

# East St. Louis center offers hope to region’s youth

By **RANDY PIERCE**  
[tribune@heraldpubs.com](mailto:tribune@heraldpubs.com)

Many dozens of children in East St. Louis likely have futures full of promise and fulfillment as the result of their participation in the programs at a facility located there which provides not only recreation, entertainment and education but also inspiration regarding the life skills necessary for them to thrive in the years ahead.

The Christian Activity Center on North 6th Street near Summit Avenue has become a valuable resource for local youngsters who, along with their parents, might otherwise not realize the benefits it has to offer them.

Pastor Jeffrey Williams of New Christian Fellowship Church in Fairview Heights keeps himself very busy with his ministry while additionally making a difference in the lives of others who are less fortunate as a result of his dedication to the Christian Activity Center where he is the executive director.

Williams, in speaking of the efforts of the CAC and the support staff at the complex which is located just off Interstate 64 near the Baugh Avenue exit, says, “Just because I’m in Fairview Heights doesn’t mean I can’t help in East St. Louis. I just go where I’m led to help.”

“Once you go there, you can’t help but fall in love with the young people there.”

The CAC’s after school program begins at 3 p.m. and extends all the way until 8 p.m. which Williams says is unusual by going that far into the evening. But he is quick to add that he and others there did some research which showed the children living in the environment served by the facility, at 540 North 6th Street, face challenges which justify those kinds of hours, “so we try to hold on to them as long as we can.”

During the summer months, the CAC has a camp program that runs from noon until 6 p.m. with appropriate programs for the enjoyment and enrichment of the participants including many outdoor activities.

“Our mission is to embrace kids with the love of Christ,” Williams said, “and to equip them to thrive,” which includes academic guidance by tutors from schools, churches or the neighborhood who volunteer their time, along with offering physical activities, athletic programs, technology interaction opportunities and providing the emotional support which many of them need.

“It’s not that the kids in that area are not capable. They just don’t have access and opportunity so what we do is try to wrap our arms around our children and help them thrive in those areas where they’re lacking so much,” Williams continued.

One of the many projects the participants can enjoy while also learning entrepreneurship involves planting and harvesting produce then taking it to a farmer’s market where it can be sold, something which also teaches them about accounting and is assisted through

a partnership with Scott Credit Union.

A very disheartening experience that Williams said he has encountered concerned children who have had their identities stolen by their own parents, the result being facing unexpected debt with the victims, some who have no idea about the concept of credit, being completely unaware not only that this occurred but also how to deal with it. To counter this, Scott Credit Union, in conjunction with the CAC, has enabled some of the kids to have their own savings accounts which are not accessible by the parents.

The CAC at times takes the children on various short-distance field trips to places like the Science Center or zoo in St. Louis so they realize the world is a much bigger place than what they have experienced by being isolated in East St. Louis.

Guest speakers, musicians and performers are brought to the center as another way of providing inspiration, entertainment, encouragement and education for the children.

Williams shared that prior to his selection for the CAC director position, he was a member of the board of directors of the Metro East Baptist Association.

The history of the CAC includes a time when teen violence was sweeping the streets of East St. Louis and The Rev. Chet Cantrell arrived in 1989. The CAC’s purpose at that time was to keep kids alive.



Shown are Christian Activity Center youth participants enjoying a recent outdoor crafts activity. (Courtesy CAC)

removal, walking into the heart of street violence and gang wars and visiting mothers of murdered teens to counsel against retribution.

With East St. Louis in a downward spiral, congregations in the city fled for safer ground just as families’ needs and despair were compounded by dwindling resources. The CAC’s immediate sphere of influence, the Samuel Gompers Homes, had become the acme of violence in what was aptly called “America’s Deadliest City.”

Officials in the city asked Baptists to do something to help stem the tide of juvenile crime and violence in this neighborhood. After a series of attempts to reestablish a ministry that included five directors in seven years and a near-closing in 1988, a nationwide search was conducted and Cantrell was hired to begin work January 6, 1989.

The CAC has grown in youth service from 13 teens in 1989 to close to 500 children and youth ages five to 18. CAC’s base of support has grown exponentially but there are needs that still exist to continue its efforts.

The tangible results of the work of the CAC include children’s grade-point aver-

ages increasing, more of the participants eventually enrolling in college and a reduction in juvenile crime in the area it serves.

Williams has been serving as executive director of the CAC, a registered non-profit organization with a governing board of directors, since January of 2021. Further information can be found at [www.cacsl.org](http://www.cacsl.org).

• *Randy Pierce is a reporter for Herald Publications, part of the Better Newspapers Inc. media family.*

## Swansea Rotary is raising funds for Belleville District’s CAVE students

The Rotary Club of Swansea is selling raffle tickets again this year to benefit Belleville District 201 CAVE (Center for Academic and Vocational Excellence) students that will be entering the trades workforce.

Last year the club exceeded its goal and raised \$5,000 for educational awards to six CAVE students.

The students’ cash award assists them in purchasing tools for their selected trade or to further their education in their vocation. Student recipients are featured on the Rotary’s website and on its Facebook page, @SwanseaRotary.

Club members are reaching out for assistance in exceeding their goal again this year. The drawing for the three cash prizes will be on Thursday, Nov. 2, 2023. The first prize drawing is for \$1,000 cash, second prize is \$600, and third is \$400. Tickets are \$20 each, or \$30 for two.

For tickets or more information about the raffle, visit [www.swansearotary.org](http://www.swansearotary.org) or scan the QR code provided. Any Swansea Rotarian can also help provide information about the Rotary’s efforts and the CAVE fundraiser. ■



**‘Dine to Donate.’ Godfrey Scooter’s Coffee donates portion of sales to Beverly Farm**

Co-owner Bob Semptimphelter of Scooter’s Coffee in Godfrey (right) presents a check on Aug. 15 to Beverly Farm Foundation CEO Crystal Officer (middle) and Chief Development Officer Taylor Justice (left) for the donations from the “Dine to Donate” fundraiser Scooter’s Coffee held for Beverly Farm on July 28. Bob and his wife Lindsey also own the Scooter’s Coffee location in Glen Carbon. Their Godfrey location celebrated its grand opening in April. Their Glen Carbon location opened in July 2021. (Courtesy Beverly Farm)

# It’s time to try transit!

\$1

in Madison County

\$3

to or from St. Louis & St. Clair County



Madison County Transit

mct.org

|

info@mct.org

|

618-797-4600