

Making a Difference with Washington Street

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 20, 2012

I watch *The Blind Side* anytime I come across it flipping channels. It's a movie that still brings a tear to my eyes, no matter how many times I see it.

I don't usually cry over football films – unless it's a replay of Reggie Ball throwing away the ball (and Tech's chances) on 4th down in Sanford Stadium in 2004. But, anyone who's seen *The Blind Side* knows it's more than a football story. It's the true life tale of Michael Oher, a 17-year-old, homeless black boy from a broken home who is taken in and eventually adopted by an affluent white family. No doubt, the particulars of Oher's story made it big screen material: high school football star, college All American, and first round NFL draft pick. But that's not what touches me.

I get emotional over the risk Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy took bringing a child off the mean streets of Memphis into their home and the difference they made by doing so. It was a leap of faith, an inspired act that changed a young man's destiny. Massive size, quick feet, and natural instincts made Oher a gridiron success. But, a giant dose of caring and concern are what set his life on a new course. Children like Michael seldom escape the random circumstances of birth into broken homes or disadvantaged neighborhoods. Drug dealers, pimps, jailers, and the grim reaper come calling far more often than college recruiters, pro scouts, and good Samaritans like Leigh Anne Tuohy.

We think acts of extreme kindness come from rare, incredible people. Perhaps incredible, but thankfully they're not so rare. We can't all help a future NFL star find destiny, but we have chances all around to make profound differences in the lives of others.

At 4138 School Street in Covington, on the site of the historic Washington Street School, sits Washington Street Community Center. Opened in 1981, the Center is where ordinary people from all walks of life perform life-altering acts of kindness every day – especially through the after-school tutorial program started in 1992 by retired Newton County Elementary Principal Louise Adams.

I learned about WSCC in the early 90s when my wife's stepfather, Bud, volunteered as a tutor. From his stories, I saw this was about more than math and reading. Volunteers weren't just helping with homework; they were filling a serious void in young lives as mentors, life coaches, and sometimes surrogate parents. One young man, Adrian, called Bud regularly for years, even after graduating high school, just to talk. Back then, it struck me as profound for a white man raised in rural Alabama in the 1930s to care so much and gain such trust from a young black boy from a difficult background in Covington.

Today, dozens of volunteers serve the Washington Street community through programs like scouting, theater, leadership development, fitness, band, and summer enrichment. There is even a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren. Where there is need, there's a response.

Thursday, 40 students in grades K-8 “graduated” from the 2011-12 After School Program, as more than 60 proud parents and supporters cheered. “Young Legends” (high school students) take an active role in center’s programs. College scholarships are not uncommon. Mature, responsible young people are the wonderful product of this caring environment.

With a volunteer workforce and shoestring budget, WSCC makes a sustained difference in our community. But, that legacy is at risk. Since 2009, Newton County’s appropriation to WSCC has shrunk 31%. For three years, losses were offset by reimbursements from the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant awarded to Newton County Schools in 2009, providing up to \$40,000 a year for program expenses. But that grant expires this school year. Corporate/foundation grants and private contributions cover 57% of center operating expenses, but that’s not enough.

As a WSCC Board Member, I’ll be blunt. We need you – now. Cutbacks are unavoidable in our post-recession world. But, we can’t allow hope and opportunity to become nice-to-haves for children who depend on the Center. Nothing is more vital to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness than education. We each have different circumstances and varying means, but we can all do something. Money, time, and talent are each gifts that matter. Visit www.washingtonstreetcommunitycenter.org or call Director Bea Jackson at 770-786-4002 to make your difference. Ask a board member about tickets to the June 8 “Jazz by the River” fundraising concert in Porterdale.

The hand you lend will lift a child to a better path in life. They need you.

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