

PEOPLE

'Starry Night' gala benefits Gifford Youth Achievement



Dr. Ronald and Jackye Hudson.

PHOTOS: MARY SCHENKEL



Joe and Bernice Idlette.



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Angelia Perry and Trudie Rainone.



Dorothy Bagley, Willie Henry, Angeline Washington and Katherine Washington.



Marvett and Wanda Gipson with Jeanette Cobb Rowe and Eddie Hudson.

BY MARY SCHENKEL
Staff Writer

The Gifford Youth Achievement Center gymnasium was elegantly decorated for a Starry Night fundraiser last Saturday evening that featured a delicious dinner catered by Wilke's 14 Bones Barbeque and dancing to the fabulous Ladies of Soul.

The nonprofit was founded as a grassroots effort 20 years ago; the vision of Chairman Emeritus Dr. A. Ronald Hudson, the late Dan K. Richardson and the late Dr. William Nigh. Under the strong leadership of executive director Angelia Perry, her staff, board and the support of the community, it continues to grow in terms of children and programs. With no state or federal dollars to assist them, GYAC relies solely on local contributions and grants.

Starry Night proceeds will support the GYAC Building Expansion Fund and, ultimately, the real stars

– the children served through its afterschool and summer programs.

"The board has decided to embark upon this expansion after five-plus years of a growing waiting list of between 50 and 60 students that we can't serve due to space capacity," said Perry.

Five modular units had previously been added to the campus, but the wait list continued to increase. The 14,000-square-foot expansion, expected to be completed by April 2019, will feature eight additional classrooms, enabling them to clear the wait list and serve an additional 125 students.

"Our enrollment has increased over 60 percent in the last 10 years. It's through the generosity of this community that we're able to embark upon an expansion now that will allow us to continue to impact the families and students that we serve and make a difference in this community for generations to come," said Perry.

Hudson, the last surviving founder, said that while they expected enrollment numbers to increase over time, they were overwhelmed with requests from the very beginning.

"I'm most proud of the fact that this facility has opened up so many opportunities for young people," he said, noting that graduation rates have increased as a result of their enhanced education programs.

Commenting that GYAC has also helped reduce the anxieties of individuals living outside the Gifford community, Hudson added "that pleases me a lot, to see people coming here, feeling comfortable and interacting with the citizens in the community. I think it's boded well for everybody."

Construction costs are estimated at \$3.4 million, with roughly an equal amount required for furniture, fixtures and equipment, and they are simultaneously raising money for an endowment for future needs.

"The board felt it was important

that in addition to raising money for the expansion, that we secure the future of the center by increasing our foundation to help with increased operational expenses," said Perry.

GYAC currently serves about 120 students, a temporarily low average as they lost the use of three modular units, which were located where the construction is taking place.

"Our average prior to those units being gone was anywhere from about 180 to 200, on average," said Perry. With the expansion they will be able to serve about 300 students throughout the course of the year.

"We're excited about the expansion and we have to thank this community for equipping us with the ability to do that. Without donations, the center would never have opened let alone expand 20 years later," said Perry. "We've had 20 years improving lives and impacting the community and we look forward to the next 20." ■