

# SMYL widens

## Seneca Mentoring Youth Links reaches 45 matches

By **MARYANN KROMER**

Staff Writer

mkromer@advertiser-tribune.com

In 2013, Jami Opp was hired as the case manager for the newly established Seneca Mentoring Youth Links, or SMYL. The Family and Children First Council had determined a need in the area for a mentoring program. Opp's mission was to enlist people to become mentors and match them with children who needed them. She made the first match in December 2013.



"I'm just really excited about how much it's grown in just over a year, from my first match to 45 matches. It feels good," Opp said recently. "I've been very busy."

Opp also started a School Pal program at Columbian High School for 2013-2014 to pair younger children with high school students. This year, School Pal is operating at North Central Academy, where 10 younger students are matched with 10 older ones. Then, there are adults who spend time with youth outside of school. Opp said the adult mentors range from college age to senior citizens.

Sixteen boys are waiting to be matched and five adult women are eligible to be mentors. Opp said she does same-

sex matches, unless there is a married couple who want to serve as a "family match." Each mentor now has only one child, but Opp is considering having one mentor matched with more than one child, especially in the case of same-sex siblings. Typically, the girls get matched but their brothers do not.

"It kind of breaks your heart," Opp said. "All the kids in this program, even the ones that aren't matched yet, I feel a special bond with them. ... And the parents have been great."

All mentors receive FBI and Bureau of Criminal Identification background checks. Opp visits potential mentors' homes to be sure they are safe environments for children. Some of the mentors prefer not to take children to their homes, especially if a child has a history of acts such as shoplifting. The mentors can spend time with their charges at other places, such as a park or shopping area, rather than in the home.

"The YMCA has donated some day passes, so we really appreciated that," Opp said.

She gives mentors and parents her phone number and encourages them to call anytime a problem or concern arises. Mostly, she asks mentors to be consistent and dependable.



PHOTOS BY MARYANN KROMER

Above, youths and adults in the Seneca Mentoring Youth Links program make bead bracelets at the Christmas party. Inset, SMYL case manager Jami Opp works in her office in the United Way building in downtown Tiffin. Below, a game of Twister was one of the activities at the SMYL Christmas party.

Mentors turn in an activity log every month so Opp can see what they have been doing. She said she tries to match mentors with children having similar interests.

"Today, I matched a little boy who likes model cars with a guy who likes to fix cars. He is match 45," Opp said.

SMYL also plans group events for the children and their families and mentors. In the fall, the group spent the day at the Franciscan Earth Literacy Center. There was a meeting for all the mentors to exchange ideas for activities and share problems and achievements. SMYL also had a Christmas party at the YMCA.

"I look forward to the events. That's like my highlight. It's like, OK, I've done all this work. Now let's have fun

with the kids," Opp said. "My favorite was the Party in the Park, the dance party. We danced with the kids and did the line dances they were doing. They had to teach me some things, but it was fun."

Whenever she sees one of the children in a store or elsewhere in the community, Opp typically is greeted with a big hug. She said case management she does is a big part of the program, but it would not be possible without the mentors.

"I give a lot of credit to the mentors because they go out of their way to make sure these kids are a priority ... make the child feel special," Opp said. "I do a follow-up every month with my mentors and mentees to see how everything's going."

A Bob Evans community

fundraiser is set for March 12. Patrons can present a flier that day to designate 15 percent of their sale to SMYL. Another benefit is a Girls' Night Out March 26 at Camden Falls. It is to feature a light spring buffet and a cash bar. Tickets are available for \$20 each.

Opp said she reports to work eager to plan events and follow up with participants in the program.

"It's not even like working because I enjoy it so much ... I find myself excited to come to work every day, excited to help as many kids as I can," she said.

To learn more about becoming a mentor, volunteering or donating to Seneca Mentoring Youth Links, contact Opp at (419) 443-0981.

## Musings from the mentors

Jeff Brickner said he is a friend of Jami Opp, who told him about SMYL. Having fostered three children in recent years, he decided to become a mentor. Last summer, he was matched with a middle school student.

"We go hang out quite a bit — movies, video games," Brickner said. "I took him down to Mansfield to Snow Trails. They have a huge tubing hill with lanes that you can go down. He had a blast."

The pair would like to go back, but it takes time to drive and admission is rather expensive. Brickner said he has "lots of toys" at his home in the form of all-terrain vehicles. He taught his match how to ride a four-wheeler, which gave them an activity to do together. Brickner said single moms with sons may be glad to have a male companion to throw a football or get dirty in other outdoor activities. Being a mentor has been a good experience for Brickner.

"I enjoy it. It gives the kids an opportunity to get away from home, get away from their parents. At least they're with a responsible person where they can do more than with another 13-year-old kid and not get into trouble. I'm kind of a big kid myself."

Jami Opp spoke about SMYL at the church Sharon Faris attends, so



Faris joined the program and was matched with a first-grade girl last July 1.

"It takes a village," Faris said, repeating a famous sentiment.

Retired from Mercy Tiffin Hospital, Faris said she introduced her match to her two young granddaughters. The girls attend the same school, and they got along well together. Faris said they play card games and bingo games in which "everybody wins a prize."

Now, she considers the little girl an adopted grandchild.

"I have my grandkids a lot, so we have tea parties. ... They never have too many tea parties with Grandma," Faris said.

When SMYL had a party at St. Francis, Faris took her "little person," who experienced her first taste of s'mores. Faris said her child doesn't talk very much, but she opened up a lot while

they were walking in the woods.

"We had some good moments. Every one of them is like a Christmas present for me, just to see her grow," Faris said.

She and her match went to see the movie "Annie," and Faris took the little girl Christmas caroling with a group from her church. The child did not know every song, but it didn't seem to matter.

thing for here in Seneca County. Even though the arrangement with Big Brothers didn't work out really conducive to serving the children of this county, I did not want to let that fall through the cracks."

A handful of other people who had worked with Big Brothers also were dissatisfied with its operation. They and DeVaughn collaborated to start an independent program, and Seneca Mentoring Youth Links was born. DeVaughn said the group emphasizes "true transparency" in conducting its work. Any donations to SMYL stay here to benefit youth in Seneca County.

"We count true matches as our measuring stick. ... Just having a child on a waiting list is not serving a child," DeVaughn said.

Now that SMYL is an established nonprofit, DeVaughn said the organization would like to expand its board. Anyone interested can contact Opp at (419) 443-0981.

"It's a good organization and a lot of good people have devoted a lot of time to it. I'm really proud of them. ... We've made a lot of progress in a short time, so we hope to keep doing that and grow even bigger," DeVaughn said.



**DayBreak of Fostoria**  
*Adult Day Center for persons with Alzheimer's Disease & Memory Loss*  
 Caring for a Loved One...Need a Break? Try Our Safe, Loving Environment.  
 First Day Free... Come check us out \$32 per day  
 Financial Assistance Available For Those Who Qualify  
 M-W-F 8:30 am to 2:30 pm  
 For more information contact: Melinda Walker  
 email: daybreakoffostoria@outlook.com  
 725 Columbus Ave. Fostoria  
**419-435-4022**  
 A United Way Agency

**HIGH SPEED INTERNET**

bright wireless

Your LOCAL Link to the World  
\*A division of Bascom Mutual Telephone Co.



5990 W. Tiffin St.  
 Bascom, OH 44809  
 (419)937-2222 · (888)806-2530  
 www.bascomtelephone.com

**First Presbyterian Church**

www.fpctiffin.com  
 96 S. Monroe St., Tiffin · 419-447-2004



**Worship 10:30 am**  
**Sunday School 9:00 am**

- Nursery Available
- Handicap Accessible
- Visitors Welcome

**Rev. Katie Treadway, Pastor**