

Success Story - Jackson's Promise Coalition United Way of the Capital Area

Sometimes the road to a destination can be winding and challenging. Travelers may need help in reaching their destination and often rely on a map, a GPS, or a compass to lead the way. Many times the best support in reaching a destination comes as guidance from those who have traveled the road before and are willing to lend a hand. United Way of the Capital Area in Jackson, Mississippi believes that the best approach to helping students navigate the road to graduation is by walking with them. United Way staff and volunteers lead a collaborative community effort to help teens and adolescents find their way, graduate from high school and succeed in life

In 2010, United Way of the Capital Area served more than 24,000 households in the tri-county area of Hinds, Madison and Rankin counties with programs that support education, financial stability and health (United Way, 2009). A focus of the organization's work is dropout prevention to combat a major problem affecting families in the area. According to United Way of the Capital Area's 2009 Annual Report, approximately 27% of students in the tri-county area do not graduate from high school (United Way, 2009).

In 2008, the organization formed a partnership called Jackson's Promise Coalition (JPC), where community partners, staff, volunteers and students themselves actively advocate for high school graduation and the importance it serves in one's future path to success. "It's truly a holistic approach to helping students graduate from high school," said Shawna Davie, United Way's Dropout Prevention Coordinator.

The program is part of America's Promise Alliance, which was established in 1997 by General Colin Powell and his wife Alma with the goal of reducing the nation's dropout rate in half by the year 2018. America's Promise Alliance included Jackson as one of 12 Featured Communities across the country and recognizes United Way as the leader of the Jackson's Promise Coalition because of the organization's effective work at bringing partners together to increase graduation rates. America's Promise Alliance defines Featured Communities as "a local collaboration or group of



*Shawna Davie, Dropout Prevention Coordinator,
United Way*

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partnerships engaging leadership from corporate, philanthropic, government, community-based, and education sectors, as well as the civic community (e.g., parents, youth)” (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.). Jackson’s Promise Coalition (JPC) now uses the alliance’s “key support” areas, or Five Promises to advocate and initiate programs to increase graduation rates (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.).

The Five Promises are:

- Caring Adults
- Safe Places
- A Healthy Start
- An Effective Education
- Opportunities to Help Others

JPC seeks to fulfill these promises on behalf of 31,000 students in the Jackson area. The targeted communities include Lanier, Provine, and Wingfield High Schools, as well as the middle and elementary schools that feed into them, these are called feeder patterns. According to Davie, these locations were chosen because they have the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates in the Jackson Public School District (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Carol Burger, President of United Way of the Capital Area, Davie and community partners have created unique and no-cost programs for students in Jackson. “America’s Promise Alliance along with United Way really believe that if students receive the Five Promises, then they are much more likely to graduate high school on time and be prepared for college or work,” Davie said of the program’s objectives. Davie established a resource team committed to fulfilling the Five Promises in the feeder patterns by facilitating events and councils, coordinating research and writing grants for youth.

According to America’s Promise Alliance, over 40% of individuals, ages 8-21, desire more support from adults (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.). The Alliance and its Jackson partners believe that families, leaders in school systems, and community members should develop and maintain stable and encouraging relationships with children in order to solidify success. To fulfill the Caring Adults promise, Jackson’s Promise Coalition implemented two projects. The first is a resource guide for the Lanier feeder pattern that provides a catalogued list of resources that a school official or parent might need to identify services for their children



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(S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). Secondly, one of United Way’s major partners Operation Shoestring, a local organization devoted to providing all children with educational resources and opportunities to thrive in the present and future (Operation Shoestring, n.d.) agreed to co-host an education house party where students, their parents and teachers held a community conversation to discuss two questions:

- 1) What is going on in school?
- 2) How can we increase on-time graduation rates?

Those in attendance formulated suggestions that JPC is incorporating in their programs designed to help the students in Jackson reach short-term and long-term goals toward graduation (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

The Jackson-Hinds Library System is a key partner dedicated to achieving the second promise Safe Places, which seeks to provide solid ground for children to retreat to, whether it is at school, home or in the community (America’s Promise Alliance, n.d.). In 2010, the library system participated in a new JPC program called Pages of Promise, a community book drive aimed at stocking the shelves of the libraries located in Jackson with books that are found on Jackson Public School’s required summer reading lists. “United Way providing extra copies was a blessing,” says Charlotte Moman, the Jackson-Hinds Library System’s Assistant Director for Public Services. “We weren’t able to purchase books because we just don’t have the funds.”

Pages of Promise started when Davie realized that between 95 and 99% of students in the targeted feeder patterns receive free and reduced lunch (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010) and perhaps could not afford to buy the required books. JPC checked with the Jackson-Hinds Library System and discovered that there were not enough books for the approximately 3,000 students per grade. JPC launched Pages of Promise in April and within a few months, more than 800 books were donated by people in the community (S. Davie, personal communication,



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Charlotte Moman, Assistant Director for Public Services, Jackson-Hinds County Library System

Wingfield High School students of ways they could support their school's garden. After the information session, students began working with the Jackson Inner City Gardeners to reconstruct an existing garden at their school and other gardens located in Jackson (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

The fourth promise, Effective Education, pledges to give children the quality education they deserve in order to graduate high school adequately prepared for the future. To positively alter the statistic that 60% of youth, ages 10-21, feel that their school fails to prepare them for life after high school, JPC developed a Summer Resource Guide and provided free educational workshops for students (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). "Once we compiled the information [for the resource guide] we learned that actually we do have quite a resource-rich community, but nobody knows," Davie said. The first guide was enclosed in a weekly newspaper, Jackson Free Press, and provided students with safe places for educational activities as well as volunteer and job opportunities. Davie stated that United Way had to incur some cost to produce the guide, but students and their parents did not have to pay for the booklet because the Jackson Free Press is free to the community (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). The guide can be found <http://www.myunitedway.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Summer-Activities-Guide2.pdf>.

December 13, 2010). Community partners Bancorp-South, City of Jackson, local McDonald's restaurants and State Farm Insurance branch offices were designated as drop off sites. The Clarion-Ledger donated advertising space to get the word out.

Davie believes this is an easy program to replicate in other communities because it is free, and community members can easily donate books on the reading lists. Moman wants to tell other libraries that the community and library partnership is a true fit. "It's the greatest thing that can happen because the community is helping with the needs."

The third promise, A Healthy Start, ensures that children are in good physical and mental health by practicing healthy habits and productive physical and mental activities (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). To achieve this, the JPC resource team is advancing gardening initiatives within Jackson. Organizations such as the Jackson Inner City Gardeners, the Jackson Medical Mall Foundation, the YMCA and Health Help for Kids, a program that helps Mississippi's parents provide health care for their children (Health Help Mississippi, n.d.), joined United Way to educate

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To further ensure that the Effective Education promise was fulfilled, JPC, America Reads and local volunteers, including teachers, hosted Summer Reading and English II Workshops to provide students with test-taking strategies and writing skills to prepare them for the test, which is a graduation requirement (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). English II Workshops are a great example of how United Way of the Capital Area supports school systems. "I think what we are doing is being a supporter of the families and the schools," Burger said. "Our role is to provide any assistance we can to help these kids learn."



Alvin Hester and Dewayne West, Wingfield High School Students

The fifth promise is Opportunities to Help Others, which encourages children and teens to make a positive difference in their homes, schools and communities. Milsha Lowe, the Director of Youth Programs, leads youth community service efforts at United Way of the Capital Area. Lowe believes that, "If we start addressing the issues that are feeding into students dropping out, we can stop it instead of putting a Band-Aid on it."

According to Every Child, Every Promise, 94% of youth want to make the world a more positive place (America's Promise Alliance, n.d.). JPC received a grant from America's Promise Alliance to form a youth-led Drop Out Prevention Council, which has support from JPC (M. Lowe, personal communication, December 13, 2010). The 20 students involved with the council meet once a month from August to May and discuss issues of the community as well as their personal lives. Davie brings in professionals from the community to lead discussions, and there are often civic learning opportunities surrounding drop out prevention. In December 2010, the Drop Out Prevention Council held its first "Graduation Matters" Conference at the Jackson Medical Mall with support from the Opportunities to Help Others Committee. More than 100 teens in the Jackson area gathered to screen a movie, view the winning videos from the "Don't Drop Out" video contest and share their suggestions on how to help more students graduate high school (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). Wingfield High School students Alvin Hester, Dewayne West and Renergee Salahadyn won the "Don't Drop Out" video contest in which participants wrote and starred in short videos promoting the importance of graduating. The students say they want to use their winning submissions to encourage others to stay in school. Salahadyn thinks young adults should have access to a variety of groups like the Drop Out Prevention Council. Hester and West see the benefits of the program, which promotes the importance of graduation. Hester said, "Knowledge. We receive the knowledge and understanding of why something is happening or when it is happening. Knowledge is power."

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Davie plans to use the results from the sessions, which were videographed by students, to develop new strategies for Jackson’s Promise Coalition. It’s all part of the coalition’s efforts to create community-driven strategies and interventions for youth. “You’ve got to take the temperature, right?” Davie said. “When we go to the doctor, the doctor can only do so much. We have to tell the doctor what our symptoms are, what’s going on, what we think the root of the problem is and when we started experiencing the problem in the first place” (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

Jackson’s Promise Coalition also performs primary and secondary research to learn more about what can be done to encourage students to excel in high school and beyond. Recently, JPC compiled information through focus groups funded by a grant from United Way Worldwide with 102 parents and students as well as 50 GED students (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). “What we learned from those focus groups and using the Mississippi Urban Research Center through Jackson State University was that students were really craving relationships, healthy relationships, with caring adults,” Davie said. “If those relationships are intact then there is a supportive network to help the student reach the next level of education.”

Sixty percent of United Way of the Capital Area’s grant funds are invested in its education efforts, ranging from early childhood education to high school graduation and preparation for college and career (United Way, 2009). The agency takes a unique approach by funding partnerships rather than programs. “What our research showed is that if the families are not healthy as a whole, then the students are not going to stay in school,” Burger said. “We fund partnerships. We look at how we can put together a holistic approach for families, to meet their education, income needs, and health needs.”



Deja Brown, Wingfield High School Student, Rahim Salahadyn, Parent, and Renergee Salahadyn, Wingfield High School Student

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Clearly, Jackson's Promise Coalition succeeds in providing paths to bright futures and training students to be community leaders. Jackson's Promise Coalition wants other communities in the state to know that similar partnerships can be developed at little or no cost. It all starts with a concerned community and leaders. In offering advice to other communities, Operation Shoestring Executive Director Robert Langford believes that getting started involves taking stock in a community's assets. "Work with other people in the community to knit this quilt together with the other patches of fabric that already exist there."

Wingfield student Renergee Salahadyn believes it can be done in other areas and more importantly, that it needs to be done. "It's not only Jackson or Mississippi that's really having the problem. It's all around, so I think they should do it worldwide." Her father, Rahim, echoed, "Because it does take a village to raise a child after all."

Jackson's Promise Coalition sees the dropout prevention program continuing and expanding in the coming years. Already, they have reached out to teens in Canton by holding workshops and hosting CEO Mixers with well-known leaders in the Jackson area (S. Davie, personal communication, December 13, 2010). "We want to replicate our success in different places because these are models we know will work," Burger said. They also expect to continue producing Summer Activities Guides, recruiting students for the Drop Out Prevention Council and creating new programs and events for the feeder patterns.

There are personal benefits to doing this work. For Burger, the life-changing benefits are priceless. "I think our reward in all of this work is to see these kids who all of a sudden say, 'Hey, somebody cares enough about me to make a difference.'"

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Robert Langford, Executive Director, Operation Shoestring