

HOYAS now have a brick-and-mortar presence

By ABBY WARGO
Student Intern

CHESTERTOWN — If you haven't heard of the Bayside HOYAS, you'll know their name soon enough.

The nonprofit serving Kent and Queen Anne's counties opened its resource center at 100 Cross St. on Monday. The HOYAS' first brick-and-mortar presence will be a "central location" to house all of their programs and activities.

Its mission is embedded in its name. HOYAS is an acronym for Helping Our Youth Achieve Success.

"In a nutshell, that's what we're trying to do. And that comes in a variety of programs, events and personal face-to-face connection. Our program is more so family oriented," said John Queen, president and co-founder of the HOYAS.

All of its programming is based around the mission of serving underprivileged young people ages 16 to 24 and giving them opportunities to succeed. The resource center is the next step in the HOYAS' plan for expansion.

"It's a great honor to house so many wonderful programs and just give the youth somewhere where they feel like it's not only a place of business but it's a home for them," Queen said at Monday's opening.

"These young people, they make us go. Six years has been a long time, a lot of work, but stuff like this makes it worth it," added Paul Tue, vice president and co-founder. "This is just the beginning of something that's going to continue to blossom and flourish."

The resource center does not yet have set hours, but from now until Labor Day, it will be open Monday through Friday. The goal is

to have an everyday presence at the resource center, but currently, Queen and the Tue brothers have day jobs that makes keeping a regular schedule more difficult.

Prior to the resource center, the HOYAS' programming was in various locations. Co-founders Queen and Paul and Pierre Tue would meet the HOYAS "where they are," whether that be in the car, at home, at school, in the streets or on the basketball court. The resource center will change the dynamic of the program and the town.

"With us coming down there, it's going to be a haven for youth. They know they're welcome there, they know they can come there in times of need, or just coming to talk trash," Queen said. "We want downtown Chestertown to see that problem every day. Those youth don't come (downtown), but with us there you're going to see a bigger concentration of youth, bigger concentration of minorities and people in poverty coming down there and feeling welcome, and we want the people around there to see that ... with us down there, you can't hide from that component."

The original plan was to designate a HOYAS House for all of the programming, as well as to provide beds and hot meals for those who need a place to stay or something to eat. For now, "you've got to start somewhere," said Rosemary Ramsey Granillo, director of the Kent County Local Management Board.

The funding for the resource center came from the Kent County Local Management Board and the Children's Cabinet Inter-Agency Fund.

A focal point inside of the



PHOTO BY ABBY WARGO

Rosemary Ramsey Granillo, center, cuts the ribbon in front of the Bayside Hoyas resource center, located at 100 Cross St. in Chestertown.

resource center is a mural of abolitionist Harriet Tubman created three years ago with Annapolis-based artist Jeff Huntington and a group of seven HOYAS. After the mural was completed, Huntington couldn't find a home for it, so when the resource center opened, the HOYAS reached out to him to have it installed there.

Among those attending Monday's public opening and ribbon cutting were Chestertown Mayor Chris Cerino; Melissa Kelly, the Eastern Shore regional director for U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen; Chestertown Police Chief Adrian Baker; Candy Edwards, the chief of policy for the Governor's Office for Children; Shelly Neal-Edwards, director of Kent County Department of Social Services; Doncella Wilson, the systems of care coordinator for the KCLMB; and Ramsey Granillo.

"We are so excited that you are opening today. The criteria that you all are working on with our young people are all of the governor's priorities and initiatives with our young people," Edwards.

Families of the HOYAS,

members of the board of directors and community members also came out to show their support.

"This is huge," said Ileana Lindstrom, a local independent psychologist who is a member of the Social Action Committee for Racial Justice. "All these kinds of things put an organization on the map, making services accessible to members and the community. This has been a long time coming, and I'm very happy for them."

Members of the HOYAS also were in attendance.

"Without the HOYAS, I believe that I wouldn't be in the position I am today. The HOYAS is a pretty cool program, we do a little bit of everything," said Jay-Shaun Freeman, a rising senior at Kent County High School who has been with the HOYAS since the program's inception when he was a sixth-grader — what Queen calls a "day one kid."

"There's a lot I could say about it; it doesn't feel like a youth program, it feels like a family," Freeman said.

Queen commended the HOYAS themselves for their contributions to the program's success.

"These kids being super humble and modest; to be honest, without this connection or vibe we have from the youth, the program would never exist. Without these youths opening up their minds, their hearts, their families to the HOYAS, we wouldn't be standing here in front of them," Queen said at the opening.

It's not just the youths in HOYAS that benefit. Queen, Paul Tue and Pierre Tue also work directly with the families to provide opportunities for improvement.

"When we help the youth, we try to keep everything kind of two-generational so we can break some of the, what we call 'poverty curses,'" Queen said.

The Beginning

The Bayside HOYAS began in 2013 as a basketball program and provided free mentoring and tutoring. Queen, Paul Tue and Pierre Tue wanted to give the local youth "something to look forward to" amidst the instability in their lives.

While basketball remains an aspect of the group — team building is an important part — the HOYAS have expanded their programming and resources to help at-risk youths in all aspects of life.

The HOYAS provide much-needed services to the community. Data compiled by the Local Management Board in April cited the county's top priority as issues associated with child poverty. There are increasing pockets of child and family poverty here; the current child poverty rate of 20.4% is about a 6% increase from the pre-recession rates. Young adults aged 18 to 34 experience the highest

rates of poverty, according to the KCLMB report.

The racial disparity of poverty in Kent County is even more pronounced. An African-American child in Kent County is 1.8 times more likely to experience poverty than a white child, according to 2019 data from the KCLMB. Using information from Harvard's Opportunity Atlas, the Annie B. Casey Foundation found that the southeastern United States, including the Eastern Shore of Maryland, is "at the epicenter of stalled mobility that disproportionately affect youth of color."

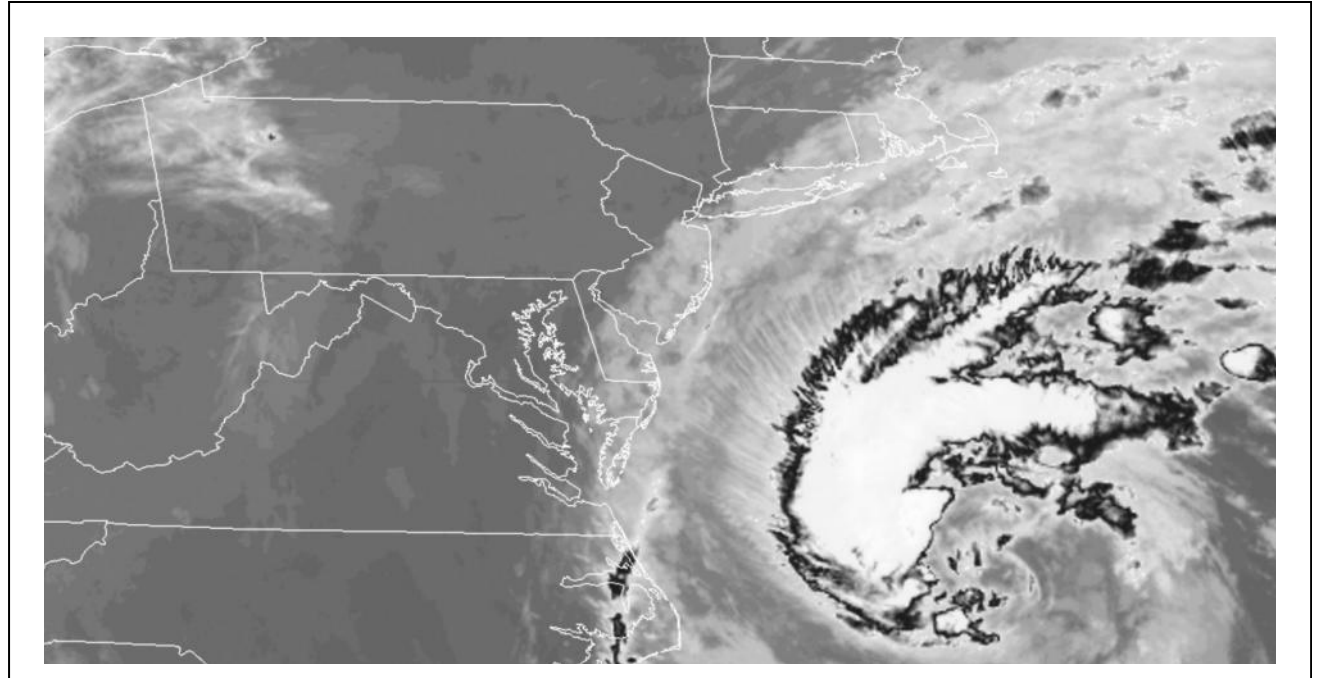
In order to combat all of this, the HOYAS' programming has four core focuses: college preparation, civic responsibility, mentoring and leadership development.

Bayside HOYAS runs three main programs and two sub-programs that build on the core goals. Circle-build, Reconnect for Life and the Food Recovery Program are the HOYAS' main initiatives. All of these programs now have a centralized location in the resource center.

While existing resources like those offered by the Department of Social Services are effective, Paul Tue said, they all have regular operating hours. Although the brick-and-mortar locations (including the resource center) all close, the HOYAS don't, which allows them to help youths in crisis at all hours of the day, any day of the week.

"People in Kent County know where the help really comes from. Not to sell nobody else short, but if you really want a problem solved, the community knows to contact the Bay-

See **HOYAS**
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HOYAS

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side HOYAS, and that's for anything," Queen said in an interview at the Kent County News office on July 25.

Circlebuild

Funded by the Governor's Office for Children and the Kent County Local Management Board, Circlebuild helps caregivers and children impacted by incarceration ensure stability at home and academic improvement.

In 2016, the KCLMB reported that 23% of the child population of Kent County was affected by incarceration — a higher number than those who are affected by poverty. In Kent County, African Americans are 12.8 times more likely to be incarcerated than white people, according to the KCLMB report.

Circlebuild helps youth until they reach the legal adult age of 18. When youths age out of Circlebuild, they can move direct-

ly into Reconnect for Life if they still need assistance getting a job or going back to school.

Reconnect for Life

Reconnect for Life helps teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are not in school and are unemployed. The goal is to get the youth back into the classroom and to help them get a job.

According to the KCLMB report, high poverty rates in the 18-34 age group combined with a smaller job market due to the effects of the recession, interrupted the career-building process for many young people.

In addition to stalled career prospects, in the last two years, the graduation rate of African-American students from Kent County Public Schools has fallen by 13 points, according to the KCLMB report.

"Reconnect for Life applies an analysis of the structural and social barriers that disproportionately impact African-American opportunity youth and works to address them as appropriate,"

according to the KCLMB report.

The program teaches social and "soft" skills such as interviewing tactics, budgeting and financial literacy, and offers opportunities for youths to earn their GED.

Even after young adults age out of Reconnect for Life, they can still find support in the HOYAS.

"Even though you might cycle out of that, you come under the big umbrella which is Bayside HOYAS and we'll continue to help you as long as you need help in life," Queen said.

Food Recovery

The Food Recovery Program is the only main program that does not receive support from the governor's office, but is partnered with the Food Recovery Network at Washington College. It is a fairly new program that provides meals for families in need.

The initiative was borne from a town meeting called to discuss issues of food insecurity in Kent County, which Queen attended. He

said he left with the impression that he needed to do something, so he acted.

With the help of WC's program, HOYAS were able to provide 220 pounds of food to more than 25 local families over a period of two months, Queen said.

The HOYAS also are affiliated with several sub-programs.

Although Students Talking About Race is not a direct initiative of the HOYAS, the HOYAS are affiliated with the program. Queen said that after an incident of racial bias at Kent County Middle School two years ago, students from the school contacted Paul Tue. To address racial divides in schools, Tue, the middle school's principal and a local therapist created STAR.

"It gives kids an outlet to have uncomfortable conversations," Paul Tue said. "That's why I started this. It gives these kids a chance to sit down, to learn some skills, to learn some tools on how to navigate through racial tensions or racial problems."

STAR celebrates its three-

year anniversary this November.

"I'm starting to feel like the kids, they're so far along in their training they're probably more qualified than some of the adults that actually are teaching them," Paul Tue said.

Conflict Awareness

Queen said he created this program to help work with disconnected youths and teach them how to deal with conflict in a healthy manner and how to work through their issues.

"In our community with the young kids that we deal with, we want to make them aware of conflict and how fast it escalates, so if we're teaching you how to work through the dynamics of altercation, anger, aggression, before you get physical and teach you to use your mind, we're breaking some of these barriers that kids just resort to fighting first," he said.

Queen and Paul Tue are also in the process of developing another sub-program, the Juvenile Justice Truancy Diversion program, which will be designed to work in tandem with the justice system.

It will feature a four-step program, based on the seriousness of incident, that works with truant children to incentivize them to turn around their behavior.

"A kid needs to be in class," Paul Tue said. "This program would help keep kids in the classroom where they need to be, also we would offer direct mentoring and intense case management of their truancy problem."

The bigger issue at hand, he said, is getting to the root of the youth's problems.

"We're gonna delve into what is making this kid a truant and help fix that and get the better results," Paul Tue said.

The original HOYAS was

a group of 14 boys. The founders say now there are upwards of 250, and they have stopped counting. HOYAS who have graduated out of the programs are still HOYAS for life.

"It's an infinity number, it will never stop," Queen said.

"Outside of sports in Kent County, nobody touches more kids than we do," Paul Tue said.

Even over the summer, almost 60 young people have participated in HOYAS programming, which included a four-part series, a youth empowerment summit and a pool party.

"This is a lifestyle, when you commit to the HOYAS, you're committing to this family and there are certain things you have to do as well as conduct yourself with respect and integrity in the community. You have to give back, you have to come out for programming, you have to refer your friends," Queen said.

The difference being a HOYA makes in young adults' lives is tangible. As an example, a few weeks ago, Queen said that a HOYA came to him wanting to learn how to become an entrepreneur like him, and since then he has gotten him reading books on business and discovering his interests and passions.

"Somebody like that who a lot of people have written off and said, 'Oh, he's a criminal, 'He has an anger issue' — for us to have him contact us and start teaching him business, is worth it," Queen said.

"Not to make everything black and white — because it's not black and white, but it's still America. That's the importance of a black kid seeing black men move positively, more professionally, intertwined in what they would consider a white world," Paul Tue said. "Now, it's attainable to them."

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