

## *AfterSchool@first*

The after school program for at-risk children at First Presbyterian Church in Sharon is a dream come true for me. I have worked with children for 26 years within churches in Mercer and Lawrence Counties and at the City Rescue Mission in New Castle. I have seen children within our communities who have been forgotten. These children have fallen through the cracks of our society. We see it every day in First Presbyterian's parking lot where the parents leave their 4 and 5 year olds to fend for themselves while they work all day.

First Presbyterian Church made a decision to make a difference in OUR neighborhood. A few years ago, after canvassing the neighborhood, we began an after school program for elementary children. It failed miserably. Three children registered -2 could only come every other week and the other child cried the entire time he was there. But we did not give up; we knew God had great plans for us. We waited and searched for other options. A year and a half ago, we met with the superintendent of Case Avenue Elementary School which is located only a few blocks from the church. We discussed our thoughts and resources and their needs for the children. We found out through that meeting that 80% of the children in that particular school district were at-risk children. That day, we partnered with the Case Avenue School determined to make a difference in our community.

In the fall of 2007, we opened up our church to 14 students. We began a no-cost, two year program for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Each child was hand picked by the Principal, Guidance Counselor, and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers. These were children who were not eligible for any other programming within the school or community. These were children that had to baby-sit 5 kids younger than themselves every day after school. Children that come home from school and had to make dinner for their brothers and sisters. Children who had parents that did not graduate from High School, so the parents can not help their own children with homework every night. One of our boys in the program lives in a house with his grandparents, an aunt, an uncle, and 4 other children from 2 other families. His parents are divorced and living in California-mother is in jail. Most of these children do well in school, but we know at any time they could fall so far behind that they would never catch up.

Our program partners 2 children with 1 adult mentor. This partnership is for the entire 2 years that these children are with us in the program. Our mentors are role models and friends. Our adults greet each student at the door when they arrive. They have a healthy snack together, do homework, and even play games together in the gym. Every week, we engage in a learning time when professional speakers, counselors, and other experts visit and discuss topics such as confidence building, stress reduction and bullying. The night ends as we all join together around the dinner tables.

Our after school program is member driven. Each mentor from the congregation has volunteered to give 2 years to each child. We have decided to let our 7<sup>th</sup> graders return for the third year as a peer mentor to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. These 7<sup>th</sup> graders will help the younger children with the transition from elementary to junior high school. It is nice to see a familiar face when you walk into a new school.

Incredible things can happen when young minds feel the spark of understanding and learning within an environment of acceptance. We hope and pray that we have made First Presbyterian Church in Sharon just that-a safe environment of acceptance for these at-risk children.

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