendly Five,” and his uncles moved it from Clarksdale, Miss., to Syracuse in the 1950s.

NEW MUNDY ON WAY

Library is last in Syracuse to be renovated; its open space will remain



> Neysha Cirino, a library assistant from Syracuse, places books back on shelves. | Shannon Hazlitt, Staff Photo

By | Joey Cosco
Urban Affairs reporter

Mundy Branch Library will start renovations in January 2014 to create spaces for age groups

The Mundy Branch Library won't lose its one-room charm, but it will undergo changes as renovations are made early next year.

The library, located at 1204 S. Geddes St., in Syracuse's Skunk City neighborhood, is the most recent Onondaga County Public Library to be approved for renovations, said Susan Reckhow, county administrator for branch services and initiatives.

The plans for renovations include updating the building heating, ventilation and air conditioning; adding new furniture; and creating more defined spaces for the different age groups that use the library. All this is expected to begin in late January 2014, and the library will be closed for eight to 10 weeks during the process, Reckhow said.

While Reckhow declined to give the cost of renovations, a recent article published on Syracuse.com reports that more than \$400,000 is allotted to the project. Reckhow explained that the money has come from several places, including the county, the Skunk City Community

Initiative, and fund raising efforts by the Mundy Branch Library itself.

Rich Puchalski, executive director of the community organization Syracuse United Neighbors, said an agreement between Syracuse and county officials had dedicated \$3 million to the improvement of nine libraries throughout the county. Eight of those nine libraries have been renovated, and Mundy is the last one.

A visitor stepping across Mundy's threshold gets a clear view of almost every part of the library. Most of the building is one large room with tables, bookshelves and people filling the open space. At 4 p.m. on a recent Wednesday afternoon, the library bustles with children, teens and adults working and relaxing.

"It's always like this in the afternoons," said Diane Heller, a clerk at Mundy for six years. "In the mornings, it's usually quieter. Sometimes we get teens who skip school. But it's always like this in the afternoons."

Heller said the library is within walking distance of Bellevue and Delaware elementary schools, and she sees students from there daily.

Branch Manager Janet Park said she thinks Mundy attracts school children simply because of its open space. "As far as a public space Monday through Saturday, we're it," she said. "Some kids run here straight from

school and say, 'I'm first!'"

Staff members of the Mundy Branch Library put on programs and events for every age group. Trying to get the library involved in the community is the mission, Park said.

Libraries have come a long way from being "warehouses of books," she said. At 4:15 on that Wednesday afternoon, many of the young patrons surrounded a cluster of six computers, playing on them and with one another. Adults and teens sat at the 10 computers lining the perimeter of the room, using them for Bing searches and YouTube videos. "Vegetarian Cooking for Dummies" and James Patterson's novels sat on a shelf, closed and quiet. Still, at 4:30 a young couple entered and went straight to the Spanish book section, browsing through the picture books.

The library offers more than just physical resources. Many adults come in for help with their resumes and advice on getting a job, Park said, and the staff helped a man knot his necktie for a job interview.

Jeff Ethington goes to the library every day to try to find a job. Ethington, 25, said he gets help with his resume, hears about job opportunities, and goes to job fairs held at the public library.

Near the beginning of 2014, however, Ethington and others won't be able to go to the library every day once renovations begin.

"A construction site is a construction site," Reckhow said, explaining that the open, one-room nature of the Mundy Branch Library wouldn't lend itself to staying open during construction. The plan is for the project to take six to eight weeks, with one week at the start and one week at the end to prepare the space for the work and then to bring in new furniture. All the new furniture will be easily moved to help contribute to Park's goal of making the space more flexible for programs, performances and gatherings.

Reckhow's plan is to create more defined spaces for the distinct age groups that use the library, while still maintaining the open atmosphere. The building will gain no square footage in the process, but some staff workspace will be made public, she said.

"We didn't want to erect new walls and create rooms," Reckhow said. "Short of knocking down a few walls, this is as extensive of a renovation as it could get." And during the renovation process, she said the library will work with local community groups and organizations to continue providing resources and programs elsewhere.

"The renovated Mundy will be something the community can be proud of, and they already are," Reckhow said. "It's a living example of what a library should be like."



> Renovations at Mundy Branch Library will include updating the heating and air conditioning. New furniture that is easily moved will help make the library's open space flexible for various programs. | Shannon Hazlitt, Staff Photo

Now open... the **Eat to Live** Food Cooperative!



From **locally grown fresh fruits and vegetables** to a wide selection of everyday food items, the **Eat to Live Food Cooperative** has everything you need to create **tasty, nutritious meals—at affordable prices**. And it's all within an easy walking distance.

While you're there, be sure to visit the café—it's a great place to meet friends, have a cup of coffee, and enjoy a delicious, healthy treat.

Syracuse University joined with many local partners to make this vital resource a reality. To learn more, including how to become a co-op member, contact the Eat to Live Food Cooperative, 2323 South Salina Street, by phone at **315.430.9828**, or e-mail **shirleyrowser@hotmail.com**.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: Scholarship in Action



VETERANS: DROP IN

Veterans can call for more information, but appointments are not necessary for Nov. 11.

Dr. Joan Laura does not require any documentation of military service.

Location

2326 James St.

Veterans Day hours

7:30 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Contact

(315) 215-0048

CALLING ALL VETS

Dentist offers free services for second year on Veterans Day

By | Ruthnie Angrand
Staff reporter

Free dental services for Syracuse veterans is a way for dentist to honor father's memory

This Veterans Day, Dr. Joan C. Laura at Eastwood Dental Office opens the doors of her dental practice to offer free services to veterans for the second year.

"This is just my way of giving back, so as long as I'm blessed to give, I'll give," she said.

Laura opened her clinic for Veterans Day for the first time last year and said she was pleased with the turnout — about a dozen veterans. With an announcement in The Post-Standard, fliers at the Veterans of Foreign Wars office and a banner across the front of her office facing the busy traffic of James Street, she had clients before she even arrived to work that morning.

"I was surprised," she said. "We had two to three people here by 6:30 a.m. I thought, 'Whoa!'"

The veterans are welcome to a free regular cleaning, filling or tooth extraction at her practice this Nov. 11. Another dentist, inspired by her act, even offered to help with procedures, she said.

Laura sees about 20 patients a day, she said. Veterans Day, she said, is about setting aside time to be patriotic and do her part right here at home.

"We had a veteran call and couldn't make it down that day. We still helped him the next day," she said.

And while some veterans may be pleasantly surprised by her patriotic act of kindness, Laura is not unfamiliar with war or heroes. She recounts stories of how her grandfather dropped bombs from planes with his hands in World War I. And how her father enlisted to serve in the Korean War as a dentist to serve his country. When he returned home and continued his dentistry practice, she tearfully recalls helping him in the office.

"I was his assistant — cleaning instruments, mixing things for him and handing him things before I could even drive," she said, laughing.

Still fresh in her tears and evident in the photo plaques she keeps of her heroes — her father and grandfather — as if they passed yesterday, is Laura's conviction to continue the work her father believed in: giving back through dentistry.

"God bless others because I know I can't pick up a gun and fight but I can serve my neighbor through dentistry, right here," she said. "And it's hard for me to fly to another country when my neighbor needs my help."

Laura has worked at Camp Smith and Fort Drum



> Dr. Joan Laura says she can "serve my neighbor through dentistry." | Ruthnie Angrand, Staff Photo

doing dentistry. She has worked as a dentist for 24 years since taking over the practice of her father, Dr. John Laura.

Although she grew up around dentistry, she didn't imagine she would pursue the career. Her bachelor's in fashion design initially led her to a career in fashion in New York City for nearly a decade. Once she decided dentistry was her passion, she returned to Syracuse, where she and her triplet brothers were raised by parents who believed in giving.

Dr. John Laura enjoyed volunteering at the Museum of Science and Technology and leading the Onondaga County Dental Society, his daughter said.

"The real reason I'm doing this is in loving memory of my dad. I didn't think of this when he was alive but I'm sure he would be proud now," Laura said.

"I hope it spreads. There's so much hurt and violence and everyone is so into their own profile. I may not be able to fight but I choose a charity of love."

FAST FACTS

- Dr. Laura is married to George Nardone
- They live in Syracuse with their cat, Buster
- She is the only sibling still in Syracuse

Who Needs a Flu Vaccine?



*Everyone.
Every Year.*

*Everyone 6 months and older is
recommended to get a flu vaccine
every year.*

**No insurance? Call the Onondaga County Health Department
at 435-2000 to find out how you can get a flu shot.**

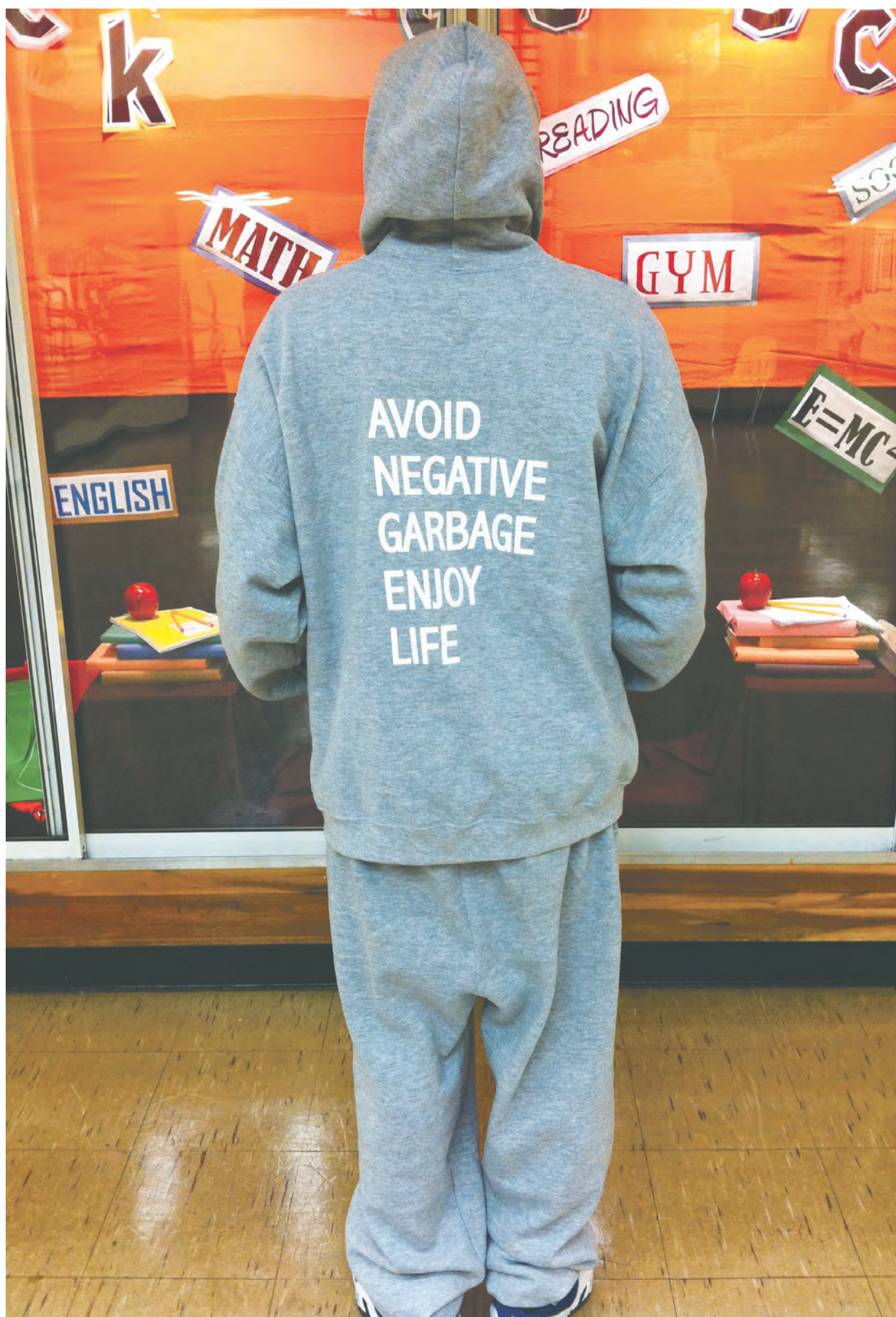


Onondaga County Health Department

Joanne M. Mahoney, County Executive
Cynthia B. Morrow, MD, MPH, Commissioner of Health

www.ongov.net/health • facebook.com/ongovhealth





> Eddie Mitchell Jr.'s sweatshirt displays the acronym for Team ANGEL. The program provides local teens with jobs and a safe place to spend time. | Shannon Rosenberg, Staff Photo

WORKING IT OUT

Teens who participated in Team ANGEL tell how it bettered their lives

By | Shannon Rosenberg
Staff reporter

Members of the program hope to find jobs for even more teens in the coming year

Kamiya Huggins sits at a long wooden table as she finishes a plate of food provided for her by the Southwest Community Center. She is 18 years old and a senior at George Fowler High School. She has a hearty laugh and an infectious smile and has only positive things to say about life. Yet she says that only three years ago, she was going down a path that, if she had not changed, would have her dead by now.

Huggins said it was the summer of freshman year when she got off track. A native of the South Side, she had applied for a job at CNY Works — a nonprofit organization that helps people learn job skills — but didn't get it. She said that left her with simply nothing to do. She was bored, and that was where it started.

"I used to fight," Huggins said candidly. "I used to fight a lot. I was around a lot of drama, partied all the time. I would get in cars that weren't mine, hassle

people's kids. I was always in trouble just because I didn't have anything else to do. I did things I knew I had no business at all doing."

Huggins' story sounds a recurring theme for the youth of Syracuse. Teenagers apply for jobs, but there are none. Many fill their time as Huggins did. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the youth unemployment rate across the nation is 16.9 percent; for the state of New York (16 to 24 years old), it is 18 percent.

The community continues looking for answers. People's AME Zion Church pastor, Daren Jaime, held a press conference Sunday, Sept. 22, to rally the community. And on Oct. 13, the Mary Nelson Youth Center organized a "Get Your Kids" Rally at Kirk Park, in response to the slaying of Jim Gifford, whom authorities believe was beaten to death by an 18-year-old in a 7-Eleven parking lot on the South Side. The message: If they don't "get their kids," the police will. The next day, there was another street slaying on the South Side of the city — 65-year-old Marvin Bryant — and three teens were charged.

Midland Avenue resident Emmanuel Snipes told a story at the September event the teens would have related to: He's been approached by youngsters wanting to learn more about home maintenance and related skills, the business he is in. But the hard reality is many small businesses on the South Side of Syracuse don't have the money to hire them.

"Children are looking to do what is going to make them a fast dollar," said Dale Harp, volunteer at the Mary Nelson Youth Center. "But because many of them can't get jobs, they go out on the streets and sell drugs.

"If children have something to do during the summer they will have less time to hang in the streets. It also gives them the opportunity to learn responsibility. They're children. They don't know better. They need someone to teach them."

Andre Baptista, a 16-year-old student at Corcoran High School, said he hoped for a job at Syracuse Parks and Recreation, but didn't get it. "I have many friends who have been rejected from jobs," Baptista said. "They just hang out. They gamble and get caught by the police. If they had jobs they would have something to do instead of just walking around the block."

Baptista and Huggins are involved with Team ANGEL, which stands for Avoid Negative Garbage Enjoy Life. The group for teens is run by Eddie

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Team ANGEL was started by Eddie Mitchell Jr. in July 2011.

Focus

A program for teens that finds solutions for Syracuse youth violence.

Location

Southwest Community Center, 401 South Ave.

Volunteer team

All of the leaders of Team ANGEL are volunteers. They are not publicly funded, and all money for activities comes out of their own pockets.

The program helped more than 20 teens get jobs last summer, and members hope to exceed that number this year.



> Eddie Mitchell Jr.'s tattoo reads "avoid negative garbage enjoy life," reflecting the youth program he runs. | Shannon Rosenberg, Staff Photo

Continued on Page 10



> Team ANGEL participants include, left to right: Andre Baptista 16; Mike Gregory, 19; Kyhla Miles, 15; Jamar Williams, 18; and Kamiya Huggins, 17. Eddie Mitchell Jr., seated, runs the program. | Shannon Rosenberg, Staff Photo

Continued from Page 9

Mitchell Jr. every day from 3 to 7 p.m. at the Southwest Community Center. Huggins says it's the sole reason she was able to turn her life around.

It was already 6:30 p.m. as Huggins chatted on a recent fall day, but she was in no hurry to leave the community center. She said it has become a home for her.

"The center changed my life," Huggins said. "It was like I always have things to do. My grades went up and I was able to get help finding jobs. I always tell Ed thank you so much because Team ANGEL saved my life."

Huggins believes if she had gotten that summer job freshman year she wouldn't have gotten into nearly as much trouble. She said she had no adult figure in her life.

Mitchell, only 26 years old, started Team ANGEL because he had grown up around the Southwest Community Center all his life, and he has seen what can happen on the streets.

"I started this program because of my own experiences in life, guns, drugs, death, violence," Mitchell said. "I've watched a little kid take his last breath and die before my eyes. I've been shot, seen a friend die. There is rabid violence but no programs. You need to give kids things to do or they go to the streets."

Mitchell, dressed in a gray sweatsuit and blue Orlando Magic hat, pulled back the sleeves of his hoodie and revealed a tattoo down the inside of his left arm. It's the acronym for his program: Avoid Negative Garbage Enjoy Life.

He says his mission is simply to show kids that there

is more to life than the streets.

"I tell them, 'You got school, work, jail, or the grave.' There are four options and I ask them, 'Which one are you going to choose?'"

Mitchell and Team ANGEL were able to help 20 kids get jobs last summer, something he believes is extremely important because it offers them the opportunity to get people to believe in them.

Huggins is now working jobs at Tim Horton's and a daycare center on top of her schoolwork. She is taking a few college-level courses and hopes to attend college in Virginia, where her aunt lives. She wants to study criminal justice.

"I'm at home by 8 now and getting ready to go to bed," Huggins said, laughing. "I don't have time for anything else. I got school in the morning and I got work. I'm a busy person."

Harp says jobs for youth are also important in helping to solve the problem of bullying.

"We definitely need to find a way to get these kids jobs," Harp said.

"Bullying happens to kids who don't have as much as the others. It's causing the bullied kids to drop out of school because they can't take it. Jobs would help the child buy things for the school year and there'd be not as much bullying.

"Violence is going to happen regardless," he said. "But you can lessen it. Many of them are lost, like walking zombies. If anybody has something to do, they won't be getting into trouble."

MOBILIZING CHANGE

Local church collects walking equipment for distribution in Nigeria

By | Joey Cosco
Urban Affairs reporter

Syracuse Salt of the Earth Ministries shipping 1,000 crutches, walkers and wheelchairs

A small South Side congregation is helping West Africans with walking disabilities to become mobile again. The congregation planned to ship an estimated 1,000 used and donated items — crutches, walkers, wheelchairs and canes — at the end of October to Nigeria for distribution there, following an initial shipment last spring.

“In a nutshell, it’s a project geared toward people with disability,” said Frankie Jackson, a senior pastor at Syracuse Salt of the Earth Ministries, a non-denominational church located at 320 W. Onondaga St. He has been working with the project, called Project Restoration, since it began a few years ago at the hands of “a gentleman named Sola” in 2009, he said.

Olusola “Sola” Ogundola is a Nigerian man who graduated in May from Syracuse University with a master’s degree in media studies. He has since returned to Nigeria, but his message can be found on YouTube, where a video shows him speaking for the rights of disabled people. From Ekiti State, where he currently resides, Ogundola said he plans to lead the distribution effort for the donated items once they get to Africa.

Jackson said his son struggled with paralysis as a child, and he knows the help that is available in America for those who need it. In Nigeria, however, the community treats disability differently, he said.

“Just from their families, alone, disability is considered a curse. There is no real effort to expose them and help them,” he said, adding that the Nigerian government is currently doing little to assist citizens with disabilities. “There’s two-fold opposition over there.”

Pastor Nathanael Akinpelu, another minister from the congregation, said he knows what it’s like for those with disabilities in Nigeria. Akinpelu is also from Nigeria, and he said the lack of technology in Africa’s most populous nation makes it difficult for those with disabilities to get the equipment they need.

“Some of them crawl. I’ve seen someone rolling on the ground because he didn’t have limbs,” he said. In an email interview, Ogundola described one person’s experience. “A lady who was involved in a road traffic accident has been home for the past seven years. Her family would not let her out because they feel it is embarrassing to see her crawl on the floor. They made her improvised crutches, but you need to see what further



> Crutches, walkers and wheelchairs are stored in a basement before being sent to Nigeria. | Joey Cosco, Staff Photo

harm this has caused her.” With help from Project Restoration, the woman can now freely leave the house and is considering returning to school, Ogundola said.

In January, the church began collecting donated walkers, crutches and wheelchairs, storing them in a garage in the back of its building. After months of gathering equipment, the congregation shipped out the first load of items to Nigeria in April, Jackson said. What started as donations coming from the small congregation of no more than 100 people grew to include gifts from all over Central New York and beyond, with an estimated 25 percent of the items coming from beyond the Syracuse area, Jackson said. “One of our biggest donations came from three hours away in Pennsylvania,” the pastor said. Sometimes the church goes and gets items from donors who are unable to transport them themselves.

The second shipment was scheduled to be on its way to Nigeria on Oct. 31. In an email, Jackson said the church raised money to cover the \$6,000 shipping costs through donations from the congregation and local businesses and organizations. With more than 1,000 items, including several motorized wheelchairs, October’s shipment dwarfs the first.

“This is an ongoing thing,” Jackson said. “This is not a one-time thing.”

HOW TO DONATE

To donate to Project Restoration, bring your wheelchairs, walkers, canes and crutches to the Syracuse Salt of the Earth Ministries

Location

320 W. Onondaga St.

Hours

Monday through Thursday,
10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Can’t transport?

If you are unable to transport your items, call the church
(315) 423-3829

ABOUT JOHNSON

Vanessa Johnson has been living in DeWitt since September and previously lived in Eastwood. Her family lived on the South Side and moved to Camillus when she started the fourth grade. She attended Stonehedge Elementary School and West Genesee High School. She studied political science at the University of Houston from 1975 to 1978, but she did not complete her degree.

She returned to Syracuse in 1978 and stayed there until 1984. During that time, she worked for the Salvation Army for four years with developmentally challenged children. She went back to Houston in 1984 and worked at a center for mentally ill and extremely abused children. She also worked as a marketing director for a firm.

Upon her return to Syracuse in 1987, she opened a black art gallery and worked part time for the Salvation Army. From 1990 to 2000, she worked at the Southwest Community Center, first as a receptionist and then running an after-school program for children with developmental problems. She worked as the education director for the Onondaga Historical Association from 2000 to 2005.

AFRICA BOUND

Founder Vanessa Johnson will permanently move to Accra, Ghana



> Vanessa Johnson, 56, storytelling at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation in Fayetteville. Her performances highlight subjects like the Underground Railroad, the civil rights movement and the women's rights movement. | Madina Toure, Staff Photo

By | Madina Toure
Staff reporter

Organizer plans move to Africa for institution of international exchange center

One day in 1989, Vanessa Johnson saw an African-American boy acting out in front of her art gallery.

After chastising him for his behavior, the two made a deal: If he would go to school and complete his homework, she would pay him to work at her store. After he told her about a teacher portraying Africans as “monkeys with tails in trees,” she promised to send him to Africa.

“I said to him, ‘The best way to know something, whatever it is, is to see it for yourself,’” said Johnson, 56.

She then created Syracuse Africa Bound, an organization that seeks to educate youth about African culture. The first trip – to Dakar, Senegal, in 1990 – included six adults and three children. Johnson opted out of the inaugural trip because money was tight.

In spring 2014, Johnson will permanently move to Accra, Ghana, to be with her husband, who is Ghanaian, and to launch the Africa Bound Center for International

Exchange, which she will oversee. The center will officially launch Aug. 1.

The center will give professionals such as artists, writers and intellectuals the opportunity to do their work and give back to the community, too. It will include an after-school program and a reading library. Johnson will work for the cause without a salary.

“I’m hoping that what Africa Bound (there) will look like in the future are these young people who have gone through Africa Bound (here), who become adults ... looking for a job ... will consider a job at the Syracuse Africa Bound Center for International Exchange,” she said.

Six to 10 girls, three chaperones and two or three college interns are expected to participate in this year’s trip to Ghana, which will take place in July for 17 days. The trip will cost roughly \$3,000 to \$3,500 per child, with roughly \$1,720 for air travel.

Parents are responsible for airfare. The advisory team runs four major fundraisers per year. This year, they are asking children to help plan two fundraisers of their own, such as a car wash.

Johnson and a half-dozen others put the program together back in 1989.

At that time, the Southwest Community Center agreed to be their nonprofit oversight and let them use the facility. The center provided the yellow fever inoculation for free, and Ellen Blalock, a longtime photographer for The Post-Standard, took photographs of the students for their passports.

Students and chaperones raised money for the first trip, Johnson said. It took them one and a half years to finance a two-week trip to Dakar during winter break in 1990. That year, flights cost \$1,500.

Initially, more than 70 children were signed up for the first trip, but their number eventually trickled.

The cost of the trip and the negative stereotypes of Africa at the time turned people away, said Najah Salaam, a doctoral candidate in executive leadership at St. John Fisher College who participated in the first trip at the age of 12.

“To be Afro-centric or to promote poor youth going to an African country, it just was unheard of. People weren’t doing it,” Salaam said. “And so at the time, anything that’s new, people are supportive of it until they see the time and effort that takes place to make it come to fruition.”

The trip usually consists of visits to the slave and fort castles in Cape Coast; the home of sociologist, historian and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois; the National

Museum of Ghana; the Center for National Culture; the Ashanti King’s Palace; the Kumasi Fort and Military Museum; and the artisan villages that surround Kumasi, a city in Ashanti in South Ghana. They also visit a clinic or hospital.

But what sets Africa Bound apart from other travel programs for students, Johnson said, is that every trip itinerary caters to the interests of the students themselves, functioning as a “consensus network.” For example, one year, the group was interested in art and culture, while another year, it was environmental issues.

“It’s not a travel service. It’s very different,” she said. “Even how we set up the program itself and where we travel and what the flavor of that travel is, is by consensus of the kids that become a part of it. So it looks different every time.”

Kimberly McCoy, community engagement organizer at ArtRage, was a chaperone for the 2005 and 2006 trips. “I think she puts more faith and trust into youth than some other people might, and that is important to treat people like adults,” McCoy said of Johnson. “To not settle for less.”

After that first trip, the program also stalled over money and organizer burnout. But the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centers in New York City

Continued on Page 14



> Expressions and gestures are part of Vanessa Johnson’s professional storytelling. During a recent performance at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation in Fayetteville, she combines emotion and interaction, gently holding a woman’s hand at one point. | Madina Toure, Staff Photo



> Najah Salaam, a doctoral candidate studying executive leadership at St. John Fisher College, participated in the first trip to Dakar, Senegal, at the age of 12. She is shown here in Billings Park in Syracuse. | Madina Toure, Staff Photo

Continued from Page 13

prompted Johnson to restart it.

Since 2005 — the first trip since 1990 — all Africa Bound trips have taken place in Ghana. In 2005, there were three chaperones, two parents, two journalists, and three youths. Kofi Addai, project coordinator at ProLiteracy Worldwide, who is from Ghana, also participated. In 2006, six children, three chaperones and one Ghanaian child participated. In 2008, there were eight children, two parents, three chaperones and four Ghanaian children.

A trip was planned for 2010 but was canceled because of consternation over the earthquake in Haiti. The number of participants dropped substantially in 2011 because of the economic downturn, with only one child, his mother and Valerie Escoffery, co-coordinator of Africa Bound, traveling.

Past Africa Bounders say Johnson is a fun and protective leader who helped expose them to a part of the world they had never seen.

“She was always kind of watching out for us and explaining things to us and she just had such a rich knowledge of the Ghanaian culture and history, and the people just loved her, all wanted to be around her. She was just great,” said Seamus Kirst, 23, who traveled with Africa Bound in 2008. Kirst works for The Doe Fund, a nonprofit organization that helps formerly homeless

individuals.

Johnson had initially thought of the Africa Bound Center for International Exchange as a place where Africa Bound students could stay, but the center will now give professionals a chance to interact with the community.

Brandon Ellis, artistic director of The Dance Theater of Syracuse, and Shaina Bradford, a dancer there who practices modern jazz and ballet, are scheduled to visit Ghana in 2015. They would be paired with a Ghanaian artist who practices Ghanaian art, and as artists they would exchange their art forms.

A final community performance would highlight their art forms separately as well as meshed together. At the highest level of community involvement, children in the community would be included as part of the performance. A percentage of all profits will go toward scholarships to cover students’ travel cost. Professionals would then only be required to pay for their food and the cost of traveling in Ghana.

“It will be set up on a sliding scale: The more that you are involved in community projects as an artist or writer or intellect or whatever your field is, the cheaper it will be to stay there,” Johnson said.

Johnson will also be running an after-school program for children in her community. There will be a computer lab in the center where these students can interact with elementary and junior high students in



> Kimberly McCoy, community engagement organizer for ArtRage, served as a chaperone for the 2005 and 2006 Africa Bound trips. | Madina Toure, Staff Photo

other countries via closed Facebook sites. For example, junior high students might have a discussion on Facebook about how the government shutdown in the United States would manifest itself in other countries.

For some, the trip to Ghana shaped their academic pursuits. Kirst, who studied history and ethnic studies at Brown University, said his interests in impoverished or marginalized groups in the United States and developing countries stemmed from the trip.

“A huge part of that curriculum was focusing on different groups that are marginalized within specific societies,” said Kirst, “so I definitely think that being in Ghana and seeing kids who are left in orphanages and seeing poverty in your face on the streets was definitely a life-changing experience for me.”

McCoy, who completed an internship at the Ghanaian Trade and Livelihood Coalition, said that the trip influenced her interest in peace and social justice issues.

Though Salaam was already exposed to different cultures by way of growing up in an Islamic household, she said that going to Ghana and seeing the culture made a difference.

As a result of her experiences during the trip, she joined Ray Panek, an English teacher at Clary Middle School, to start S&P World Tours, a youth travel academy that takes high school students overseas. At the time, Salaam was a Spanish teacher at Corcoran High School. They traveled to Costa Rica and Mexico, for example,

and fundraising efforts are similar to those of Africa Bound.

Salaam said that the key to Africa Bound’s success was that Johnson was persistent in pushing her vision and dedicated to helping inner-city youth see African culture.

“She had a vision,” Salaam said. “She believed in her vision despite the obstacles that were there and through her vision, she was able to help youth — black youth — become exposed to cultures outside of the inner-city community, and that’s important.”

Johnson said they are currently looking into ways to supplement remaining costs they are unable to cover through fundraising efforts. She is considering creating a website where Africa Bound goods such as bookmarks and bracelets would be sold.

Escoffery, one of the co-coordinators of Africa Bound, will continue to be involved in some capacity, but Johnson is currently looking for someone to serve as executive director.

Leaving Syracuse after 26 years will be hard, Johnson said, but she hopes that Syracuse Africa Bound will continue to attract students in Syracuse while she maintains the program in Ghana.

“I have to have faith that the community will see value in Syracuse Africa Bound, and they will support Valerie and other advisory team members in keeping it going,” she said. “I just have to have faith that will happen.”

RETELLING STORIES

Vanessa Johnson’s parents, who grew up during the segregation era, would always tell her stories about their childhood and her grandparents. It was this atmosphere that influenced Johnson to become a professional storyteller.

“I grew up in this milieu of stories about being proud of our black heritage, of our African heritage, this milieu of stories about resistance and struggle and triumph,” said Johnson, who has been a professional storyteller since 2005.

Johnson tells stories at museums, colleges, universities, churches, bridal showers and weddings. Her stories usually center on the Underground Railroad, the civil rights movement and the women’s rights movement — the histories of resistance. Black children, she said, need to understand that their origins stem from Africa.

“You are not just Jamaican, because that’s a cop-out. You are Africans that were brought to Jamaica,” Johnson said. “You are not just from Haiti. You are Africans that were brought to Haiti. There is a backstory and in those stories, there is incredible resistance to it.”

CENTER UPGRADES

A key use for grant money: provide guidance on health insurance



> El-Java Williams Abdul Qadir, director of the South Side Innovation Center, explains the importance of helping small businesses. He is working to bring in experts who will provide guidance on health insurance planning. | Wei Pan, Staff Photo

By | Joe Infantino
Urban Affairs reporter

South Side Innovation Center receives grant to update its business training programs

The South Side Innovation Center, whose mission is to help develop small businesses, has received a \$75,000 grant from an international financial services company. The money will be used to upgrade the center's business training programs, its director said.

The grant, from JPMorgan Chase & Co., will also be used to hire someone to help explain to small business owners what the new federal health care law may mean for them, said El-Java Williams Abdul-Qadir, the center's director. The grant is part of a collaboration between Syracuse University and JPMorgan Chase — a corporate-university joint venture that works to develop innovations in financial services.

"The local entrepreneurial ecosystem is growing because of the connections we've established and the programs we offer," he said, crediting the center's success with attracting donors.

Located at 2610 S. Salina St., the innovation center opened in 2006 and now houses 27 small-business tenants. Abdul-Qadir said 350 entrepreneurs, such as web

designers and educators, also use the center's services. The center was created through the Falcone Center for Entrepreneurship at SU's Martin J. Whitman School of Management, whose goal is to stimulate the local economy by recruiting and training both emerging and mature businesses.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, popularly known as "Obamacare," has the potential to confuse small business owners, Abdul-Qadir said. That is why he is in the process of bringing in a health insurance navigator from HealtheConnections, a charitable organization that provides guidance for health planning in New York.

"Sometimes entrepreneurs forgo health care because if this is their primary income they may not be able to purchase it," said Abdul-Qadir, who is a graduate of the center's entrepreneurial assistant program, which he now directs while running his own business, Excel Martial Arts Training Center at 600 Nottingham Road.

One of the building's 27 offices will be dedicated to HealtheConnections' navigation site. The health care navigator's responsibilities will include guiding the entrepreneurs through the process of finding a plan in the health insurance marketplace.

Terry Brown, the executive director of the Falcone

“We hope to see that spark again”

— Scott Matthews

Center, which facilitates entrepreneurial activity in local and regional communities, said that “someone who understands the nuances of the new law” will be indispensable in “getting the entrepreneurs up to speed.”

The innovation center received a Morgan grant before, in 2010. The 2013 grant coincides with the end of five years of funding by a federal Small Business Administration grant, which was used to cover the cost of classes at the center for low-income individuals, Abdul-Qadir said.

Other services that Abdul-Qadir hopes to improve include the entrepreneurial awareness program, which helps individuals identify their strengths and weaknesses and also determines the general feasibility of their ideas.

Another service is the entrepreneurial assistance program, which helps entrepreneurs develop a business plan. For a one-time, maximum \$589 fee, the center also provides access to community web consultants, accounting training and marketing and legal assistance.

“This is for people who come in and say, ‘You know, this is how grandpa did it, but I want to do it differently,’” Abdul-Qadir said.

The innovation center also houses some larger businesses that have been established for several years, and those mature companies — called “anchor tenants” — assist in incubating untested entrepreneurs.

One such company is Watts Architecture & Engineering, which has about 100 employees and has a Syracuse branch based in the center, said co-owner Scott Matthews.

When the company expanded from Buffalo, it chose the innovation center because of its inexpensive rent, Matthews said. But while there, he has been involved in advising several smaller companies, including the East Environmental Group, Inc., an environmental consulting firm, he said.

“We’ve seen and been part of things in the past that have brought excitement to the center,” Matthews said. “We hope to see that spark again.”

As the health-plan navigator makes his or her transition into the South Side, small business owners should start thinking ahead.

“It’s necessary to be prepared for entrepreneurs to survive,” said Lindsay Wickham, events and communications manager at the Falcone Center. “Health care is something you need to plan accordingly for and you need to factor in the costs. Otherwise it could turn you away.”



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PASTOR WELCOMED

Rev. Regina Reese-Young brings new personality to South Side church

By | Donato DiRenzo
Staff reporter

New pastor at Hopps Memorial C.M.E.
Church is first female in that role there

The woman holding the microphone jubilantly calls out: “Somebody say praise the Lord!” Dissatisfied with the crowd’s lukewarm response, she urges them. “Come on, say it like you mean it!” The Rev. Regina Reese-Young is addressing the more than 50 people who have come to welcome her as the new pastor of the Hopps Memorial C.M.E. Church in Syracuse.

They are in the basement of the church, which has been decorated with pink and white flowers and frill. A long table is set up on one side of the room with the food that will be enjoyed after the reception. Members of Hopps Church are not the only ones in attendance. Joining in: some parishioners and pastors of nearby churches, as well as representatives from throughout the community, including the mayor and State Sen. David Valesky’s office, the City Common Council, Interfaith Works and the Syracuse city schools.

Reese-Young was just named by Sr. Bishop Thomas L. Hoyt, Jr. to be the new pastor of Hopps Memorial C.M.E. Church in Syracuse, beginning this month. The church on the South Side of the city is 84 years old this year. She is the first female to reside as pastor of the church. She follows the Rev. Kevin J. Agee, who made a name for himself in the congregation doing community activism, especially in dealing with the poor and children. Friends for years, she describes him as a gentle, but firm pastor filled with a depth of knowledge.

Reese-Young shares many of the same qualities and passions as her predecessor. Reaching out to the youth is of particular importance to her. Known for her exciting and magnetic personality, she loves incorporating a lot of music, dance and social interactions into her “reverending” style.

GETTING AN EDUCATION

Regina Reese-Young grew up in Los Angeles. After she graduated from Crenshaw High School in 1973, her parents were unable to send her to college so she opted for junior college, taking a few classes, but didn’t finish with a degree. In 1986 Bishop E. Lynn Brown, saw something in her and challenged her to return to college full time.

She was seven months pregnant and without the means to meet that challenge.

It would be another two years, she said, until she



> Rev. Regina Reese-Young encourages congregation members to hold one another accountable and involved. Reese-Young believes people need to be connected to the Lord and to the church, but also to one another. | Donato DiRenzo, Staff Photo

“took a leap of faith, packed up my 2-year-old and everything I could stuff into my Toyota Corolla and headed to Jackson, Tenn.”

Once there she enrolled and graduated from Lane College in 1992 with a bachelor’s in business (magna cum laude). Her education did not end there. She would go on to receive degrees from Phillips School of Theology at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, with a master’s in pastoral care and counseling and post-grad work in clinical pastoral education.

GROWING UP IN A LARGE FAMILY

Her personality is strong and immediately noticeable from the brief speech she gives. She is vibrant and full of energy, authoritative but not abrasive, confident but not arrogant, compassionate yet forceful.

Born the second oldest of seven to William and Geneva Reese, she quickly became the big sister who was required to grow up, perhaps just a little too fast. Dad worked long hours to provide for his family while mom always had her hands full running a household of seven

children and all that entails.

“My father had a thing, he called us the three big ones and the three little ones,” she said. “The big ones had responsibility of the little ones.”

Her older brother was what she described as “a classic disappearing act,” leaving her to shoulder much of the responsibilities. When one of her younger siblings didn’t return to the gathering point when it was time to go home, she was the one who would venture into the neighborhood in search.

“I think that’s what stimulates a lot of my ministry,” she said. “That I’m responsible for bringing everybody with me. If we’re going to get there, we’re going to get there together.”

The lost sheep of the family, her older brother, ended up in and out of prison throughout his adult life. The only contact they have is when he shows up at their parents’ house from time to time.

REMEMBERING A SPECIAL MAN

Maybe that’s why the plight of the young black man is another area she holds as special in her heart. She has had great success on the many different stops her ministry has taken her, but she remembers one man who has had a lasting impact on her.

He was a young man, late 20s early 30s. She describes him as a “rough-neck street fella.” He was a drug addict, but came to her to get clean and get on the right track. She decided sitting down and trying to get touchy-feely with him wasn’t going to work. Instead she decided to give him a job to do.

She named him her personal security man, even giving him a hat and shirt to wear with “security” in big, bold letters. He was in charge of checking on her car throughout the day since she had to park in a rough neighborhood and he would get to church early on Sundays to make sure no one took her favorite parking spot. But as is the case with the Methodist religion, she was eventually moved from that church. The new pastor didn’t understand the need for the young man’s services and eliminated his position.

“He didn’t understand ... ‘Scuse me,” Reese-Young says today, her exuberant voice suddenly broken by weeping. “He didn’t understand the importance and significance of this young man’s role.”

The man soon returned to the streets and within two months of her leaving, he was killed.

That caused her to rethink how she approached ministry. She dedicated herself to focusing on making sure the people she serves are connected to the Lord, the church and one another instead of just her.

“I think about that man a lot,” she said. “He needed a support system and when I left, he didn’t have one anymore. I spend a lot of time now making sure people are connected to people.”

Since then she has started a sort of program for

people who are new to the church. She pairs them with regular members and holds them each responsible for one another, making it to services, community activities and general friendship.

NURTURING FRIENDSHIPS

The Rev. Ruthie McKittrick has known Reese-Young for about 10 years, meeting through their shared profession, and became friends almost immediately. She serves as the pastor for Wilson Chapel C.M.E. in Coweta, Okla. Her congregation is always excited when Reese-Young visits in what has become an annual tradition for the past six years.

Three years ago on her visit she was preaching at what they call their Praise and Worship Revival. All pastors use analogies to convey messages, but Reese-Young decided to do something a little different. Instead of praise and worship she told the crowd to bob and weave.

She used the “Rocky” theme song, “Eye of the Tiger,” and paralleled that with how a boxer dances in a fight. Keep moving, don’t let the enemy hit you.

“The message was, when you have a situation or challenge in our lives you go back to our praise and worship, back to our bob and weave,” McKittrick said. “We were literally shadow boxing in church. I don’t think anyone else could have done the same thing and made it work.”

Even McKittrick’s 88-year-old mother and all the other elderly members with canes and walkers pushed everything to the side and started moving as much as they could.

It’s something they still do occasionally and to this day when she tells people Reese-Young is coming to town people will automatically yell out “Bob and weave!”

FULFILLING MANY ROLES

Making a lasting impression seems to be something that’s followed Reese-Young since she was young. Her brother Kurtis, the baby of the family, can remember vividly his sister always being there to help take care of him and his siblings when mom and dad were busy.

“She would tuck me in, read me bedtime stories,” he said. “She was my first buddy, but she was also a second parent in some ways.”

Reverend, mother, perpetual big sister. From growing up reading bedtime stories to her baby brother Kurtis, to helping adopted children who just needed a friend and a safe haven, Rev. Regina Reese-Young now comes to Syracuse to do what she has always done. Parent, sister, friend, reverend. Whatever the situation calls for, she brings the experience and capabilities to help relieve some of the ails from which every city suffers.

“I don’t pretend to have the same size feet as Pastor Agee,” she said. “But these size 11’s go pretty good.”

POLISH CULTURE

Polish history was a cultural component introduced to library patrons at the festival. The Syracuse Polish Home on the West Side at 915 Park Ave. has been around since 1919 and is located down the street from the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church.

Marian Poczobutt, a member of the board of directors of the Polish Home, was at the festival to educate library patrons about Poland and why Polish culture is important in the community.

“When the first waves of immigrants were coming through Ellis Island, a sizable number of them settled in upstate New York,” Poczobutt said. “The home has now become a hub for Polish social and educational activity.”

“The South Side is unique because we have so many different local cultural organizations, most of which people don’t even know about,” said Steve Miko, a library patron. “The event was a great opportunity to learn about these groups firsthand.”

FESTIVAL OF NATIONS

Library patrons learn about different cultures thanks to state grant



> Joann Cooke (center) conducts a ritual during the Festival of Nations at the Onondaga Free Library in September, while other patrons participate, including Yao Xu (far right), a resident student at the Zen Center. | Bryan Rubin, Staff Photo

By | Bryan Rubin
Urban Affairs reporter

The Onondaga Free Library teaches patrons about diverse cultures on the South Side

Using a state cultural programming grant, the Onondaga Free Library recently arranged for South Side residents to experience a “Festival of Nations.” Library officials hope to make the festival an annual event.

The library brought together people from the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji and the Syracuse Polish Home. Representatives from the Onondaga Nation were invited, but were unable to attend.

Library officials credited Republican State Sen. John DeFrancisco with helping arrange financial support. The grant allots \$45,000 each year, for two years, for libraries in Onondaga County, according to the program.

“We have a lot of materials in our library that can help someone learn about these cultural organizations,” said Assistant Director Alyssa Newton. “By seeing what books, music and documents from these collections people were checking out, we figured out what groups would be great for our community to see.”

The library reached out to the Zen Center of Syracuse, 266 W. Seneca Turnpike, to perform dem-

onstrations at the library. The center, which sits on six acres of land in the middle of the South Side, serves as a “serenity zone” for the community, said Joann Cooke, a Zen practitioner at the center. The center wants to bring people together through meditation and self-realization.

“There is something amazing and extremely powerful in sitting silently in a room, perfectly still with 20 other people,” Cooke said.

Shinge Roshi, a nationally known spiritual leader in the Zen community, leads the center in meditation. Members said they meditate together in the zendo to allow their true nature to come to the surface, answering the question of how they should live their lives.

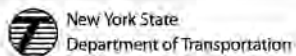
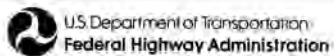
Yao Xu, a resident student at the Zen Center, attended the festival to share her experiences of living at the center. Xu, a native of China, credits the center for being a place where she and community members can sit down together and support one another through Zen.

“I feel so integrated in this community to a large extent because we all communicate deeply without words,” Xu said. “It’s a new experience of how human beings can communicate with each other, and that touches me.”

The Festival of Nations intended to bring the community together through cultural education and remind patrons about the diverse nature of the South Side.



> Marian Poczobutt, a member of the board of directors of The Syracuse Polish Home, shares his knowledge of Polish culture with participants of the Festival of Nations. | Bryan Rubin, Staff Photo



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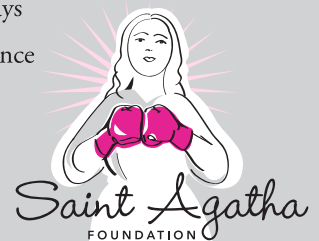
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ABOUT OWENS

Sharon Owens grew up in Geneva, N.Y., and her parents still live there. She tries to see them once a week.

Owens was a four-letter varsity track-and-field athlete at Syracuse University. Her freshman year (1981) was the first year that SU had a women's track-and-field team.

She specialized in the triple jump and was named to the Orange Plus Hall of Fame in 1986. Owens says she no longer runs, although she tries to join the line dancing classes at the Southwest Community Center as often as she can.

In 2002, Owens decided to leave the Early Head Start Program and spend some time at home with her youngest son, who showed signs of needing special attention. Soon after, he was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Owens says he is doing well, and she wants all mothers with autistic children to know that every day, children with autism are thriving. She also wants to make herself available to parents who want to talk about autism and the effects it has on a child.



> Sharon Owens, CEO of the Southwest Community Center and the Syracuse Model Neighborhood Facility, Inc., has led numerous children's programs. In just six months in her CEO position, she has made significant changes to adolescent and teen programs at the community center. | Shannon Rosenberg, Staff Photo

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Sharon Owens upholds her commitment to helping those in need

By | Shannon Rosenberg
Staff reporter

From SU track star to CEO, Sharon Owens' passion for helping others is unwavering

Thirty years ago, Sharon Owens got off the “wrong track” and onto the right one — and she has continued helping others do the same in one form or another ever since.

As she nears her half-year anniversary as CEO of the Southwest Community Center and the Syracuse Model Neighborhood Facility, Inc., she cites a number of accomplishments, ever mindful of how it started three decades ago.

Indeed, until summer 1983 (going into her junior year of college), her goal was to work as a businesswoman on Wall Street. A graduate of Geneva High School, she enrolled at Syracuse University in 1981 as an economics major.

During summer 1983, though, the Dunbar Association — a group that specializes in helping people connect with homeless shelters, food pantries, financial assistance and battered women's services — was looking for interns through the SU athletics program. At the time, Owens was a track-and-field superstar (later to be inducted into the Orange Plus Hall of Fame in 1986); she interviewed for the position.

“That internship with Dunbar changed my life,” Owens says. “It was then that I realized I had been majoring in the wrong thing for the past three years. Through the program, I worked with so many kids, most of them living in the ‘bricks’ down the Hill from SU. I found then that I was meant to help people.”

Owens was offered a full-time position with Dunbar when she graduated from SU in 1985. She worked there for four years, and was then hired by the Southwest Community Center to work with teens in the PEACE program, which is dedicated to helping people become self-sufficient.

Over time, she has led the Head Start Program (children ages 3-5); the Early Head Start Program (preschoolers, ages 1-3); the Infant Mortality Rate Prevention Program (working with mothers to get their newborns to see age 1); and the Home Headquarters Program (helping adults improve their living situations).

“Because I have worked with parents and children at so many different ages throughout the different programs, I now run into families I’ve worked with who are showing me their kids’

graduation photos, thanking me for helping them make such important life decisions,” Owens said. “It makes me proud to know that I helped get them to where they are now.”

Owens had been working as deputy commissioner for the city's Department of Neighborhood and Business Development for three years when the CEO position for the Southwest Community Center opened up in January of this year.

She succeeded former CEO Jesse Dowdell in May, and has already taken steps to separate adolescent programs from the teenage programs at the center; increase safety for the SCC; change a negative perception of the center with some people; re-establish the adult presence in the building; and rebrand the Syracuse Model Neighborhood Facility Inc. so community members know the company includes a large family planning service located in three different clinics.

“She is just a go-getter,” said Jenny Pennington, administrative assistant to the CEO.

“Whatever visions she has she implements them and works on making them happen,” Pennington said. “She is a very caring person and very approachable. You can talk to her about anything. She welcomes any ideas that you may have and is very open to the staff input.”

Owens spends time with her husband Shaun, and her 23-year-old and 13-year-old sons. She enjoys watching sports with her family, and also singing in her church choir.

“She has been a phenomenal change for us,” said Dr. Jeffrey Jackson, Southwest Community Center director of health services.

“She is definitely a hands-on leader who's not afraid to do the dirty work. She rolls up her sleeves and dives right in.”

“She is a very caring person and very approachable.”

— Jenny Pennington

FRESH FOODS

South Side residents have a new place to shop



> The Eat to Live Food Cooperative had its grand opening Oct. 15, after years of planning. Fresh produce and meats are now readily available at the co-op, located at 2323 S. Salina St. The co-op plans to provide education for healthy eating, along with its array of healthy food items. | Ruthnie Angrand, Staff Photo

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