



The 2009 Foster G. McGaw Prize Winner | Heartland Health, St. Joseph, Mo.

Building a Healthier Community, Starting with the Young and Alienated

BY JAN GREENE

Jacob Gunter was a shy 11-year-old starting fifth grade at a new school in St. Joseph, Mo. His parents nudged him into attending a meeting of the school's public service group. "I thought, 'OK, I'll just do it to make the parents happy,'" he recalls.

Little did he know that class would change his life. Jacob became active in the Public Achievement program, in which middle-school students study their communities' social and economic problems and come up with their own creative solutions. Jacob came out of his shell, learning to speak in public and work with people, no matter their age or social standing.

"He taught me to speak up," Jacob says of the class leader who became his role model. "He showed me that I could have a voice and make a change." A few years later, Jacob found himself standing in front of 2,500 people at a Healthier Communities regional summit presenting a powerful, student-made photo project about poverty from the point of view of people living in it. Today Jacob is a freshman in college and works part time at the Heartland Foundation as an AmeriCorps employee.

That's precisely the kind of empowerment that is intended by Public Achievement and the other youth programs sponsored by Heartland Health and its foundation. While helping a group of 10-year-olds build a park in a rundown neighborhood might seem far afield from a hospital's

mission, Heartland leaders see a direct connection from that group of committed schoolchildren to their future health and medical needs, and those of the people they help.

"The two things that drive the health status of the population are educational attainment and quality of jobs," explains Lowell Kruse, who helped propel the community involvement during his 25 years as president and CEO of Heartland Health. "While the quality of the hospital is important when people are sick, if you really want to work on the health of people, you go out into the community."

"It is a very visionary, long-term approach," says Mark Laney, M.D., who succeeded Kruse as CEO last August. "Given the long-term benefits relative to the small cost of doing these programs, there's nothing better we could do."

It's that commitment that earned Heartland the 2009 Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service. The \$100,000 prize is sponsored by the Baxter International Foundation, the Cardinal Health Foundation, the American Hospital Association and Health Research & Educational Trust.

Heartland's focus on youth empowerment dates back to the early 1990s, when the organization became involved with the growing healthy communities movement. Heartland's foundation, like many of its kind, focused largely on raising money to support hospital needs.

But as Heartland leaders learned more about the linkages between the hospital's goals and a healthy and educated community, they reworked the foundation to become a regional leader in building collaborations in health, social service and education.

Taking a closer look at the health status of the people in the 21-county region they served, Heartland leaders found that a large proportion of the population was overweight with low educational attainment and high rates of smoking. "We got an uneasy feeling about the demand for services for certain diseases, such as heart disease and cancer," recalls Kruse. "There just seemed to be a lot of it. We began to realize we needed to pay a lot more attention to the front end of this."

Kruse and a couple of hospital board members completed the Health Forum Healthy Communities fellowship; over time, the hospital sent 14 people through the training, some not affiliated with the hospital or foundation.

As leaders learned the connection between health status and education, they approached local school districts.

Partnering with people whose focus is different requires a willingness to be flexible. "When you start working with school administrators and social service agency executives you realize that not everyone thinks like you do," Kruse says.

Melody Smith, St. Joseph superintendent of schools for the past four years, agrees. "It's a

relationship where you give and you take," she says. "You both set aside the things that may be organizationally challenging for the greater good."

Heartland has pulled together a long list of partners throughout northwest Missouri, including schools, universities, businesses, city planners, politicians and courts. Developing relationships took time. "People have to get to trust in you and know you're headed for the long haul," Kruse says.

Dispirited Tweens Targeted

As part of its initial foray, the foundation sponsored a series of community forums that brought together local leaders, everyday citizens and, importantly, young people. "It became very clear to us that young people really believed they could make a difference but really felt disenfranchised from their communities," says Judy Sabbert, chief operating officer of the Heartland Foundation. "What really set off an alarm was that three out of four said as soon as they get out of school they planned to leave our region," Sabbert says. "It was a pretty big wake-up call that we need to begin to engage young people."

The foundation created a civic education curriculum for middle schools. Students choose the issues that most resonate with them and look for realistic solutions. Once they identify a community problem and come up with a potential solution, they can apply to the foundation for small grants of \$1,500 to \$15,000.

In one project, two seventh-grade students went to a soup kitchen and surveyed those being served about the compelling issues they faced. The students found that most of them do not seek out health care, even at the free clinic, because they don't trust the system. After contacting social services leaders, the girls discovered that a mobile health clinic that goes to schools for well checks and sports physicals was idle one day a week. They arranged to have it visit an area where homeless people congregate. A Heartland paramedic and a nurse from the free clinic in town provide care and the girls do patient intake and deliver supplies to the homeless.

In another project, students in a small town outside of St. Joseph noticed a lot of storefronts

The Finalists

The Foster G. McGaw Prize for Excellence in Community Service is presented each year to a health care organization that provides innovative programs that significantly improve the health and well-being of its community. It is sponsored by the Baxter International Foundation, the Cardinal Health Foundation, the American Hospital Association and Health Research & Educational Trust. Heartland Health of St. Joseph, Mo., was the 2009 national winner and received \$100,000.



The finalists for the 2009 prize are:

- Alegent Health in Omaha, Neb.
- Lancaster (Pa.) General Health
- St. Vincent Health in Indianapolis

They each received a \$10,000 prize.

empty because of a poor economy and population loss. The students created a DVD to promote economic development, interviewing businesspeople, educators, legislators, children and other residents about why their town is such a great place in which to live and do business.

The result, Sabbert says, are young people who are hopeful, confident and skilled in problem-solving. The Public Achievement program is a partnership with the National Center for Democracy.

The foundation also created the emPower Plant, a place where students can learn about civic engagement. It has served 12,000 students since being created in 2007.

Foundation leaders see an impact both on the communities and the children themselves. They hope those changes will have long-lasting impacts. "These young people will be more likely to complete their educations, more likely to be highly skilled and take on quality jobs," Sabbert says. "We think they'll make better choices for their lives and be less likely to have heart disease and diabetes and other chronic illnesses."

She acknowledges that the initiative required a leap of faith. The foundation and health system boards had frank conversations at the outset about whether this would just be a "feel-good" strategy or whether the system would get value out of it.

They've asked University of Kansas researchers to carry out surveys of the children who participate in the emPowerU program, as the overall program is called, to see how they are changed by the experience.

The foundation also supports other community health projects, such as the Pound Plunge, a communitywide, 12-week weight-loss program. "We thought we might get 200 people at the first one, and we had 1,500 people show up," says Tama Wagner, team leader in marketing and communications for Heartland. So far, participants have lost a total of 42,000 pounds.

Another program, Project Fit, focuses on getting students more physically active.

The fact that Heartland has a deep commitment to the future health of St. Joseph's children was a

key reason Laney, a pediatrician, took the CEO job. "It's very much a comprehensive approach," he explains. "It goes beyond the traditional programmatic approach to the very foundation of how we make choices, and how our values and character affect our ultimate health."

Community Involvement as Strategy

Community involvement is an important piece of Heartland's strategic plan. While Heartland is clearly in it for the long haul, its leaders still must balance spending for the foundation's good works with the obligation to run an efficient, high-quality health care organization.

Heartland has managed to do a lot with a little, Laney observes. "We're not a rich community. We don't have a benefactor that's given us tens of millions of dollars. But we do have a number of talented individuals who have a vision and they've worked very hard and executed well and been remarkably successful."

One sign the organization has managed the balance well is the fact that within a six-month period it won both the Foster G. McGaw Prize for Community Service and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, one of five national winners in all industries.

Kruse believes the business and community sides of a health care organization can each thrive if its leaders truly grasp the bigger picture of what a hospital means to its community. "At the end of my career, I see it as about governance and leadership in a health care industry that understands its role in society," he says.—*Jan Greene is a freelance writer in Alameda, Calif.* ●