

Christmas sendoff at the Northwest

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Chuck Watson, center, poses with helpers during a Christmas party Thursday night for children in the Reaching Out program at the Northwest Community Center. Watson, 77, will leave his position as director of the program at the end of this year.

FROM LEFT: Tyler and Robin Henderson; Watson; his assistant, Val Abington; and Rakiyah Taylor, a sophomore at Cowley College.

Photo by DONITA CLAUSEN

As a 16-year-old foster child and new Arkansas City resident, Robin Henderson hoped to find friends when she came to the Northwest Community Center one Thursday night eight years ago.

Instead, she felt coldness and rejection from the other young people who also participated in the Reaching Out program that night.

Just as she was losing hope that she would not find the positive community she longed for so much, the leaders of the Reaching Out program stepped in to help her, Henderson said Thursday night.

"He saved me from trouble," she said of Chuck Watson, who has directed the program with the assistance of Val Abington for the past 15 years.

Henderson, now 24 years old, said that with the encouragement of "Uncle Chuck" and "Sister Val," she did make friends at the center, and that it one of the few positive places she could go as a youngster.

She returned to the center Thursday night with her husband, Tyler, and their 4-year-old daughter, Tariyah.

They came to honor Watson and Abington during the Reaching Out program's annual Christmas party, attended by about 100 people — including more than 75 children.

It was Watson's next-to-last session as the program's leader.

City officials recently decided not to renew Watson's \$10,000 annual contract to run it. The contract expires at the end of the year.

The city announced last week that it plans to continue the program, making it a part of the city offerings, and to strengthen it during the next year with facility and equipment improvements, as well as new programming offerings and times.

Most of the kids enjoying pizza and snacks at the party Thursday seemed oblivious of the changes about to take place at the center.

They just were having fun.

About 6 p.m., many of the children — ranging in age from 4 to 17 — lined up for pizza and snacks in the center's west meeting room.

After being served by Watson and his assistants, they sat at four large tables or stood in the background to eat and talk with friends.

Conversations became louder as more and more kids filled the room.

Watson shouted to his assistants for more pizza as he dished out the last piece of a pizza pie in a large box.

'The 12 Days of Christmas'

Watson shouted again for kids to quiet down after Abington distributed cards with lyrics to the Christmas carol "The 12 Days of Christmas."

She handed different parts of the lyrics to various groups in the room.

The plan was for a group of leaders to start each verse, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me..." and for the different groups of kids to add the gifts that were given on each of the 12 days.

The first attempt to start the community singing didn't work. Some kids weren't paying attention and kept talking to their friends. Others missed their cue or didn't sing loud enough to be heard.

"Hey!" Watson shouted a second time to draw their attention.

Abington started the group off again, and this time, it worked.

The kids sang on cue and each time they repeated the list of gifts, they sang louder and with more spirit.

Perhaps a group seated at one particular table assigned to sing "five golden rings" sang with the most gusto.

The lead singers were seventh-grader Scotty Oliver and sixth-grader Chevy Sartin.

Sartin performed with dramatic flair, extending his arms as he sang and adding a just a hint of vibrato.

"I come here every Thursday," Oliver said.

In other rooms down narrow hallways from the meeting room, the noise level also increased as more kids showed up for the party.

It was somewhat quieter in the computer room, where several middle-school-aged children played computer games.

Sixth-grader Gavin Lehew said he looks forward to the weekly gatherings at the Northwest Community Center, where he can play basketball and other games, and see friends.

Many kids around his age come to the center, he said.

"I love this place," Lehew said. "It's like family."

Fellow sixth-grader Jacqueline Palacios agreed.

She said she enjoyed the arts, crafts and game activities at the center.

Sixth-grade classmate Mayra Hernandez said she will miss Watson when he leaves his position at the center.

"He's awesome," she said. "He's cool."

The loudest room in the center was the gymnasium where kids were shooting basketballs, throwing dodge balls, racing from one end of the court to the other and shouting at each other.

At one point, 5-year-old Roy Curry asked Abington, who was looking after the kids in the gym, if he could keep a singing Christmas tree toy that he had won earlier that night in a drawing.

She answered "yes."

The boy smiled and showed the toy to a visitor.

Watson discusses program

Gym activities at the center are not always random, said Watson, who stood on the sidelines, viewing the action.

"Sometimes we get high school and juco students who lead 3-on-3 basketball or round-robin shooting," he said.

The Reaching Out program has included various activities in addition to basketball, Watson noted.

They include pool and ping-pong tournaments.

"We average around 50 kids. This is closer to 100," he said, commenting on the size of the Christmas party crowd.

Watson, 77, was asked if he ever tired of conducting the Reaching Out program, which goes from 5 to 10 p.m. each Thursday.

"No, I really enjoy being around the kids," he said.

Watson, a deacon at St. James Church of God in Christ — located in the same neighborhood as the Northwest Community Center — talked about how he approaches helping the children who come to the center.

"I try first to be an example, and then I try to look at things from their perspective," he said.

"I don't dog any of them. I'm loud, but I've always been loud. Kids know my bark is bigger than my bite."

Watson said the most rewarding aspect of running the program is to find "kids enjoying themselves and not being influenced by wrong-doing."

Although he won't run the program in the future, Watson said he plans to remain an active part of the Northwest community.

"I'll be in and out," he said. "Regardless of what the city thinks, I think this is an important program. ... I get a lot of help."

Center 'grads' bring children

Jacob and Shaquita Folk attended the Reaching Out program when they were growing up, and they plan to have their three small children also attend, they said.

"It would be sad (if the program were discontinued)," said Jacob Folk, "because kids that come here get help on the computer or a place to play."

"It is wonderful for the community, as far as holidays, because they have coloring contests and games."

Another couple who attended the program when they were younger are Tyler and Robin Henderson.

Tyler said he started coming to the center when he was in middle school and returns from time to time as an adult volunteer.

He met Robin, who moved to Ark City when she was 16, and eventually the two were married.

They brought their 4-year-old daughter, Tariyah, to the annual Christmas party Thursday.

Tyler Henderson praised Watson as a mentor who helped him to develop a love for basketball and also was a positive role model for him.

Watson taught him "life lessons," Henderson said.

"Uncle Chuck has made a big impact on my life," Henderson said.

"He provided a fine and positive environment here. It never got boring. He kept it creative by offering a variety of activity. He allows you to have fun, but he expects you to do it the right way."

Watson taught youngsters, particularly boys, to be respectful of others, he said.

"He was a very good man for boys," he said.

"If you had a bad mouth, he would send you outside. He'd say, 'You go outside. You're not going to affect the rest of the guys. When you calm down, you can come back in.'"

Now Henderson wants to follow in Watson's footsteps, he said. "Basketball is a big thing for me now and I'm coaching kids," Henderson said.

"He helped me love the sport more. He taught me things about basketball and how to keep good character in it.

"As we got older, Chuck and I went to lunch, and I told him, 'When you retire, let me know so that I can take this over.'"

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