

Advocate

Serving Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns counties | **February 2011**

Data Busters equips students with skills for high achievement



Clay County Data Busters get hands-on training with computer hardware.

St. Johns County Commissioner Ken Bryant addressed Data Busters at the recognition event.



While other teens may gloat over their high scores in the newest video game, graduates of NFCAA's Data Busters program just smile and shrug, knowing their time was better spent over the summer. Armed with newly developed skills, 233 students left this year's program with a heightened sense of confidence and accomplishment, with many aspiring to be lawyers, doctors and authors.

For 25 years, NFCAA's Data Busters program has rescued area youth from idle summers of video games and junk food. As obesity, unemployment and poverty plagues families, Data Busters energizes 14- to 17-year-olds to excel despite their struggles as they spend six weeks in and out of the classroom, studying and gaining practical part-time work experience.

With the addition of Clay County this year, the Data Busters program expanded to all of NFCAA's seven-county service area, with students receiving instruction on conflict resolution, effective communication and team building, as well as life skills in eating properly, managing money and critical thinking. Through the program, they also master the MS Office Suite programs Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint, essential tools in modern business, in addition to attending workshops on resumé writing, interviewing tips, and business attire while maintaining paid employment at local businesses.

After completing the intensive program, each county hosts ceremonies to recognize program participants. In addition to honorable mentions for best PowerPoint presentations, hardest workers and best classroom participation, this year's all-around top performers received Hewlett-Packard computers with a carrying case, flash drives and printers, while second place performers took home Hewlett-Packard net books.

NFCAA board member Vicki Beaudry summed it up well as she addressed students at the Nassau County Data Busters reception. "You are our next generation of leaders in this community, in this state, in this country, maybe even this world," she said. "The sky is the limit. If you're not afraid of failure, imagine the accomplishments you can achieve."

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– Vicki Beaudry

A note from the executive director:



NFCAA making a difference while poverty rate in Florida continues to climb

Poverty is on the rise in Florida. A recent *Florida Times-Union* article reported that 13.2 percent of Floridians were living in poverty, as opposed to 12.1 percent in the previous year, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Hitting even closer to home, some of the counties served by the Northeast Florida Community Action Agency (NFCAA) – including Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns – were among the Florida counties cited as experiencing increased poverty levels.

While newscasts have recently reported that the recession is over, I have yet to see any evidence to back those reports. As people continue to face unemployment and economic uncertainty, NFCAA's services are more

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In spite of the gloom and doom associated with increasing poverty, NFCAA is doing its part to address this issue and be a part of the solution. We are helping people throughout Northeast Florida achieve their goals, one person at a time.

This issue offers a message of hope with home ownership success stories through our Individual Development Accounts service delivery system. We have also helped 250 young people get job experience through our Data Busters program. There are also other motivational pieces in this newsletter such as how some of the young people in our programs have gone on to achieve professional educational victories.

In short, NFCAA is making a difference and we thank and salute those of you who support our mission and can now share in our success.

John W. Edwards, Jr.

Norwood area benefits from NFCAA's partnership with Grace and Truth Community Development Corporation

Help is on the way for individuals living in the Norwood area thanks to NFCAA's partnership with The Grace and Truth Community Development Corporation (GTCD).

GTCD donated space in the former Norwood Elementary School to NFCAA for a satellite office for our weatherization and home energy assistance programs. Since the office opened in July, more than 400 individuals have received help.

"The Norwood area has been hard hit by the economic downturn," said Bishop E. M. Johnson, executive director of GTCD. "This is just the beginning of a collaborative effort to share resources that will move this community forward."

NFCAA provides emergency utility payment assistance from the new satellite office, located at 6720 Norwood Avenue. Program qualification is based on income, with priority given to seniors, the disabled and households with children five and younger.

"By working together, we're able to help more people in need," said John W. Edwards, Jr., NFCAA's executive director. "In the future, we hope to expand the services we can offer through this outreach location, making it more convenient for residents to get the help they need."

Data Busters alumnus nominated for prestigious Sargent Shriver Achievement Award



At the age of 10, Jason Hardwick was living in Golfbrook Housing Projects where he was exposed to violence and crime on a daily basis. More than 20 years later, he has been nominated for a prestigious national award for his achievements. Established in 1995 by the Community Action Partnership, the Sargent Shriver Achievement Award recognizes individuals who have changed their lives and gained independence with the assistance of a community action agency.

Hardwick defied the challenges of his neighborhood with help from the Northeast Florida Community Action Agency's Data Busters Program.

While he always actively participated in school and enrolled in programs like Inroads, Brain Brawl, Future Educators of America, Drama Club, soccer and track, he began to rise above the "at risk teen" label through Data Busters' annual summer program, where he upped his computer literacy skills and earned money, while becoming motivated to make a better life for himself.

"[Data Busters] gave me the push to do well in college so the possibilities of my landing the kind of job I wanted would be greater," said Hardwick.

Hardwick applied for the program at the encouragement of his mother. His determination to succeed in turn motivated her and the two attended college simultaneously. Hardwick's mom graduated from Bethune-Cookman College in 1996 with a bachelor of science degree in nursing. Three years later, he graduated from Florida A&M University with a bachelor of science degree in economics.

Now the patient financial services manager at Shands Jacksonville, Hardwick has achieved his childhood goals without forgetting his roots. For the last three years, he has served as a mentor for "at risk" youth, encouraging them to rise above their circumstances as he did.

He also participated as a team captain in the 2009 Shands Annual Heart Walk, is a current member of the United Way Leadership Circle and volunteers and contributes to the Children's Miracle Network, Community Giving Campaign and Our Shands Jacksonville.

Hardwick was honored with a certificate of appreciation from Community Action Partnership during the 2010 Data Busters Awards Ceremony in Jacksonville to recognize his nomination for the Sargent Shriver Achievement Award.

"I hope that others will not allow their circumstances to dictate their futures and that my story will inspire others to persevere through life's challenges and aspire to be great," said Hardwick.

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– Jason Hardwick

Achieving the American dream

Individual Development Account helps many on their journey



Melissa Dzioba used her IDA to help fund her college education.

The American dream is an elusive concept for some and becomes further muddled when unforeseen factors such as single parenthood, illness and natural disaster take their toll. While the pursuance of homeownership and independence end in futile attempts for many, the Northeast Florida Community Action Agency (NFCAA) provides the resources to enable those who seek help.

One tool that can help in the pursuit of the American Dream is the Individual Development Account (IDA). Participants invest in this unique savings account where each dollar saved is matched by \$2 from NFCAA. These savings are dedicated to funding a college education, making a down payment on a home or growing or starting a business.

For single mom Melissa Dzioba, the first step toward a career in aerospace and aviation business administration was earning a degree. Using IDA funds, she received her associate's degree from Florida Community College, now Florida State College at Jacksonville, and is currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree at Embry Riddle

Aeronautical University. Compelled to give back, Dzioba volunteers in NFCAA's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program where she provides free tax preparation for low to moderate income families at the Robert F. Kennedy Community Center in Jacksonville.

Like Dzioba, IDA participant Gail Hayes was experiencing personal hardship, and needed help to improve her credit score. After establishing her IDA, Hayes attended financial education courses sponsored by NFCAA and administered by FDIC certified trainers. Empowered by her new financial knowledge and substantial savings, Hayes purchased her own home this July.

Dzioba and Hayes are two citizens closer to achieving the American dream. Along with them are 65 new IDA participants who have benefitted from this free financial aid program, a nearly 50% increase from last year.

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Twelve-year-old Riley Brandvold takes NFCAA youth out to the ballgame

Thirteen boys and girls, ages nine to 13, enjoyed star treatment when 12-year-old Riley Brandvold took them to a Jacksonville Suns game in early June. The event was extra special because many of the boys and girls had never attended a baseball game.

The young people viewed the game from a skybox provided by the Brandvolds, while NFCAA provided them with popcorn, hot dogs and soft drinks. Young Riley Brandvold learned about NFCAA's youth programs through his father, Tom Brandvold, who has assisted a couple of customers enrolled in our Family Self-Sufficiency Program (FSSP) for the past couple of years.

"At a young age, Riley had planned to attend a mission trip that was canceled. Since that time, he has had a desire to be a part of something great," said Gerri Ford, Family and Community Services Manager at the Emmett Reed Center. "He did not want any recognition for his good deed. He just wanted to do something nice for youth who had never been to a ballgame. The Brandvolds have truly been a blessing to the agency's programs."

NFCAA helps transform Emmett Reed Park

NFCAA recently teamed with The Mt. Herman Neighborhood Association to revitalize Emmett Reed Park. Once an eyesore on W. 6th Street filled with debris, trash and rusty, run-down playground equipment, the park was a community hazard as opposed to a safe and healthy place for children to play. Our plans are to turn the park into a community jewel.

Over the years, the park's property value continued to decrease, while there was an increase in criminal activity and truancy. To move the revitalization project forward, the neighborhood association held annual meetings with residents and allowed them to share their concerns, which were brought to NFCAA's client advisory board. Plans were then set in motion to bring the park back to life.

The park's contaminated soil contained dioxins known to cause chloracne, a severe form of persistent acne, as well as developmental abnormalities in children's tooth enamel, central and peripheral nervous system pathology, thyroid disorders, immune system damage and endometriosis. Work is underway to restore the park beginning with digging up the soil, which has been replaced with fresh and safe soil.

Upon completion, the new and improved Emmett Reed Park will boast a 10-station fitness trail, park lighting, barbecue grills, and new and improved playground equipment. In addition a rarely-used tennis court was converted into a basketball court. The Emmett Reed Park project will be complete by spring 2011.

Symposium on Poverty strived to push ignored topic to forefront of election year politics but candidates failed to show up

Less than 30 days before the statewide elections, the Florida Association for Community Action had a dream of pushing the oft-neglected topic of poverty to the center of campaign platform discussions at the organization's *Symposium on Poverty* on Oct. 14. A healthy crowd of 125 showed up for the event, but something was missing. All of the candidates invited to participate were no-shows.

Candidates running for governor, senator, chief financial officer and attorney general and nine local candidates were asked to join in the conversation on the Florida A&M University campus. "We have a responsibility to keep the issue of poverty in the forefront of America's conscience," says Wilma McKay, Executive Director for the Florida Association for Community Action (FACA); the Tallahassee-based association for the 29 community action agencies across Florida, including NFCAA.

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– Wilma McKay

US Census data shows that some 30 million Americans were living in poverty in 1964. Today that number has skyrocketed to 39.8 million. In addition, 14.6 percent of Floridians and 21 percent of Florida's children were poor in 2009. The data also indicates that 7.8 percent of Florida's elderly population lives in poverty.

The symposium was designed to initiate an important dialogue about poverty, according to NFCAA's John Edwards, chair of FACA's Legislative Committee and board chairperson for the National Association for Community Action. "There is no comprehensive strategy or plan in place for reducing poverty in Florida and it's getting progressively worse," he said. "The main purpose was to encourage state government to work more closely with the FACA to develop a comprehensive strategy for Florida. It was a great plan and the timing was impeccable, but unfortunately none of the candidates showed up to participate in the discussion."

The candidates' neglect of the event has not discouraged Edwards, who says the FACA plans to encourage the Legislature to create a commission on poverty or task force to bring other agencies together to address the issue.



John Edwards elected chairman of national anti-poverty board



NFCAA's own John W. Edwards, Jr. was reelected to a second term as chairman of the national Community Action Partnership (CAP) board of directors at the anti-poverty organization's 2010 annual convention in Boston. The DC-based partnership provides training and other services to more than 1,000 community action agencies across the country. Edwards has served as board chairman since 2008.

For his new term, Edwards plans to help spearhead a number of anti-poverty initiatives, including a task force on community economic development. "During these challenging economic times, it is crucial that we continue focusing on strategies that will help low-income Americans achieve financial stability," he said. "This task force will promote community economic development as a core strategy for increasing economic security and reducing poverty."

In addition to serving as NFCAA's executive director since 1993, Edwards has also served as president of the Florida Association for Community Action, a united federation of community action agencies, Head Start programs, and weatherization programs. He is past co-chair of the Living Wage Coalition of Jacksonville, Inc. and is a certified national Peer-to-Peer ROMA (Results Oriented Management and Accountability system) trainer and a Pathways to Excellence reviewer. He also recently earned the Certified Community Action Professional designation.

"John Edwards is an incredibly effective leader in Jacksonville, throughout Florida, and on the national level in terms of working to make America a more economically secure place for low-income people and families," said Don Mathis, president and CEO of the national Community Action Partnership. "He is highly respected throughout the community action network of more than 1,000 agencies that serve over 99 percent of America's counties."

The mission of Northeast Florida Community Action Agency

is to defeat poverty and erase its devastating effects on Northeast Florida families by providing the education, empowerment and assistance that leads to self-sufficiency and a positive place within our community. Produced periodically, *The Advocate* highlights NFCAA's current efforts helping individuals and families living in Baker, Duval, Clay, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns counties.

For more information, call (904) 398-7472, (888) 498-7472 or visit www.nfcaa.org.

