

Starfish Missions helps hundreds of children in Dominican Republic

Starfish Missions, based in Crestwood, helping hundreds of school children in Dominican Republic

BY BOBBIE CURD
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

Back in 2004, it was an eye-opening experience for Crestwood couple Michael and Beth Searcy to go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic with their former church. After returning in 2006 and in '07, "we really started to pull things together ..." Michael says, eventually starting their own organization in 2008.

Now, the Searcys run Starfish Missions, a non-profit focused on raising contributions that support getting kids to school in the D.R. The mission was able most recently to get a whopping 600 kids geared up and able to attend school.

"Even in the public school system, the government doesn't provide the requirement, so a lot of families cannot afford to send their kids to school — especially if they have multiple children," Michael says.

During their first visit, Beth says she and Michael didn't have some of the skillsets other participants had, so they focused on visiting schools. "We saw kids on the outskirts of the school property, waving. Leaders said they weren't allowed to come in ..." she says.

The Searcys did not understand.

"In the Dominican Republic, they are required to have a uniform and come with certain school supplies — which many cannot afford," Beth says. And if you cannot afford them, you don't go to school.

According to the Education Policy Center, the D.R. reports a gross enrollment rate of 102%, which most would see as high participation. But the data also showed that only 52% of students complete primary school.

"We also found that families with multiple children — they will take turns going, since they can only afford supplies

for one child," Michael says.

Beth says studies find these children who don't complete school are more likely to turn to drugs and prostitution to make ends meet. "That weighed heavily on us ..." she says.

The couple had three young children at the time, and couldn't get those facts out of their minds.

"We thought what if we raised some money — first it was through friends and families, we worked with the church we went to, made contacts for several kids who we could help to go to school," Beth says, and from there it grew.

The first year, they helped 25 children attend school. "We went down at the end of July, physically took these kids to the store to buy uniforms and shoes," she says. Eighteen years later, they still go down for anywhere from a week to 10 days every year.

"This year, we took 600 kids shopping," Beth says, with help from other contacts there, of course.

Starfish Missions partners with churches in the Dominican which do outreach with families in need. It was important to them to break the cycle, and buying school needs locally also impacts the communities financially.

"Now that we've been doing this for so long, a lot of these kids have grown up in our program. Some who we were helping are now 18, 19 or 20 years old, even older, and have graduated high school — and a lot of them have gone on to college," Michael says. "Some have become lawyers. One of the kids now — he's a full-fledged doctor, owns his own practice ... We see others who became leaders in the church and community."

That doctor has become one of the mission's key partners now, Beth says, and puts the word out to

area churches when the Searcys are headed there.

She says Starfish Missions is now focused on campaigning and amping up fundraisers. "We've really done it by word of mouth ... And people can donate through our website." She says a big reason why the mission has grown is due to the personal connection.

"Most of the donors know us, and they know who we are and where their money is going," Beth says.

Starfish Missions aims to be completely transparent with funding — including the totals raised and exactly where the funds go, the couple says. The mission provides information, including an annual report as well as a graph detailing how many kids are being helped.

"We committed early on, when we set this up — every single dollar goes directly to the kids. We cover our airline tickets when we go," Beth says.

To give others an idea, to buy everything a child needs to attend school usually costs about \$65 per student. She says, "For anyone who goes shopping here, you can barely get a pair of shoes for that cost ..."

The mission doesn't ask for commitments from donors — it's a "give what you can" situation, they say. "But we feel very blessed, because at any time they could steer their donations elsewhere ..." Michael says. He says the annual goal at first was only "not to go backwards — it would really be hard to go down and say we can't help as many as we did last year ..."

If you had asked them 15 years ago, Beth says she would have guessed they'd be able to help at least 50 kids a year by now. "It's hard to even fathom that we've helped 600 — it's a God thing, a passion project."

To find out more, go to starfishmissions.org.



Submitted
Michael and Beth Searcy have made lifelong connections in the Dominican Republic, where they go annually after collecting donations. That money is then spent on children who need certain items to be able to attend school. Some of those kids they've helped now are community and church leaders, as well as professionals including doctors and lawyers.



Beth Searcy of Starfish Missions takes annual trips to the Dominican Republic to help outfit kids in uniforms and other school needs. I

Submitted



Starfish Missions partners with churches in the Dominican Republic that do outreach with families in need. The nonprofit was created by a Kentucky couple.

Submitted

Owensboro OKs \$1.5M incentive to transform mall

BY JAMES MAYSE
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

Owensboro city commissioners approved providing up to \$1.5 million to support the construction of a new entertainment center in the old Towne Square Mall building.

Tuesday evening, commissioners approved a municipal order to provide funding in four \$375,000 installments to TS Entertainment LLC, which plans to build the facility.

The TS Entertainment's proposal, which it filed with the Kentucky Tourism Development Finance Authority, says the company is "proposing a multi-concept indoor/outdoor entertainment destination. The family entertainment center includes indoor golf, laser tag, bowling, an arcade, go-cart track, kids' playground and a variety of lawn games."

Other amenities would include an indoor lawn and stage area.

The agreement commissioners approved requires TS Entertainment to invest at least \$10.5 million in the 25.5-acre property. Reports from earlier this year said the estimated cost of the project is \$17.7 million.

Mayor Tom Watson said before Tuesday's meeting the project will be a good development for the old Towne Square Mall area.

"It's south oriented," Watson said of the planned development, and that it's also an opportunity to fill much of the mall's 342,823-square-foot space.

TS Enterprises researched similar facilities in other cit-

ies while creating their plan, Watson said.

"I think it will be a neat program to support south Frederica (Street), which has been forgotten lately," Watson said.

"It will be just what the doctor ordered for that area," Watson said.

The city funds are scheduled to be paid out when the project reaches certain milestones.

For example, the first installment will be paid when TS Enterprises receives its building permit for the site, and installments will be paid when the project is 25% and 50% complete. The final \$375,000 will be paid when the company receives a certificate of occupancy for the facility.

The agreement says the company must begin construction within 24 months of the day city officials and Tony Yager of TS Enterprises sign, and that all work must be done within 36 months of the agreement.

City Manager Nate Pagan said TS Enterprises requested the incentive funds from the city. In addition to the city incentive funds, the developer will receive a sales tax rebate from the state. Previous reports said the potential tax rebate is more than \$2 million.

Finding a business to occupy the mall was important to officials.

"We have been hearing for a while about the mall," Pagan said.

The mall has been closed since September 2023.

"We wanted to be aggressive in getting something in there," Pagan said.



CASSANDRA PROFITT/Paxton Media Group
P.E. Teacher Danny Shaw leads his class of seventh graders and members of the Women's Club through several mental health exercises.

Madisonville students start the day with mental health walk

BY CASSANDRA PROFITT
PAXTON MEDIA GROUP

The Women's Club of Madisonville has partnered with Hopkins County Schools to support students during National Mental Health Awareness Month.

The partnership culminated in Browning Springs Middle School students going on a mental health walk last week.

"We've always wanted to get the school system involved, but we just couldn't figure out how to do it," Women's Club member and walk organizer Sandra Aiken said. "We couldn't bus

them there, that was logistically a nightmare. We talked and (Wendy Gamblin) was going to send out a flyer with all of these on it, but that didn't seem like enough. They had some grant money so they just decided to re-do all of our signs and put them in the schools."

These signs are not only at Browning Springs' Unity Park, but at every school in the district. Women's Club members and teachers alike encourage people to take just a moment or two of time to focus on their mental health with their seven techniques

presented on the placards.

"Every school, as well as our district leadership and our board realize the importance of mental health," said Gamblin, director of Hopkins County Community Schools. "Our community also realizes the great need for all this. This is just a true example of community schools and community collaboration."

Teacher Danny Shaw guided his seventh grade class through breathing exercises, meditation, mental grounding, gratitude, stretching, affirma-

tion and reflection. He encouraged them not only to follow the steps in the moment, but to internalize those ideas as future tools.

"When you start feeling down on yourself, when we're looking at all of these things like breathing and mental grounding and meditation, when you're doing these things, have an image in the back of your mind," he said. "A little video of you doing something that you love to do, something that you are good at, something that says 'I can,' and apply that in other areas as well."