

“Lawrence County’s ‘Learn & Serve’ Project”

By Jerry A. Chenault, Urban Regional Extension Agent

What started out as an idea about how to reclaim the hope in troubled young lives at the Alternative High School in Moulton has developed into a program with almost as many branches as a cherry tree!

It all started back a few years ago in the mind of retired County Extension Agent Henry Buchanan. Buchanan’s dream was to help transform troubled young people at the Judy Jester Center in Moulton (also known as “the Alternative High School”). “What if we took these young people and involved them in hands-on projects in horticulture?” Buchanan asked. “What if we helped them to build skills, develop work ethics, and see themselves in a new way?” “What if we got them out of the traditional classroom where they haven’t been successful and put them into a new avenue for learning?” Fast forward a few years . . . and we now have those answers. They’re all good!

The answers are that school attendance improves, grades go up about 40%, tardies and discipline infractions decrease significantly, and graduation rates increase as well! All thanks to a program that Henry Buchanan dreamed of and a partnership between the Alabama State Dept. of Education and the Urban Affairs and New Nontraditional Programs division of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

Urban Regional Extension Agent, Jerry A. Chenault, has partnered with Buchanan to implement Lawrence County’s “Learn & Serve” project . . . a program designed to help youth learn by doing hands-on service projects in the community. Buchanan serves as a part-time instructor with the program, and Chenault assists with program planning and implementation. Together they lead a group of about 40 high school students down a path toward learning and seeing themselves in a new way.

“That’s likely the most significant part,” says Buchanan. “They’re learning to see themselves differently than they once did. They’re learning, for the first time in many cases, what it feels like to be a giver rather than a taker. That role shift is significant and empowering. And, they’re learning some real skills in horticulture which also boosts their self worth.”

The avenues down which the Learn & Serve program travels are varied and many. The students have hauled and spread mulch, composts, and manures; they’ve re-built an old greenhouse into a “hoop house”; they’ve produced shrubs for projects; they’ve grown vegetables; they’ve truck farmed and sold at the farmer’s market; they’ve built raised bed gardens for others; and the list goes on and on. Along the way the students have encountered some bi-product or “side benefits” with their projects such as visiting with nursing home clients, visiting with senior citizens, riding a horse, and many other valuable experiences. It all adds up to many cases of success!

Recent projects have included the construction of an additional greenhouse (hoop house); raised bed gardens built at the Bill Stewart Center for the developmentally disabled, the NHC Nursing Home, and the Senior Center at Courtland; and mulch hauled in and spread at the Stewart Center gardens.

If you have a local project that you would like to propose for consideration by the “Learn & Serve” program, please contact Jerry Chenault at 256-974-2464.



Students from the “Learn and Serve” program built a raised bed “Angel Garden” for the residents at NHC Nursing Home in Moulton.



“Learn and Serve” program students marketed the vegetables they grew at the Farmers Market in Moulton.