

Strong Families program sees success

By Andy Fillmore / Correspondent

United Way of Marion County's free 15-week program, with added mentoring and support, helps families with budgeting, credit rebuilding and job-finding preparation.

United Way of Marion County research indicates 47 percent of families in Marion County are struggling to survive and provide food and housing on incomes below the cost of living.

The agency's Strong Families free 15-week financial, budgeting and credit resources class, with an added 12 months of mentoring and support, was set up in 2016 to help struggling local families living paycheck to paycheck or unable to maintain proper housing and teach them to get back on an even, and often improved, financial footing.

The course teaches budgeting skills, credit rebuilding and job-finding preparation. The idea for the class was brought to the United Way of Marion County by CEO Scot Quintel after a nationwide search was made for the "best practices" to help families struggling with financial issues.

Graduates of the class also have upgraded their education, paid off vehicles, gotten into improved housing or moved toward home ownership, and started emergency saving funds.

Shella and Byron Harris and their children, twin girls age 9 and a son age 12, were displaced from their Georgia rental home in October due to damage from Hurricane Irma and moved to her mother's home in Marion Oaks until 55-plus age restrictions forced them to leave.

The family ended up at the Salvation Army Center of Hope in Ocala in December and were trying to get back on their feet. The couple started the Strong Families spring session, which started in January, with weekly classes at the Church of Hope in Ocala.

In March, the family moved into a tidy, spacious, four-bedroom rented home in Marion Oaks.

“Strong Families was a bridge for us to get to what was on the other side,” said Shella Harris, 42, as she stood in the living room of the home, which was freshly painted inside by her husband, Byron, 66.

“Strong Families had us set three goals,” she said. Those were to get into a house, find work and get household furnishings.

Shella and Byron Harris started figuring a budget and saved receipts, watched purchases of snacks and sodas, and monitored quick store trips that can jump from \$10 to \$25.

The family was able to add savings to tax refunds and pay the first and last months’ rent for the Marion Oaks rental and the Strong Families initiative helped with the deposit.

Byron Harris receives disability income; Shella Harris said she plans to look for work as soon as the family gets settled in their new home.

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The spring class was the fourth held to date. Some of the group’s 22 graduating families shared their success stories during a recent graduation ceremony at the College of Central Florida.

Single mom Danaisha Welcome, 28, and her children, ages, 1, 4 and 6, were at the ceremony.

“I was stuck and not moving forward,” said Welcome.

Welcome, who works at a local department store, said a recent two-week lapse in work because of surgery also caused concerns but with the skills and resources she learned in the Strong Families class she has been able to keep up

and even save some money.

She said the financial stability class also helped her with disputed credit issues and taught her about financial resources.

“It’s definitely a good thing,” Welcome said of the course.

Other family members at the ceremony told about improvements in their housing, financial, educational and overall lot in life, with newly learned or honed financial and budgetary skills through the class, which also offers the help and support of a success coach and mentoring for a year.

United Way literature provided at the ceremony stated that the size of the Strong Families program has tripled over the last two years with support from Marion County Community Services, Progress Dunnellon and private donations.

The free spring and fall sessions and are conducted in Ocala and Dunnellon. To date, 62 families, or 150 children and adults, have gone through the classes.

For the 2018 spring class, 73 percent graduated; 53 percent improved their housing; 58 advanced their educations, by for example getting their GED; 55 reduced debt; and 18 percent increased their income.

Quintel said a presentation about the Strong Families classes here will be made by an official from United Way of Marion County during a statewide conference in July.

Pebbles Vance, a success coach for the program, said families have a “juggling act and they need life skills” to cope.

Vance, formerly with a consumer credit company and involved in HUD housing, said many of the incoming students “have no concept of a budget.”

“It’s hard to make a change,” she said, calling some of the issues “generational.”

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Gary Thornton, 47, of Ocala, has been at his new job at the AutoZone Distribution Center for about four weeks. He said he learned about the Strong Families class after Bessie Morley with United Way made a presentation at his church.

Thornton said the class “brought his family together” and taught him “every penny counts.” He said the class was an “awesome experience” and he has goals to follow up on.

Cynthia Williams, a graduate of the third class, in 2017, was hard hit by hurricane damage to her apartment. She said she now has a budget, paid off her vehicle and will likely get into a home next year. She told the graduation class you “wonder here the money went” as you learn to set a budget

April Mcaroy, 34, a single mother, said last July she was living in her car in Belleview and heard about the Strong Families program after she went to a local shelter, Shepherd’s Lighthouse. She said she came to be homeless after the owner sold a property she was renting without notice and lost “temporary custody” of her now 18-month-old and 15-year-old children until she could prove she had stable housing.

Mcaroy, who works at a fast food restaurant, was able to get a one-room apartment before she started the Strong Families class and regain custody of her children.

She said the class encouraged her in “not giving up” and to “be strong” and that “there is something better.”

She said the lessons learned through the class helped her start back to school to complete her GED and to set a budget with a goal of getting in a home with more room for the family of three.

Mac McCray, a Strong Families Initiative Assistant with United Way of Marion County, congratulated the graduates. He said the classes are getting bigger as word is spreading.

“This is a no judgment zone,” he said about the atmosphere in the class.