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YMCA works wonders through Strong Kids campaign

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Debbie Johnson recalls a woman who often passed the Geauga YMCA's modern facility on Bass Lake Road in Munson Township.

She told Johnson, the Geauga YMCA executive director, she couldn't envision herself entering such a beautiful building, let alone partake in its programs.

But through donations to the YMCA of Greater Cleveland's Strong Kids campaign, the once-elusive door opened to the woman and her who children who now regularly utilize the Y's amenities.

"No one is turned away from the Y because they can't afford to pay," Johnson said.

Since its inception in 1854, the organization's mission has focused on extending a helping hand. Building strong children, families and communities, to paraphrase the organization's slogan, is accomplished through athletic programs, education, child care and more.

The annual campaign, which assists with bringing the humanitarian endeavors to fruition, kicked off this week. Last year's campaign raised \$540,500 – 106 percent of the set goal.

This year, the goal is \$617,000.

Honored with the YMCA of Greater Cleveland's highest branch campaign volunteer award in 2007 was Marilyn Foote of Newbury Township, who brought in nearly \$12,000 from more than 20 donors. Her efforts for the Geauga Y superseded monetary objectives by about \$10,000.

"I think that our success last year was based on the fact that we made personal contacts," Foote said.

"When you tell (donors) you're talking about needy children, they're generous with their time and money."



Michael Blair/MBlair@News-Herald

Daylan Powers, 10, of Chardon practices a tip drill as coach Steve Powell looks on at left, during Thursday's YMCA Youth Basketball League practice at the Geauga County YMCA.

Johnson agrees.

"The members that give are becoming more connected to the Y because they see the kids in here, and they want them to have the same opportunities they have," she said.

Michelle White, interim executive director of the Euclid YMCA on Babbitt Road, related an experience told to her by a former director about how opportunities afforded through campaign dollars make a difference.

The director approached a boy loitering outside the Euclid facility and questioned him. He said his mother couldn't afford to purchase a membership for him.

Stipulating ground rules of good behavior and appropriate involvement during programs, the director permitted him use of the facility through a scholarship. The young man gratefully complied, and true to his word, spent more of his time in participating in beneficial endeavors

within the building, rather than hanging around outside of it.

No distinction is made between paying members and those who are able to attend due to donations. Recipients remain anonymous.

“The best part about the scholarship is that there are people who make six figures, and they could be on the treadmill next to someone who is receiving funds, and nobody would know the difference,” White said.

Applications provided through the YMCA are reviewed by staff members, and scholarships are granted on a sliding

scale. Individuals are permitted to reapply annually.

Alvin Austin, executive director of the Hillcrest YMCA on Mayfield Road in Lyndhurst, stated that he hopes a new playground will be realized through this year’s campaign.

“One of the things that we look at are where the greatest needs are,” Austin said. “We have so many programs. The Y is so much more than swim and gym.”

According to information provided by the Y, “All contributed dollars are used for programs in the communities served by the YMCA as indicated by the donor.” Dollars raised by each branch remain there. ■

YMCA Strong Kids campaign goals

EUCLID FAMILY YMCA – \$30,000

(216) 731-7454

Regular and Youth Memberships – \$14,000

Leaders School – \$10,000

Youth Sports – \$3,500

Summer Day Camp – \$2,500

“The Euclid YMCA serves primarily the residents of the city of Euclid. It is the main recreational center in the city and also the home of a new government program, “the Euclid Collaborative,” a YMCA news release states. “The city itself is currently facing issues surrounding its demographics. It used to be a middle-class, blue-collar town, but due to socioeconomic changes, the number of children, families and adults in need continues to increase. The Strong Kids Campaign will provide valuable and essential support to area residents in the categories of memberships, leaders school, summer day camp and youth sports programming.”

GEAUGA FAMILY YMCA – \$60,000

(440) 285-7543

Memberships – \$32,000

Youth Room – \$13,500

Sports Camp Scholarships – \$6,240

Obesity Programming – \$4,300

Teen Leaders – \$3,960

“The primary community needs identified by the Geauga Family YMCA center on teens and obesity. Teens from Chardon (where the majority of members come from) have no teen center, and even the mall, always a popular hangout for teens, is outside the city. To that end, (the) branch is looking to increase teen programming and offer a gathering place for teens. The other issue facing the area is obesity. As the national obesity rate rises, so does that of Geauga County. The YMCA is ideally positioned to provide nutrition and weight-loss programming for that population.”

HILLCREST FAMILY YMCA – \$60,000

(216) 382-4300

Regular and youth memberships – \$20,000

Capital Improvement Needs (new playground) – \$20,000

Youth Sports and Swimming – \$5,000

Teen Initiatives – \$5,000

Active Older Adult Initiatives – \$5,000

Summer Day Camp – \$5,000

“The Hillcrest Family YMCA provides service to many of the large and small suburbs on the east side of Cleveland, including Lyndhurst, Mayfield, Mayfield Heights, South Euclid, Cleveland Heights, Highland Heights, Richmond Heights, University Heights, Beachwood and many others. The branch caters to adults, young families, youth, and has a strong, active senior population...After meeting with community leaders, members and volunteers, the Hillcrest YMCA identified our primary community focus is centered on seniors and teens.”