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GOOD CONNECTIONS

Outreach program expands to bring health care center to urban KC

By DEBRA SKODACK
The Kansas City Star



JILL TOYOSHIBA/The Kansas City S

Hope Center, an outreach program aimed at helping youth in Kansas City's East Side neighborhoods, opened the Hope Family Care Center this month at Linwood Square Shopping Center. There, Tami Barr (left) helped support her son Bayley while nurse Sylvia Berner checked his heartbeat. Medical assistant Katherine Lemmones and Bayley's brother Tru also were there.

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Joshua Saulaberry returned Friday to the urban Kansas City neighborhood where he grew up.

His errand?

To pick up a volunteer application for the Hope Center Family Care Center, a medical clinic that had opened a week earlier at 3027 Prospect Ave.

Saulaberry hadn't forgotten how Hope Center and its founder, Chris Jehle, provided him an anchor during his adolescent years.

Now it's his turn to contribute.

"I still care about the inner city, just like Chris cared for me," said the 24-year-old Saulaberry of south Kansas City.

It's been more than 11 years since Jehle started Hope Center, a faith-based community development and outreach program at 2800 E. Linwood Blvd. that has helped countless young people.

This month, the nonprofit agency opened the family care center to provide affordable health care to the area.

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Jehle, originally from Prairie Village, has a bachelor's degree in social work from the University of Kansas. He moved to Kansas City's East Side in 1995, working as an office machine salesman for a living and — as his passion — doing youth outreach for Heartland Community Church.

Jehle, now a husband and father, still lives where he works.

"It helped me to see the obstacles that (the youth) face," Jehle said.

Saulaberry was in sixth grade when he met Jehle through Bible study. He was yearning for a fun place to hang out and heard that the Bible study might give him a chance to go to summer camp. He was among the young people there when Hope Center began.

"I remember Chris asking me, 'What is your dream?' and I said, 'Basically to have a place to hang out and learn about God,'" Saulaberry said.

He got both at Hope Center. Now Saulaberry is engaged to be married and is preparing to take the medical assistant certificate test.

Jehle said Hope Center helps many "who were largely forgotten."

"Indifference can hurt an area like this," he said.

And yet there is so much promise with the kids. The center serves about 100 young people a week.

"You see the hope and potential," Jehle said. "We are committed to do everything to see them through."

That now includes medical care, through a project with College Park Family Care Center in Johnson County. The doctors volunteer their time at the new center.

College Park has a history of mission work both within the U.S. and internationally, said Tom Kettler, a co-founder of the Stilwell practice.

"We want to do something within our city," Kettler said.

The medical center couldn't have been established at a better time.

"The foreclosure crisis has really ravaged our neighborhood," Jehle said. "I think it's encouraging to see a first-class medical facility."

Another goal is to open a charter kindergarten through eighth-grade school in 2011.

Constance Norton, president of the Oak Park Neighborhood Association, loves the new health care center.

"I, myself personally, will definitely be going," she said. "It is absolutely fantastic that we have someone like Chris in our neighborhood."

The details

The Hope Family Care Center is open from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. It provides primary care to patients with insurance, Medicaid and Medicare, and offers sliding-scale fees for the uninsured. For an appointment, call 816-861-6500. Learn more at www.hopecenterkc.org.

Good Connections tells stories of people who are giving — and getting — help. If you have a story idea, call Debra Skodack at 816-234-4738 or send e-mail to dskodack@kcstar.com.

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