

Carver Center: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

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Many people in Rye are familiar with the Port Chester Carver Center; whether they have organized food drives to donate to the food pantry, attended the annual benefit, or volunteered in some other capacity.

Founded in 1943, the Carver Center started out as a small storefront afterschool program for children whose parents worked in wartime defense plants. After expanding to a small food pantry and child care program operating out of a synagogue basement for 50 years, Carver Center now serves thousands of Port Chester community members and their families. The

food pantry provides supplemental and emergency food for over 300 families each month. Their afterschool program serves over 1,000 elementary and middle school children, and the teen center works with over 200 high school students each year to help them become tomorrow's leaders.

As the only full-service community center in Port Chester, Carver offers programs and resources designed to meet the educational, recreational, cultural and civic needs of its residents, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of underprivileged youths.

Joseph Kwasniewski, Carver CEO, says that one of their proudest accomplishments in recent years is the restructuring of the very popular afterschool program. Prior to 2013, the tuition-based afterschool program served 125 elementary and middle school children in the Carver Center building on Westchester Avenue. While extremely well received, the program was unable to accommodate a large population of Port Chester's children due to space constraints. At the end of 2013, the Port Chester School District was notified that they would no longer receive federal funding for any afterschool programming in their schools. The district scrambled to find a way to



continue their programming privately, and, based on a long-standing relationship, chose Port Chester Council for the Arts to run a tuition-based afterschool program on site at each school. At the same time, The Dalio Foundation, a private foundation in Westport, Conn., was particularly interested in the educational needs of Port Chester residents, and hired a consultant to investigate options for a more expansive privately funded afterschool program in the Port Chester Schools.

After extensive review, the Dalio Foundation chose the Carver Center as the most viable partner in its extremely generous quest to reignite the Port Chester afterschool program. In spring 2014 Carver ran a pilot program in the three neediest schools for two-and-a-half months. Twenty children each from JFK Magnet, Edison, and Port Chester Middle schools received free afterschool services as part of this test program.

The pilot program, while short, was very successful, and the Dalio Foundation and Carver forged an ongoing partnership to substantially expand the program at these three targeted schools. (The other two elementary schools, Park Avenue and King Street, still had tuition-based afterschool programs run by the Port Chester Council for the Arts.)

In the past year, the Carver program morphed from 125 kids in the Carver building to 1,000 kids on site at each of the local schools. Of these, 750 children attend this program at no cost, and 250 children pay a small tuition fee. The key elements of the program, says Kwasniewski, are academic support, recreation, enrichment, and social, emotional, and behavioral support. Literacy is a major focus, as English is not the first language of many of the children, and many are often still learning their native language as well.

While academic support is very important, Kwasniewski feels that the social and emotional support often becomes paramount, as many of these children have suffered some kind of trauma at a young age and need that support in order to eventually perform better academically. Kwasniewski stresses, "The goal of starting the kids so young (in the afterschool program) is to increase high school graduation rates and college and/or job readiness." At present, only 26% of Port Chester High School students show "college readiness" and a mere 14% go on to obtain a bachelor's degree. Carver's afterschool program aims to improve those statistics.

"Education is the great equalizer," says Carver board president Maureen Gomez. Gomez, a Rye resident who has been involved with the Carver Center for 15 years, agrees that a strong afterschool program will give these children additional opportunities to supplement and foster their education while also receiving vital social and emotional support.

Looking beyond academics, Gomez believes there are numerous opportunities for Rye's youth to reach out and connect with their "neighbors" just five miles down the road. Gomez feels strongly that despite their differences in experience and socio-economic status, kids in both communities share many similarities and could all benefit from socialization and making connections concerning the issues they all face as young adults. Gomez would love to see some kind of joint community service project with Port Chester and Rye teens where they would work together side by side to accomplish a common goal. Gomez notes that another opportunity for the children of Rye to get involved could be an "Adopt a School" program, whereby a Rye elementary school could "adopt" a Port Chester elementary school and have an ongoing relationship with different events planned throughout the year.

For more information about the Carver Center, or how to get involved, go to www.carvercenter.org.