



# Community Action Solutions

May - June 2003

## Community Action Month: A Time to Remember



*Helen James*

Helen James knew as a sixth grade student that she wanted to help people when she saw a group of minority children who were prohibited from eating lunch with other school children.

“One day I’m going to make a difference in people’s lives,” she decided. Now, after 36 years of Community Action service, Helen says she still gets excited about coming to work.

“I love it. I look forward to coming up here every day,” she said.

Helen began her career in Community Action in 1967 as a clerk-bookkeeper in the three-month summer Head Start program. She recalls that all 24 members of Cookson Hill’s Board of Directors participated in her interview.

When Cookson Hills added the Foster Grandparents program, she moved to that program. She later became administrative assistant, director of operations and four years ago was named to the top position when then 22-year veteran executive director Mitch Sheffield died.

See “Helen James” on page 6

*They are the deans of Community Action in Oklahoma -- three executive directors with a combined total of more than a century of battling poverty in the state. Helen James from Cookson Hills Community Action Foundation in Tahlequah, Georgene Zachary with Community Action Resource & Development in Claremore and Bill Buck with INCA Community Services in Tishomingo, recall their careers in Community Action.*



*Georgene Zachary*

Georgene Zachary, a 37-year veteran, was the first employee of the Community Action Agency in the city of Wagoner which was housed in the jail.

“We went to work in the back room of the jail in the city of Wagoner. You had to go through the jail to get to our office,” she said.

Her first project was to put together a grant application for an 8-week summer Head Start program. The following year, it was expanded to an 8-month program and funded for 120 children.

Today, Head Start remains the largest program operated by the agency with 30 centers and 700 children.

The second grant was for a family planning program. That was controversial, Georgene recalls.

“I got my first taste of having public opinion against what I was



*Bill Buck*

Since their beginning in the mid-60s, Community Action Agencies have been a laboratory for innovative methods for combating poverty. INCA Community Services, based in Tishomingo, pioneered the “Rent a Cow” program which help put dozens of farmers in the cattle business. Bill Buck, Executive Director for the past 14 years, said he purchased the first cows for the program in the mid-70s.

See “Bill Buck” on page 6

See “Georgene Zachary” on page 6

## Community Action Month

### United recognizes Ponca City supporters

To commemorate National Community Action Month, United Community Action Program, Inc. recognized the City of Ponca City, ConocoPhillips, Ponca City Publishing Company and Via Christi Medical Center as outstanding supporters who have contributed to the agency. Representatives were treated to lunch and received certificates of appreciation.

"These supporters understand that helping people and changing lives takes resources and they have been eager to help us in that area," said David Ellison, Associate Executive Director.

In Kay County, UCAP operates innovative and cost-effective programs including: Head Start, housing, weatherization, transportation, child care food program and outreach/referral.

"The goal of our agency is to work with cities, towns and government to address their needs, using our expertise," said Johnny Bryant, Executive Director.

"As we battle constant funding challenges, Community Action Agencies rely on contributions provided by supporters like them," Ellison added. "We encourage more businesses to follow in their footsteps."



David Ellison, Associate Executive Director, United Community Programs (right) presented certificates to Diane Anderson, ConocoPhillips, and Ponca City Mayor Tom Leonard. (Photo provided by United Community Action)



Great Plains Improvement Foundation Executive Director Odell Gunter (second from left) was joined by Foundation President Larry Frezon when Lawton Mayor Cecil Powell (far right) read a proclamation recognizing May as Community Action Month in the city. Also pictured is city attorney John Vincent. Great Plains hosted an appreciation lunch and open house for political leaders in Comanche County. (Photo provided by Great Plains Improvement Foundation)



## Community leaders promote literacy in Southwest Head Start program

Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group in Altus is enlisting community leaders to help promote literacy in its Head Start program.

“Reading: It’s an Everybody Thing” is the title of the program. It’s designed to show that everybody reads books.

“That’s why we have reached out to the community,” explained Jeny Searcy, literacy specialist.

Police Chief Mike Patterson read the book “Green Eggs and Ham” to children in the Bailey Head Start center in honor of Dr. Seuss’s birthday. Mayor T. L. Gramling has also read to children.

Jackson County Memorial Hospital has agreed to send over staff weekly to read to the three and four-year-old children.

Southwest Executive Director Neil

Montgomery and several board members have also volunteered to read.

Over 134 books were donated to

the Lincoln Center Head Start program by the 54th and 55th ARS enlisted spouses from Altus Air Force Base.



*Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group Executive Director Neil Montgomery and Altus Police Chief Mike Patterson are among those who volunteered to read to Head Start children as part of the “Reading: It’s an Everybody Thing” program to promote literacy. (Photo provided by Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group)*

## Washita Valley Community Action Council gets new Head Start building in Carnegie



*(Photos provided by Washita Valley Community Action Council)*



After being shuffled from a community building to a public school and then to a church building, Washita Valley Community Action Council now has its own Head Start building in Carnegie.

The 1,500 square foot modular building is licensed for 21 children and is offering a half-day program during the school year.

Head Start Director Peggy Sayers praised volunteers from the community who leveled the land and helped erect the playground equipment and fence.

Staffing the center are Ann King, director; Brenda Brock, assistant teacher; Sarita Tofpi, substitute teacher/van driver; Melissa Gifford, van monitor; and Debbie PoorBuffalo, family service worker.





# Deep Fork Community Action coordinates efforts to create a community garden in Eufaula

Deep Fork Community Action Foundation is coordinating an effort to help feed low-income families in McIntosh County with a community garden.

“It’s the ‘old timey’ kind of Community Action project,” said Jeff Schuman, executive director, Deep Fork.

Nestled on three acres of Corps of Engineers land at the edge of the City of Eufaula, the garden features more than a dozen different vegetables that are being planted, cultivated and harvested by community groups, explained Debbie Wright, Deep Fork’s McIntosh County coordinator.

Federal, state and local agencies have joined forces with Deep Fork and local community groups to create

the garden.

Providing expert advice is Oklahoma State University Extension master gardener Randy Burris. The land for the garden was provided by the Corps of Engineers and the City of Eufaula is providing the water.

Corps of Engineers ranger Aimee Jordan said she is not aware of any other Corps land in the state being used for a similar project. The Corps has been part of the planning since day one.

The community garden is now in its second year. It was the brainstorm of Sherry McConnell, who previously served as the county coordinator. Last year over 200 families received vegetables from the garden.

As the vegetables are harvested, they will be taken to Deep Fork’s office to be distributed. Some of the vegetables will be distributed in food baskets and some will be taken to senior nutrition sites.

*Continued on page 5*



*Representing some of the groups involved in the Eufaula Inspiration Garden are (front row l-r) Randy Shannon, Corps of Engineers; Kim Woodruff and son Daniel, McIntosh County Health Department; Debbie Wright, Deep Fork Community Action; Samantha Pryor, Health Dept.; Aimee Jordan, Corps of Engineers; (back row l-r) Randy Burris and Melanie Clark, both from OSU Extension; Sherry McConnell and Jeff Schuman, Deep Fork Community Action.*



*Corps of Engineers rangers Randy Shannon and Aimee Jordan erect a bat house at the edge of the garden to help control insects. Shannon said a bat will eat up to 600 mosquitos in a single night.*

# Many will work in the community garden

*Continued from page 4*

Among the organizations participating are the McIntosh County Health Department, Oklahoma Department of Human Services, Boy and Girl Scouts, Oklahomans for Independent Living, a local homeless shelter and BEACON and SWAT, two student groups. Paradise Garden, Expressions Unlimited, Nelson's Feed and Burdine, all local nurseries, donated seeds for the project. OG&E provided some of the "seed" money to get the garden started. The Lake Eufaula Association and the America the Beautiful Fund also provided funds for the project.

Wright expects more than 100 individuals will work on the garden during the year.

A volunteer advisory panel oversees the whole project. Groups that want to participate in the project must be approved by the panel.

A five-year strategic plan is being developed for the project.

Wright said the name for the garden was suggested by BEACON, an after school youth group. The goal

is to inspire the community to work together to feed the needy, she explained.



*State Representative Ray Miller (l) and Eufaula Mayor Dean Smith (r) joined Deep Fork Executive Director Jeff Schuman to stake out some of the vegetables in the garden.*



*Corps of Engineers Ranger Aimee Jordan visits Doris Hays who donated a variety of vegetable plants for the community garden in Eufaula.*



*Turnips are one of more than a dozen different vegetables planted in the Eufaula Inspiration Garden. Vegetables from the garden are expected to help feed more than 200 low-income families in the county.*

## Helen James

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*continued from page 1*

A photo of a smiling Sheffield still sets on a file cabinet in her office.

As executive director, Helen presides over 153 employees scattered over a three-county area. Her office is located in what was originally a Masonic Lodge constructed in 1939. Cherokee County commissioners provides the building without charge and the city of Tahlequah provides the utilities.

She recalls in the early days of Community Action, many clients needed emergency services such as food and clothes. Now she is seeing senior citizens who own their homes, but can't afford to maintain them.

Another change over the years has been the development of partnerships.

"Back then we were on our own. Now we have partners," Helen said.

Among Cookson Hill's partners are

the county health department, the Department of Human Services, Department of Commerce, Oklahoma Housing Finance Agency, Cherokee Nation, and the Masons.

Head Start continues to be Cookson Hill's largest program. But the Foster Grandparents program has grown to cover 11 counties. Senior citizen housing is also growing with 23 units recently completed and 27 more units in the works.

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## Bill Buck

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"We would put up to five cows with a family who could keep them for up to three years," Buck explained. The family was responsible for the care and feeding of the cattle. The cattle would be bred and at the end of the third year, the original cows went back to INCA and the family could keep any calves that had been born.

At one time, Buck recalls, INCA had placed about 100 cows with area residents. At the end of the three years, some families had ten of their own cows.

With 38 years of service, Buck has seen the agency grow from two employees with a budget of \$6,128 to about 140 employees with \$5 - \$6 million budget.

What is now known as INCA Community Services, began as the Marshall County Development Foundation. Its first program were summer Head Start classes for 60 children in Kingston and Madill. Later came a job works-training program.

From its humble beginning, the foundation grew to include 10 counties and became known as Indian Nations Community Action. It later split with five counties forming Big Five Community Services, Buck said.

There was an identity problem, Buck said. Many people thought the agency provided programs only to Indians so the name was changed to

INCA.

The agency works closely with the public schools. "We collaborate with every school where there is a Head Start program," Buck said. "Our staff has been real good at working with the schools."

Another major focus of the agency has been helping low-income families facing rising utility costs. Buck

recalls delivering checks to families throughout the agency's service area to help them pay utility bills. The agency has also been instrumental in helping families weatherize their homes.

Sitting in his office – with a wall covered with plaques – Bill says he has enjoyed his career at INCA.

"It's been a joy," he said

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## Georgene Zachary

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*continued from page 1*

trying to promote and do," she said.

In 1969 Congress passed a law that required Community Action Agencies to serve areas with a minimum population of 50,000 so Wagoner consolidated with Rogers and Mayes Counties and became WA-RO-MA. The agency later consolidated with Washington and Nowata Counties and became known as Community Action Resource & Development.

Community Action Agencies have been laboratories for developing innovative ideas.

"We weren't intended to operate a program forever," Georgene said. In the beginning, the concept was that a Community Action Agency would try a program and if it was successful, it would be spun off, she added.

For example, today's workforce development programs began in Community Action Agencies as

"Operation Mainstream," she said.

The biggest crisis to face Community Action came in 1973 when then President Richard Nixon tried to close down the agencies by impounding funds appropriated by Congress. The Supreme Court ultimately thwarted his move.

At the time, she received instructions on how to close down the agency. Georgene still has that file.

From its humble beginning in the back room of a jail with three employees, the agency has grown to serve five counties with about 225 employees.

She concluded by recalling that one day a volunteer asked what CAP meant since everyone was referring to the CAP agency.

"Before I could answer," Georgene said, he asked, "Does it mean Caring About People?"

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## Washita Valley adds 'Road to Work' route

Washita Valley Transit Authority has launched a new Road to Work route from Anadarko to Chickasha.

Washita Valley Community Action Council Transit Director Bill Miller said the van will make two trips between the communities weekdays.

"Road to Work is the best thing to hit Oklahoma," Miller said. He expects the 14 passenger van to be filled as more workers want to come to Chickasha for higher paying jobs.

Employers like it. They know employees will be there on time, he said. Some employers are considering paying the \$2 trip fee as a fringe benefit, he added.

Washita Valley already has three routes running in Chickasha taking about 35 people to a variety of jobs in the community.

Road to Work is a statewide program in which local transit systems work with area employers to develop work routes to get area residents to jobs.



*Driver Bill Boyd and Washita Valley Community Action Transit Director Bill Miller are pictured.*



*Delta Community Action Head Start Director Sharon Horton (l) accepted a plaque from the Delta Board of Directors and Executive Director Karen Nichols (r) that recognized the efforts of all of the Head Start staff. The plaque was presented during the federal monitoring team's exit interview. Federal monitoring team leader Judy Culpepper(c) from the regional office in Dallas was present during the plaque presentation. (Photo provided by Delta Community Action Foundation)*

## Students learn about character

Arlene Burgess, Promise Fellow with the Southwest Oklahoma Community Action Group's Community of Promise program, spent time recently with third grade students in the Reading Renaissance after school program in Altus.

The students were introduced to the six pillars of character, the *Altus Times* reported. Those are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. A representative from the Southwest Oklahoma Chapter of the American Red Cross also participated.

### Mark Your Calendar

Oklahoma Weatherization & Housing  
Advisory Council

### 11th Annual Housing & Energy Conference

August 18-21  
Oklahoma City

## Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies

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<http://www.okacaa.org>

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## Member Agencies of the Oklahoma Association of Community Action Agencies

### **Big Five Community Services**

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