



Indianola Promise Community

**At Work**

FALL 2014





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Greetings!

What follows in this booklet are descriptions of some of the 28 programs we are using to build and develop the Indianola Promise Community (IPC). These narrative summaries are told from the perspective of the individuals who are participating in these programs and helping us learn from their experiences.

The Indianola Promise Community is a community-based initiative to provide children with the opportunity to succeed in school, graduate, and attend college. It is sponsored by Delta Health Alliance and our many local partners including Sunflower County Consolidated School District, City of Indianola, Sunflower-Humphreys County Progress, Save the Children, B. B. King Museum, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation. While we sponsor many programs, we have one priority – making sure children in Indianola have the opportunities they need to excel.

IPC unites health care, education, government, community, and faith-based services to develop a “pipeline” of academic, family, and community resources, from prenatal care through high school graduation, creating a path for students to gain meaningful careers and earn financial independence. We want to ensure Indianola children are ready for school, that students who need help get help quickly, and that young people stay in school through graduation and transition to postsecondary education.

The programs included in this collection range from after-school classes, summer enrichment camps, in-home visitation programs, and parenting and family support initiatives. We hope you enjoy these stories about the ways individuals are working together to improve educational opportunities in Indianola.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Davis', written in a cursive style.

Josh Davis  
Vice President of External Affairs  
Delta Health Alliance

## Academic Student Leaders in Indianola

*They each hold grade point averages above 4.0. They each graduated from high school this spring in the top 10 of their class. They each mastered the ACT college entrance exam. They each are headed to college on academic scholarships.*

*And one more thing: They each credit the Indianola Promise Community (IPC) with helping them reach those goals.*

*Meet Jordan Whitfield and Samesa Hoskins, two 18-year-old Indianola students who are going places while never forgetting from where they came.*

*"IPC has really been great in helping me see the need for volunteering and helping others out," said Jordan. "I could have gone all the way through school, just working to make good grades, but IPC helped me see that there was more to do along the way."*

*Said Samesa: "Joining IPC was a success in itself. I've had the chance to lead in my community and make a change in Indianola. For each part of my life, I know I can always go to someone at IPC for support and help."*



### JORDAN WHITFIELD

GPA:	4.48
Class Rank:	#1 (Valedictorian) Gentry High School
College:	University of Southern Mississippi, academic scholarship

Jordan joined IPC's Art of Living Smart summer program in 8th grade. The eight-week program teaches the elements that constitute a quality life – proper nutrition, physical fitness, music, and art. Students learn culinary arts; and how to prepare well-balanced meals, how to count calories, how to recognize the different food groups and the best ways to exercise. In between, there are art competitions, singing, and dancing. "I was part of the older group so I took a leadership role to help the younger kids," said Jordan. "I taught hip-hop. It's my passion."

Jordan, who is also a DJ, played football in 10th grade then ran cross-country and track for his high school. His love for music comes from his mom, a cheerleading coach. In college, he plans to study computer science and graphic arts.

As he neared the end of his high school career, Jordan took part in IPC's College Readiness/ACT Prep program, one of Indianola Promise Community's commitments to the city's high school students. From dorm life to finances, the readiness program assists with academic preparation and mentoring as they travel the road to college and beyond. "This has been such a great time for me," said Jordan. "I definitely want to come back to Indianola and teach. I remember my favorite teachers and how important they were to me, so I want to come back for at least a few years and give something back to the place that has helped me so much."



### SAMESA HOSKINS

GPA:	4.04
Class Rank:	#10 (Gentry High School)
College:	Millsaps College, academic scholarship

Samesa joined IPC's Indianola Youth Council just after her 17th birthday and quickly ascended to president of the group. Proving to be one of IPC's most valuable programs, the Youth Council is comprised of 15-20 members in 8th through 12th grades. It is the first youth council of its kind in Mississippi that is comprised of students from two different counties and six cities – Sunflower and Washington counties, and Indianola, Greenville, Leland, Moorhead, Sunflower and Ruleville. The primary goal is give young people a voice and make them part of the decision-making process into their future.

"It has boosted my confidence and made me aware of both the problems and the successes in my community," said Samesa. "It has contributed a lot to the way I am now." In addition to the Youth Council, Samesa participated in the College Readiness/ACT Prep program, assisted with IPC's community garden and served on the Mayor's Health Council. She also took part in IPC's Becoming A Responsible Teen (BART) program -- an eight-week, after-school course that helps kids clarify their own values about sexual activity and help them make safe decisions.

She worked as an IPC summer intern before heading to college where she plans to study pre-law. "Indianola is my home. I'll come back after college because there's a mission here that's not yet finished," Samesa said. "I want to be part of that outcome by taking what I've learned and bringing it back to my community."

IPC project director Anthony Powell has watched both students as they've grown and matured and said he's proud of their accomplishments.

"They have worked so hard and it makes me feel like IPC is giving everything we've got to help these kids be successful," said Powell. "We want to see this same result in all our kids at the end of the day. That's our mission."

## Neighborhood Football Camp in Indianola



Indianola's newest neighborhood association is already making a difference in the lives of its youngest residents.

"Every summer, there are a lot of kids on the playground, playing football with no guidance," said Marilyn James, president of the Indianola Roosevelt Neighborhood Association. "They have a passion for the game and we saw an opportunity."

With the help of the Indianola Promise Community, the neighborhood association held a football camp on Monday, June 30, for 200 children ages 6-13 at the Carver Elementary School baseball field. The Legends Foundation, a national non-profit group that works to educate children of their responsibility to make good choices for themselves and their communities conducted the camp.

"We want to show these kids that their community really cares about them and we are invested in them," said James. "We want to do everything we can to give them the opportunities to be successful."

The Roosevelt neighborhood association serves 300-400 residents in an area that has struggled with crime and drugs. Improving safety is a goal and reaching that goal means providing meaningful activities for its children.

"These kids and their parents were really excited. So many parents offered their time to help, and we had coaches from the area, as well as Anthony Griggs, a former pro football player," said James.

A nearly 20-year resident of Roosevelt, James credits the Indianola Promise Community (IPC) with helping the neighborhood become organized. IPC, she said, saw residents' interest and "we saw that IPC had a vested interest in our community and it really gave us the motivation to get started."

The Indianola Roosevelt Neighborhood Association is the second neighborhood organization to be formed with the help and guidance of IPC. The first, Indianola's Southgate community, has been successful in its efforts to improve life for its residents.

Through IPC, the Roosevelt association members have been meeting regularly with a professional organizer and trainer from Cleveland. Meeting twice a month, they are guided through the steps that make a successful and cohesive neighborhood group.

*"Roosevelt is one of our pet projects,"*

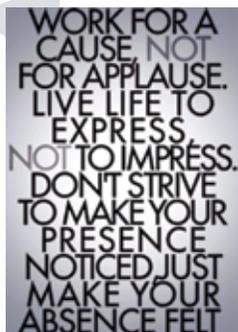
*said Anthony Powell, an IPC project manager.*

*"Since day one, this association has been putting in a lot of effort. So when Marilyn called about the football camp, we were eager to help in assisting with logistics and in volunteering our services."*

Ever since organizing, the Roosevelt association has been working on activities for its residents. As shown on its Facebook page, the group has already held an Easter egg hunt for children and has taken an active role in the city's community garden, also an IPC project. James hopes to hold educational events and form reading groups in the future.

"IPC has been so much help. Any time I've called for guidance, they have been there," said James. "You see, education is my passion, whether it is in the classroom, the football field, or the garden. I just want to move forward and do it all. The future of our kids depends on what we do as adults."

## Organizing Neighborhoods in Indianola



The Facebook page features a photo of 16 smiling children holding Easter eggs beside a community garden. In the corner of the page is a saying:

"Work for a cause, not applause. Live life to express, not to impress. Don't strive to make your presence noticed, just make your absence felt."

The page is the product of the Indianola Roosevelt Community Association, the city's newest neighborhood organization whose "cause" is to make Roosevelt a shining example for others to follow.

"We want to change the face of this community," said Marilyn James, president of the association which serves 300-400 residents. "We want other people to say 'I want to be like Roosevelt.'"

The Indianola neighborhood has struggled with crime and drugs, she said, and with so many children living there, improving safety is imperative.

"When children don't have much to do or a lot of people invested in them, they drift toward people who have something to offer, and that can be drugs," James said. "We knew we had to get the entire community involved to make a difference."

James, a nearly 20-year resident of Roosevelt, credits the Indianola Promise Community with helping the neighborhood become organized. IPC, she said, saw residents' interest and "we saw that IPC had a vested interest in our community and it really gave us the motivation to get started."

The Indianola Roosevelt Community Association is the second neighborhood organization to be formed with the help and guidance of IPC. The first, in Indianola's Southgate community, has been successful in its efforts to improve life for its residents.

"We wanted to replicate our efforts in Southgate; and we knew that Roosevelt residents wanted a better and safer neighborhood for their children," said Anthony Powell, IPC project coordinator. "All they needed was some guidance."

Part of that guidance came from Geri Adams, a professional organizer and trainer from Cleveland. Working through IPC, Adams meets twice a month with association members, guiding them through the steps that make a successful and cohesive neighborhood group. She likens it to the construction of a house.



"We go from A to Z; how to make a plan and follow through with it," Adams said. "It's the preparation before the house begins to be built. It takes many people to build that house."

Adams works with James and other members in selling and marketing their agenda "to get other neighborhood members to buy in." They discuss goals and objectives, effective communication, conflict resolution, teamwork and personal strengths.

*"Everyone has a voice," she said. "Everyone has something to give. "They're doing excellent."*

Since organizing, the Roosevelt association has begun planning activities for its residents. As shown on its Facebook page, the group has already held an Easter egg hunt for children and has taken an active role in the city's community garden, also an IPC project. James hopes to hold educational events and form reading groups in the future.

As with the Southgate association, Roosevelt has the ears of City Hall, said Powell. Mayor Steve Rosenthal and city department heads are available to attend association meetings when concerns are raised and are proactive in meeting the needs of the neighborhood.

"We're just getting started and we're doing great," said James. "Our goal in all of this is to keep our kids in Indianola; to build the kind of place they want to live in. The Indianola Promise Community wants the same things and we are grateful for every bit of their help."



## Financial Literacy

Building wealth without a plan is tantamount to erecting a house with no foundation. And in Indianola -- where nearly a third of residents never even use a bank -- wealth is often scant, and learning to be financially literate is crucial.

"One thing I did immediately was pull my credit scores and look at ways to improve them," said Cassandra Rule.

Rule is the social services coordinator for the Indianola Promise Community and she is also a recent graduate of an IPC-sponsored financial training course called "Healthy, Wealthy, Wise & Money Smart."

"How to build credit is so important," said Rule. "It affects so many things from borrowing money to lower interest rates on a home mortgage; even your ability to buy a car." Held in March at the Capps Technology Center in Indianola, the five-week course drew more than 30 participants with 27 graduating with a greater understanding of finances and how to build wealth.

The program is a collaborative effort of the Mississippi Community Financial Access Coalition (MCFAC), comprised of community- and faith-based organizations; social services agencies; financial institutions; federal, state and local agencies; and universities whose focus is to create policies that impact low- and moderate-income individuals, families and communities such as Indianola.

"This is important because the data we have shows that so many in our community don't even utilize a financial institution such as a bank," said Roshunda Sample, project coordinator for IPC. "Think of it -- 28 percent of Indianola residents who never use a bank; who aren't building their credit; who aren't building their personal wealth; and not planning for the future."

The Health, Wealthy, Wise & Money Smart program offers a standardized curriculum to assist residents with managing their finances, reducing debt, saving money, establishing or re-establishing credit and learning strategies to change poor financial behavior. It is for the unbanked, under-banked, credit-challenged individuals who need to improve credit scores, learn to budget, start saving and investing, and begin preparing for home ownership.

Five of those who took the course in March were not using a bank when they enrolled. "Most of these people are intimidated by banks and a little afraid to ask questions," said Sample. "Nobody goes into a bank to just chit-chat, so there's a little bit of fear of the unknown. This course helps alleviate those fears."



Rule said one of the most important aspects of the class was learning how to bargain shop and using personal talents, such as baking, to generate and save extra income.

*“And having a plan – assets versus expenditures, budgets, cutting debt, living within your means,” she said. “Those are the building blocks you have to have to create wealth.”*

In addition to MCFAC and IPC, other sponsors were Planter’s Bank, Community Bank and Guaranty Bank. A second class is scheduled for this summer.

“I think it was excellent and I highly recommend it,” said Rule. “The principles behind it are so basic, but putting it all into practice on a daily basis takes effort. The knowledge that this program provided to us is so helpful.”

## Indianola Survey Results



Each day, surveys are conducted on most every conceivable subject, from current fashion to the latest political campaign. They are posted on social media, sent by email, taken over the telephone and, sometimes, done door-to-door.

The results can be valuable or worthless, depending on the way they're used and the commitment of those using them. In Indianola, Mayor Steve Rosenthal wants to make sure that a recent survey of his city is a roadmap for change.

"These results are very important if used correctly," said Rosenthal. "We have to plan action steps to try to solve some of the problems that have been brought to light. We were aware of most but may not have been aware as to how deep the problems are."

The Indianola Promise Community began the in-depth survey of city neighborhoods in September 2013 and released the results this month. Questionnaires were completed by a random sample of 467 adult Indianola residents to determine attitudes about their neighborhoods, their health care, and the education of their children. The sample was chosen from among all Indianola adults who have children attending public schools or will attend public schools when old enough and accurately reflects the population as a whole.

Karin Scott, who oversaw the survey for IPC, noted that all of the findings align with IPC initiatives "but give us reason to find more and better ways to reach out to parents and organize venues for them to get more involved."

### Key findings from the survey included:

- **Parents and students value education and understand its importance.** Even though half the parents stopped their formal schooling in high school, 81% of them want their children to attain a college degree, 77% believe that a college education will lead to a good job, and 91% of the parents believe it is "very important" for their children to "read to themselves outside of school." Likewise, 82% of the students "strongly agree" with the statement "I know I will graduate from high school" and 88% believe they will find a good job after they graduate.

- **Access to health care is good though healthy behaviors among students need improvement and attention.** Only 5% of the parents had a problem getting checkups or immunizations for their children and a similarly small percentage expressed a concern with obtaining health care for their children when they are sick. As for the students, when asked “Which of the following are you trying to do about your weight,” 23% said they were trying to gain weight, 44% said lose weight, 21% said maintain their weight, while 12% indicated they were doing nothing. When asked, “On an average school day, how many hours do you watch TV,” 53% said they watched three or more hours (with 29% choosing five hours or more). When asked if they had received a diagnosis of asthma, 31% (compared to 23% nationally) told us yes. Of more concern, 32% of the students answered yes when asked, “During the past 12 months did you ever feel so sad or hopeless that you stopped doing some usual activities” while 14% indicated that they “seriously considered suicide.” These numbers are consistent with national surveys.
- **Access to early childcare is good, but needs to be better.** Of the parents with pre-school age children, 72% had enrolled their children in a formal program, either Head Start, childcare, or other early learning center.
- **While parents generally feel good about the education their children are receiving at the Indianola school system, students gave the school system mixed reviews.** Of the parents with school-age children, 89% feel welcome at their child’s school, 83% indicated they are contacted if their child has a problem in school, and 84% believe their children are receiving a quality education at school. As for the middle and high school students responding to the questionnaire, a third believe teachers do not care about students and 43% believe teachers do not listen to students when they have problems. However, when asked specifically about their own teachers, 75% agreed with the statement “I like most of my teachers.” When asked if teachers let students know when they are being good or doing well, only 65% agreed with that statement. Moreover, 71% agreed with the statement that “students are often punished.”
- **Parents generally feel good about their neighborhood, but they have significant concerns about drugs.** Of the parent respondents, 95% believe people in the neighborhoods know each other, 86% believe the neighborhood wants to help children do well in school, and 78% believe their neighbors are willing to watch out for their children. On the other hand, 35% believe there are too many burglaries and muggings, 51% believe people in the neighborhood taking drugs is a serious problem and 41% believe the selling of drugs is a serious problem. Responses from the student survey would give parents some justification for their concern. More than half of the 9th -12th grade students (66%, compared to 70.8% nationally) admitted having at least one drink of alcohol, 31% said they had tried smoking (compared to 45% nationally), and 35% (compared to 40% nationally) said they had tried marijuana. Six percent indicated they had been offered or sold an illegal drug on a school campus. This is lower than the national average of 25%. On the other hand, less than five percent admitted to using hard drugs like cocaine or heroin.
- **A sizeable percentage of students expressed concerns about safety at the school and about bullying.** Only 60% of the students “feel safe” when transitioning from class to class and only 57% “feel safe” while traveling back and forth to and from school (which is reinforced by the questions about bullying). More than a third of the students (35%) indicated they had been in a physical fight at least once during the previous 12 months and 26% admitted the fight had occurred on school

## Indianola Survey Results – continued

property. Only 41% of the middle and high school students agreed with the statement “students get along with each other” and just 37% believe students are “friendly” with each other. These findings are reinforced when students were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “I like students who go to this school” – 35% disagreed. This is also reflected in a series of questions about bullying: 20% indicated they had been “bullied,” 43% indicated they had been “teased,” 33% indicated “hurtful jokes” had been said about them, 21% indicated they had been threatened, and 23% indicated they had had something stolen or damaged on purpose. Related to these findings is that only 47% of the students indicated they are “taught how to solve conflicts with others.”

- **Parents are connected.** Of the respondents, 57% indicated they had Internet service at their home while 78% told us they used a “smart” phone for internet services.
- **Awareness of IPC is good.** Almost two-thirds of respondents (62%) said they had heard of the Indianola Promise Community or the IPC, though there appears to be some disconnect between IPC generally and the specific programs it sponsors.

Rosenthal said he was most surprised by the numbers that showed that drug use in Indianola was less than the national average, though he doesn’t intend to get comfortable with the results.

“I also found the state of depression among our young people is really shocking, and I hope that we can focus on some new interventions,” he said. “We know that poverty is going to play a big part, but we have to address this to give these children some hope for the future.”

*In all, the survey results “give us a baseline to start with,” the mayor said. “We will be able to tell what to address the hardest and to understand the mindset of the citizens involved.”*

*(Complete survey results can be obtained at the Indianola Promise Community headquarters.)*

## Mentoring Students in Indianola



Christine Perryman and her husband of 43 years, Elgie, sat together at a table in an empty elementary school classroom constructing a paper banner for an upcoming one-year anniversary celebration. Despite the unusual setting, the retired couple did not seem out of place.

"So, will you be a mentor to one of these children?" Christine asked a visitor. "It's important. A lot of these kids need someone to talk with; to show them the way."

The Perrymans were referring to CARES – Children Are Reaching Excellence with Support – the successful mentoring program at Lockard Elementary School that is celebrating its first year of operation.

"This program is so important in helping our children to grow into successful young men and women," said Azzie Ambrose, the CARES coordinator. "We're talking about kids who are at a critical age in terms of learning and direction. These mentors can serve as guides."

Begun in March 2013 with 23 adult mentors, CARES, in partnership with the Indianola Promise Community, provides an avenue to offer academic, social and emotional support to children in kindergarten through second grade, and, hopefully, well beyond. Now beginning its second year, the CARES program boasts 102 adult mentors representing most all walks of life, from retirees to lawyers to educators.

After completing an application, interview and reference check, each mentor is assigned a child, or mentee, based upon the needs of the mentee and common interests. Then, mentors will meet at least once a week for at least an hour with children during the school day and on school grounds. Some mentors meet more than once a week.

"I can tell you that the little 8-year-old girl I mentor just touches my heart," said Christine Perryman. "She trusts me. We work on her studies, but we also talk about family and about relationships. I plan to follow her as long as they will let me."

Mentors quickly become positive role models for the children, working to enhance their self-esteem and improve school attendance and academics. Mentors are viewed as adult role models, not as teachers and certainly not as second parents. In fact, parents are encouraged to meet their child's mentor during an annual CARES meet-and-greet event. "If we start here, with this mentoring program, we can instill good habits and begin forming the work ethic that these children will need and use the rest of their lives," said Frankie Blackmon of the Indianola Public School district, who works closely with the Indianola Promise Community on the mentoring program and other joint efforts.

The success of CARES is reflected in the recent presentation of the 2014 Partnership in Excellence Award to Lockard Elementary School from the Mississippi Association of Partners in Education.

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"This year's winning programs are proof that community partnerships play a vital role in helping improve student performance," said Michael Bentley, president of the association.

Frankie Blackmon, the school district's Indianola Promise Community Liaison, said the hope is that mentors will stay with their students as they travel from grade school to high school. "So many faces and places change for children as they grow. Teachers change; schools change; and, often, friends change," she said. "These mentors are familiar faces, people they know and trust."

The Perrymans, like many mentors, first became involved in CARES because "it sounded interesting," said Christine Perryman, a great-grandmother of four. "But it just grows on you. The little girl I mentor, I just want to help steer her in the right direction. We can look at each other and smile and we just know what the other is thinking. She is so eager to show me what she can do."

## "Teen Talk" in Indianola

Ten-year-olds sat with seniors. Seventh graders rubbed minds with 18-year-olds bound for college. Elementary students put pencil to paper with their peers from high school. Together, they brainstormed ways to accomplish one goal: improve their futures and the futures of those who follow them.



"I feel like it's a start toward making a real difference," said Shameen Jennings, an 18-year-old Indianola high school senior. "Most of the time we don't get a chance to speak our minds and offer our opinions. So this is very important."

The gathering of about 40 students on March 18 was dubbed "Teen Talk," a first-time event coordinated, facilitated and sponsored by the Indianola School District, in partnership with the Indianola Promise Community (IPC) and the P-16 Council, to increase the engagement of Indianola public school students. Held at Carver Elementary School, the program was part of a nationwide effort to use results from a recent Gallup student poll to inspire community dialog and create actions that improve the lives of young people. "It's important for us to listen and to know how you feel so we learn what we need to do to create change," Deborah Moore of IPC told the students. "We want to hear your voices."

In its survey, Gallup had identified three key indicators of student success – hope, engagement, and well being. If present in a school system, these indicators have been shown to improve grades, achievement scores, retention, and future employments.

The national Gallup poll included 1,234 Indianola students from fifth through twelfth grades, ages 10-18 with an average age of 14, with a nearly even gender mix. Nationally, a total of 589,997 students participated in the online survey that was conducted last fall. The poll is used to forecast success in academic and other youth development settings.

**From a list of 20 questions ranging from students' belief that they will graduate from high school to the way their teachers make them feel about schoolwork to health issues that inhibit activities, the poll found that:**

- **On the issue of hope**, 55 percent of students were hopeful about graduating, getting good grades, solving problems, finding good jobs, pursuing goals and having caring adults in their lives. Thirty-two percent were “stuck” and 13 percent were discouraged.
- **On the issue of engagement**, 43 percent of students were engaged in terms of having a best friend at school, feeling safe at school, having teachers who made them feel schoolwork was important, receiving praise for good schoolwork and being given the opportunity to do their best every day. Thirty-three percent were not engaged and 24 percent were actively disengaged.
- **On the issue of wellbeing**, 68 percent of students were considered to be “thriving” when asked about being treated with respect; smiling and laughing often; learning interesting information; having energy to accomplish tasks; having health problems that inhibit activities; and counting on friends and family when in trouble. Thirty-one percent were struggling and one percent was suffering.

Working in small groups of about 10, the Indianola students were asked to come up with their own ideas, solutions, and recommendations based on the poll results. Their suggestions were varied and, by mixing older and younger students, the ideas reflected issues that crossed age boundaries.

When it came to hope, the students wanted to see more mentors, both adult and student; motivational youth groups; recreational centers that meet specific needs and wants; more educational field trips; and programs to change the mindset of young people about their future after high school.

*“Where we live does not determine our future in terms of jobs,” one group of students stated.*

When it came to engagement, the students wanted new incentives to learn; new games aimed at education and learning; reality fairs that teach success after graduation and how to live in the “real” world; more teen summits; and ways to be inspired.

“Some kids at school don’t get inspired by their parents or peers, so they need teachers to inspire them,” said one student.

When it came to well-being, the students suggested better and healthier food options; effective exercise programs; brainstorming activities to keep a sharp mind; programs that focus on good mental health; peace rallies; and health fairs.

“Sometimes, adults don’t realize that we, as students, have as much stress on us as they do,” a young student told his group.

As Indianola Mayor Steve Rosenthal noted, “As adult leaders, we all too often cannot see or feel the students’ true perspective. We must hear their views and encourage their involvement if we are to create a positive learning experience at school.”

With school and community members in attendance to listen to their comments and ideas, the students can expect their strategies to be implemented, said Moore. “And, most important, we will continue to listen,” she said. “The students hold the keys. We are here to help them unlock the doors.”



## Youth Leadership Summit

### Love yourself. Empower yourself. Express yourself.

That message wasn't given to Indianola's youth by a teacher or preacher or parent. That's the message that Indianola's young people gave to their peers across Mississippi at the 7th Annual Mississippi Municipal League's Statewide Youth Leadership Summit held the first weekend in March.

"I understand the importance of supporting other youth in their accomplishments as well as their failures," said Samesa Hoskins, 18, president of the Indianola Youth Council. "It's so important to try your hardest at what you want and never give up on your dream. And I can only make my dream come true with the help of others."

Sixteen Indianola students – all members of the Indianola Youth Council – participated in the summit on the campus of Mississippi University for Women in Columbus. The event brought city officials and youth together to share their experiences and the impact their programs have made on their respective communities. Most important, the summit created a forum where students could interact and discuss issues and concerns that are important to them.

"We're trying to mold them into being young leaders and expose them to youth experiences from different parts of the state," said Anthony Powell of the Indianola Promise Community, which sponsored the trip for Indianola Youth Council members.

During the summit, the Indianola students made a presentation titled "You Have the Power: Love Yourself. Empower Yourself. Express Yourself." For two months before the summit, they practiced their message, and the result was a resounding success, said Powell.

"It was really amazing because everyone came to our session to hear our students," he said. "Our kids made it fun and exciting and got the crowd involved."

The presentation included a skit about bullying that included the message: Even if others are willing to stand up for you, always be prepared to stand up for yourself.

"I learned many different things at the summit, but one that will stick with me for the rest of my life is the fact that there are individuals out there who are willing to help assist the youth in this world no matter what," said Hoskins. "I got to meet so many people who were all different in terms of age, race and where they came from."



The Indianola Youth Council is one of the Indianola Promise Community's most valuable programs. Made up of 15-20 members in 8th through 12th grades, it is the first youth council of its kind in Mississippi that is comprised of students from two different counties and six cities – Sunflower and Washington counties and Indianola, Greenville, Leland, Moorhead, Sunflower and Ruleville.

*The goal is to give youth a voice and make them part of the decision-making process into their futures. To join the council, prospective members go through an application process in August that includes writing essays about themselves and letters of recommendation. Applicants are then interviewed and a final group is chosen to serve.*

Students learn how government operates; the duties of governmental positions within the city, state and nation; the election and voting process; creation of laws; and problem solving on a city level. At the same time, the students operate under a curriculum that teaches them valuable life lessons that include creative and critical thinking; communication and problem solving; goal setting and organizational skills; etiquette; networking; preparing for college interviews; and collaboration and cooperation

The Youth Leadership Summit also afforded the students to gain more knowledge about decision-making, financial responsibility and life after high school. And it taught teamwork.

"I see that it takes a team to achieve goals," said Hoskins. "That's why it's so important to have a Youth Council; not because it allows us to be leaders of other youth, but because it allows us to lead as a team."



## NAVIGATORS

Shanekia Pembleton doesn't carry a compass or maps or GPS, but she is a navigator nonetheless. And her job impacts the direction that hundreds of students will take in their lives.

"They just need someone to help them, to guide them, to push them and to show them the way forward," she said. "Everyone needs direction in their life; children most of all." Pembleton is one of five "academic navigators" who will soon be assisting Indianola students from Pre-K to high school to guide them through the Indianola Promise Community's (IPC) pipeline of programs to meet their individual needs.

"We want every child to succeed; not losing any along the way," said Cassandra Rule of IPC, the social services coordinator. "To do that, we work to fill the gaps they may experience in the course of their lives and educations, and find solutions to the problems they may be experiencing."

Pembleton and other navigators will be assigned to specific Indianola schools – Lockard Elementary, Carver Elementary, Merritt Middle School and Gentry High School – as well as Pre-K programs through Head Start and local child-care centers. Each navigator will be given a specific caseload.

"We begin by looking for those early warning signs: absenteeism, behavioral problems and coursework issues," Rule explained. "We let the data drive it."

### **Operating from a central office at Carver Elementary School, NAVIGATORS have many responsibilities, including:**

- Meeting with students, parents, and intervention teams to provide assistance with issues ranging from academics, peer pressure and bullying to truancy, substance abuse and self-esteem.
- Working with school, Head Start and child-care staffs to assess high-risk situations and make immediate recommendations and referrals.
- Working with students and their families to develop strategies for addressing their emotional and basic needs.
- Serving as liaisons and advocates between student's home, school and community resources, such as family service agencies, mental health clinics, courts, protective services, doctors and clergy members.
- Conducting home, agency and community-based visits.

“Our navigators help foster positive working relationships, beginning with the students and their parents,” said Rule. “We have tried to find individuals who blend experience in social work with education. They have the knowledge and skill set to identify which program a child needs and to monitor the progress and outcomes.”



Pembleton fits that bill. With seven years’ experience, she is prepared for the job and for the 120 students with whom she will be building relationships at Merritt Middle School.

“We are their advocates, working for each child to help them move through the pipeline and excel in each grade,” said Pembleton. “We target goals and direct them to achieve those goals. This is a serious job. You have to put your heart and your all into it. You have to go beyond that call to make sure a child succeeds.”

Pembleton credits the Indianola Promise Community for taking the reins and working in partnership with the school district making the program work to its potential.

*“I think this one of the best programs they have. Being from Indianola, I have seen the struggles and problems many of our children face every day,” she said.*

*“So this means a lot. By IPC coming and helping, it really motivates our children and their families to do more and to do better.”*



## Excelebration

A celebration means to observe a day or an event with ceremonies of respect, festivity or rejoicing. An Excelebration means to do it all with children in mind. Just ask Doris Wyms.

“This is a great day,” said Wyms, a retired public health nurse. “Without kids in good health and achieving at the highest levels, everything else is mundane.”

Wyms is a member of Indianola’s Excel By 5 coalition, a group of volunteers who came together more than 18 months ago to transform the city into a certified child-friendly community aimed at helping parents to educate their children during their most formative years – birth to age five.

Earlier this year, Indianola was officially presented its Excel By 5 certification by the program’s state directors at an Excelebration party held at the Indianola Public Library.

“I know that the Delta Health Alliance came together with the city and the community to make this happen,” said Bob Clay, executive director of Excel By 5 in Mississippi. “This is not the end. This is the beginning. This is really a road less traveled that you all have taken these last two years.”

Excel By 5 encourages and assists communities to become actively involved in supporting their young children. Sponsored by the Indianola Promise Community and the Delta Health Alliance, Indianola’s Excel By 5 certification formally recognizes the city for its progress in assisting children and their families. The program identifies gaps in community resources and promotes community collaboration, volunteerism and economic development.

### **Excel By 5 certification focuses on four areas:**

- Community involvement
- Family and parent support
- Early care and education
- Health and safety

“Excel By 5 shows that we are truly concerned about our young children because we know that they are our future,” said Anjohnette Gibbs, another Indianola coalition member who is heavily involved in childhood learning. “You will see signs go up to indicate that this is a community that works together for our children.”



**At least 50 people were directly involved in the certification process. In addition to parental involvement, those partners include representatives from:**

- Government
- Business
- Healthcare
- Faith-based groups
- Social and civic clubs
- Head Start, child care centers, and schools

Through the certification process, Indianola developed and is making available the resources that parents need to better raise and educate their children, such as a community resource guide that will direct them to services and assistance that they previously may not have known about.

Indianola Mayor Steve Rosenthal, who helped spearhead the city's efforts, said the Excel certification was the product of much hard work by many people who had one goal. It showed that "together, as a community, we can improve our children's health and development." A city proclamation was read and presented to the group.

Gibbs summed up the importance of the day's event by telling participants that, many years from now, they probably wouldn't remember the kind of car they drove or maybe even the details of the homes in which they lived, "but we will always remember what we did on behalf of our children."



## Indianola Summer Camps

Indianola High School student Diqueres Schaffer gained character, learned about ethics and walked away with more self confidence.

Elementary school student Eric McGowan added some “big words” to his growing vocabulary to take with him to 5th grade, and had a blast doing it.

And LaCasia Smith, a bit on the shy side, simply learned to identify shapes, count to 20 and hone her motor skills, all significant accomplishments for a 3-year-old.

The common denominator between the three was the Indianola Promise Community and its stable of successful 2014 summer camps.

“These summer camps have been highly successful for several reasons,” said IPC’s Deborah Moore. “First, they give our children a safe haven during the summer months. Second, they help curtail summer learning loss between academic school years. And third, they serve as economic development drivers because they employ a significant number of Indianola residents.”

Now in its fifth year, IPC’s summer camps program has become an integral part of the Indianola community with parents and children looking forward to, and expecting, a high quality learning experience during June and July.

“We started the process early this year so parents will know when camps will begin, what they offer, and who is sponsoring them,” said Anthony Powell of IPC. “We wanted to increase the numbers this year in each camp to offer a great learning experience to as many kids as possible.”

As the summer camps program has grown and become more defined, IPC has worked to ensure that the quality of each camp is maintained at top levels and that they will be financially sustainable in future years. This year, professional development was offered to camp managers in the areas of project management, implementation, resource development, and grant and proposal writing, said Moore.



**In total, more than 600 kids attended IPC summer camps in 2014.  
Six of the IPC summer camps were:**

**Freedom Summer 2014.** *Sponsored by the Sunflower County Freedom Project.* Targeting 7th - 9th graders, this camp provided core academic instruction plus art enrichment and fitness training. Students took a weeklong visit to Ole Miss.

**Reading, Music & Drama.** *Sponsored by the Rasberry United Methodist Men's Club.* Three age ranges were targeted for this camp: 8-11, 12-14 and 15-18, with an emphasis on language, literature and reading. Activities included creative speech, dramatic arts, music, poetry and plays.

**Farming & Literacy.** *Sponsored by Indianola Main Street, Inc.* This camp targeted 14 - 19 years olds with a focus on language and literacy development. Participants interacted with farmers and agricultural professionals with an emphasis on the importance of language and communication.

**The Writing Camp.** *Sponsored by On Track Community Development Corporation.* Students from all grades enhanced and reinforced their literacy, vocabulary and writing skills through creative and fun programs such as poetry slamming, drama/theater production, spelling bees and arts enrichment.

**College Preparation.** *Sponsored by the Sunflower County Ministerial Alliance.* 10th and 11th graders focused on preparing for college with the intent to complete a degree by placing emphasis on vocabulary and reading comprehension.

**Summer Reading.** *Sponsored by the City of Indianola.* Children ranging from ages 7 - 10 focused on reading comprehension and writing. This camp also included arts and crafts, drama, dance, word challenge, baseball and softball for participants.



## Improving Child Care in Indianola

Listening to Tawanna Sophus describe becoming a certified instructor at Pooh Bear Child Care Center in Indianola is like reading a quote from A.A. Milne's collection of Winnie the Pooh stories. About her training, Sophus said, "It took time. It took effort. And I learned so much that I didn't know. What I do is an adventure, different every day."

Sophus is one of 11 instructors from five Indianola child care centers who have recently obtained nationally recognized child care certification from the state through Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative (MLICCI). The nonprofit group works to improve the child care delivery system for low-income working families and the child care centers that serve them. The Indianola program is one of the many partnerships created and funded by the Indianola Promise Community.

"This certification is so important, because it not only means that these instructors really know their field when it comes to young children, but it helps improve the state ratings of the child care centers here," said Karen Blumenberg, technical assistant for MLICCI in Indianola.

Through the Indianola Promise Community, the newly certified instructors will receive financial incentives for staying at their respective centers for at least one year. The six-week certification process has given Sophus and the other instructors more and better tools for caring for children from birth to age five.

"I take what I learn and bring it here to make this a better center and help point our children in the right direction," said Sophus, who began her child-care career as a volunteer. "I have a passion for working with kids. I give them attention and the love they need."

### **Seven Indianola child care centers serving more than 100 children participate in the program on a voluntary basis. MLICCI focuses on three primary areas:**

- Improving the financial viability of the centers serving low-income families.
- Improving the quality of early childhood education services for children enrolled in the centers.
- Improving the child care assistance program administered by the Mississippi Department of Human Services so that it serves low-income families and child care centers in the best possible way.



Child care centers, said Blumenberg, are vital to the Indianola Promise Community because they support parental employment and, ultimately, the economic success of Indianola. But they also contribute to the long-term educational success of the children who attend the centers.

The program is also helping to improve the physical infrastructure of the centers to create a better learning environment, said Deborah Moore of the Indianola Promise Community. Remodeling, painting, installing new flooring, improving lighting and providing equipment for better hygiene are some of the ways MLICCI and IPC are enhancing the centers. New furniture, instructional supplies and toys are others.

In addition, six of the seven child care centers are now involved with the newly established Sunflower County Early Education Collaborative that also includes Sunflower Humphreys Counties Progress, the Indianola and Sunflower County school districts, IPC and its parent organization, the Delta Health Alliance. Once fully operational, the collaborative will serve an additional 147 children, all aged four, as they prepare for kindergarten.

*“The Indianola Promise Community has just been great,”  
said Sophus. “They are creating opportunities for the  
people of Indianola that we haven’t had before.”*

Joining Sophus in receiving child care certification are: Kathy Sansing, Buck-A-Roo child care center; Bernice Buckner, Buck-A-Roo; Glenda Smith, Buck-A-Roo; Shinicet Reed, Sponge Bob child care center; Tomeaka Gilson, Pooh Bear child care center; Iva Moore, Sponge Bob; Kristal Cooper, Loving Arms child care center; Cassandra Hines, Connected Branches child care center; Glenda Reed, Sponge Bob; and Tiffany Russell, Connected Branches.

## IPC After-School Program



Chassidy Watkins and Jameshia Attaway are pals. Ask these Indianola elementary school students to name their most difficult subject and they'll both respond simultaneously.

"Math!" they say, laughing at each other's identical response.

But for Chassidy, 9, and Jameshia, 10, help beyond the classroom is found in an after-school program aptly named, "The Art of Living Smart" – one of the Indianola Promise Community's (IPC) most successful projects.

"I make mostly A's and B's," said Chassidy. "But math is hard. Over here, they help me with my homework. All I have to do is raise my hand."

The after-school program, now in its second year, grew out of IPC's Art of Living Smart summer camp, where children learn the elements that comprise a quality life – proper nutrition, physical fitness, music and art. Those same components are integrated into the after-school project, but school work is the focus each afternoon, Monday through Thursday.

"Homework is the main effort; to make sure our children receive the help they need beyond the classroom," said Roshunda Sample, IPC project manager. "If not for this program, some of our children would probably just go home alone, trying their best to complete assignments on their own. We offer the support that can really make a difference."

Held at the B.B. King Museum and Delta Interpretative Center, the 28-week, after-school program has an enrollment of 51 kids, selected through an application process. Six staff members, including certified teachers, provide one-on-one assistance with classwork. Supplementing the academics are nutrition lessons, physical fitness classes and art activities.

The summer version of the Art of Living Smart is an eight-week program that attracts an average of 120 Sunflower County children. They learn culinary arts; and how to prepare well-balanced meals, how to count calories, how to recognize the different food groups and the best ways to exercise. In between, there are art competitions, singing and dancing. For the kids, the summer camp also offers the opportunity to receive important health screenings, including eye, ear and dental exams.

Given the success of its summer camp, IPC decided it was important to carry the healthy learning initiative throughout the year. The summer format was adapted to the shorter, after-school period, retaining the essence of the program while providing that crucial hour window for homework guidance and assistance. In both programs, teachers stress the links between a healthy diet and a healthy life. Such instruction is imperative in a region of the country where obesity and its related health issues are so prevalent. But the programs offer even more.



On this day, the after-school program included a visit from Dr. Alphonso Sanders, chairman of the Fine Arts Department at Mississippi Valley State University, who demonstrated the saxophone, trumpet and other musical instruments.

“It’s not the instrument that makes a musician,” Sanders told the students. “You can have the cheapest instrument in the world and if you study hard and know what you’re doing, you can make it sound like a million dollars.”

That kind of advice from noted visitors is like icing on the cake, said Sample. “We want to give our children as much as we can; to expose them to new interests and, hopefully, leave them each day wanting to learn more,” she said.

In addition, the after-school program offers a whole-group counseling session once a week. With the increasing prevalence of cyber bullying, gang fights, irresponsibility and poor decision making, the counseling sessions allow students to interact and learn social skills from one another with the help of instructors and assistants.

*“Coming here after school helps me learn, and every time there are different things,” said Chassidy.*

*“When I go back to school, I listen to my teacher more. I like it here.”*



## Positive Parenting in Indianola



"What can I do better?" It's a common refrain from parents when it comes to raising children. The question becomes even more pronounced when those children suffer from behavioral or emotional problems.

"We help them to see what they're doing currently and what they can do to be a more successful parent," said Lolita Gladney, project manager for the Indianola Promise Community's Positive Parenting Program (Triple P). "We take the blame off the child and help the parents take more responsibility for their actions and take a more active role in their child's life."

Triple P is a parenting and family support system designed to prevent, as well as treat, behavioral and emotional problems in children and teens. It aims to prevent problems in the family, school and community before they arise, and to create family environments that encourage children to realize their potential. It complements another Indianola Promise Community program, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

"Where PBIS deals with children in the school setting and involves school teachers and staff, Triple P is tailored to the home, to parents," said Gladney. "Of course, in the end, it takes everyone working together to really help a child be a successful adult."

Triple P focuses on equipping parents with the skills and confidence they need to be self-sufficient and to be able to manage family issues without ongoing support. More than half of Triple P's parenting strategies are geared toward developing positive relationships, attitudes and conduct. Offered to parents of children ages 0-16, the program is slated to begin in 2014. When fully operational, Triple P will utilize up to five practitioners who will each work with up to 25 families.

"We really want the parents to buy into the program," said Gladney. "Sometimes, the thinking of a parent is, 'I don't need help.' We want to make them feel like it's ok to seek help. We really want the parents to come to us. This is not something forced upon anyone."



Utilizing social service agencies, local health facilities and the juvenile justice system, Gladney hopes to spread the word that this assistance is available.

Triple P practitioners will meet in the home with the parents and children for at least 10 sessions. They will observe interactions between parent and child, provide an assessment and help them devise strategies for improvement.



“But we want them to be independent of us. It’s important for the parents to develop effective strategies on their own. Then, we monitor their progress. We don’t want to stay in the home too long,” said Gladney.

A sad reality is that some children are at risk or the victims of abuse, both emotional and physical. Often it’s a cycle carried from one generation to the next. Triple P offers a way to break the cycle. Some children are coping with parents going through divorce or separation. Triple P helps them as well.

*...in the end, it takes everyone working together to really help a child be a successful adult.”*

“We look at those things. And then we look at test scores at school, drop-out rates, absenteeism, juvenile crime, and we know that all these things reflect the need for this program,” said Gladney. “We want to produce emotionally stable children who can excel at school and at home and ultimately be successful in life. And isn’t that what every parent wants for their child?”

# Stopping Teenage Pregnancy

For Anthony Powell, few programs in the Indianola Promise Community elicit the passion that comes from the class he teaches called, "Becoming a Responsible Teen." And given the alarming statistics, why wouldn't it?

- Teen births in Sunflower County far exceed the national average (94.1 vs. 39 births per 1,000)
- Sunflower County ranked 12th in county teen birth rates in Mississippi from 2005-2009.
- 76 percent of Mississippi high school students say they've had sex by the end of the 12th grade – the highest percentage in the nation.
- 84 percent of births to woman 19 and younger were "unintended."
- Teen births in Sunflower County cost taxpayers about \$2.6 million a year.



"This has all got to change, and we're doing something about it," said Powell, an IPC project manager and one of four instructors for the PREP program, or Personal Responsibility Education Program. "It's very simple: a lot of kids don't have moms or dads they can talk to about this. They don't know the proper ways to protect themselves from teen pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. That's where our instructors come in."

Now beginning its second year, the eight-week, after-school course targets more than 100 kids ages 14-18 to help clarify their own values about sexual activity; make decisions that will help them avoid HIV and other STD's; and learn skills to put their decisions into action.

"This goes beyond sex education in school," said Powell. "We dispel myths and give them the facts. There are no adults allowed except the instructor, and everything shared in class is kept confidential. As a result, we form a bond with these kids where they are comfortable asking us and telling us anything. Often, I learn as much from them as they do from me."

## Through PREP, kids learn:

- Essential information about HIV, AIDS and other STD's
- Ways to handle social and sexual pressures
- Ways to communicate assertively with friends and potential sexual partners
- Refusal skills, negotiation skills and problem-solving skills

It's important because, compared with older mothers, teen mothers are more likely to be high school dropouts, limiting future earnings and the financial support they provide their child. And they are more likely to rely on public assistance. In addition, children born to teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely; to be born at a low birth weight; and to die as infants. They generally have less stimulating home environments and poorer academic and behavioral outcomes than do children born to older mothers. Finally, they are more likely themselves to initiate sex at an early age and to have a teen birth.

## **“So it’s a cycle we have to stop,” said Powell.**

Following PREP's first year, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies reached out to the Indianola Promise Community to see if it could help IPC's efforts, explained Josh Davis, vice president of external affairs for the Delta Health Alliance, the umbrella organization over IPC.

“In year two, we’ve been working with the Campaign to take advantage of their assistance and resources that are relevant to rural communities such as ours to combat teen pregnancy,” Davis said. “We shared with them our successful outcomes from the first year.”

Those outcomes showed a statistically significant gain in sexual health knowledge for participants from the beginning of the program to its conclusion. Results suggested a trend that the kids were now more likely to use contraceptives and condoms during sex, and more likely to abstain from sex for the six months following the classes. Results also showed they were now more likely to care about school, resist peer pressure, manage conflict and communicate with their parent or guardian about important issues. For Powell, the program provided some surprises.

“The most surprising thing? The kids who you think are having sex, aren’t. And the kids who you think aren’t having sex, are,” said Powell. “And there is an extremely large number who don’t know the methods to avoid teen pregnancy and STD transmission.” Powell looks at the \$2.6 million annual cost of teen births in Sunflower County and shakes his head.

“It’s so unnecessary. That’s \$2.6 million that could go toward other programs, from early learning to healthcare,” he said. “The good news is that it’s preventable. All of it is. And IPC is here to make that happen.”



## College Readiness/ACT Prep

Stephanie Gilmore recalled her senior year of high school, preparing for college with little help to guide her through the rigorous application and testing processes.

“There were few resources available to us then,” she remembered. “The college tours? I never even visited a college before I left home for school. It would have been nice to have someone come in and show us the ropes.”

Now, Gilmore is working to change all that as director of the College Readiness/ACT Prep program, part of the Indianola Promise Community’s commitment to the city’s high school students.

Two days each week, for 45 minutes each day, Gentry High School seniors who are on track to graduate participate in an academic preparation and mentoring program that assists them on their road to college and beyond. Forty-six seniors participated in the Fall 2013 program, while 50 more joined in Spring 2014. In subsequent years, the program will also assist sophomores and juniors.

To be accepted into the program, students must have a grade point average and course record indicating they are on track to graduate, and a commitment to attend no fewer than 90 percent of the class sessions, completing all required coursework and practice tests.

“We have such a need for this,” said Gilmore. The average composite score on the 2011 ACT college readiness exam for Indianola students was just 15.7, compared to the U.S. average of 21.2, according to the Mississippi Department of Education.

“We’re trying to raise these scores to give our children a better opportunity and a wider choice of schools,” she said. “We want to enhance the college-readiness culture in the school district that not only helps students get into college, but helps them once they’ve arrived.”

### **The College Readiness/ACT Prep program provides:**

- Extended learning time in reading, math, writing and science.
- An online program that incorporates the skill sets needed for ACT preparation.
- ACT registration and practice tests.
- Assistance in completing admission and financial aid applications.
- Tours of Mississippi college and university campuses.



“Up until now, we haven’t involved the parents. And that’s been the most critical missing piece,” said Gilmore. Parents’ Nights are now held to assist them as well with the application process and the financial aspects of attending college. All application fees required for testing, admission and financial aid are paid for by IPC’s College Readiness program. While student visits will be made to most in-state universities, one large tour will be taken with students and parents to the college that the majority of students have expressed interest in attending.

“We ask that the parents go with us on the college tour,” said Gilmore. “Some parents may never have been to college, so they don’t know what to expect.”

The program doesn’t end once the students graduate from high school. Enrichment and workforce development courses are held during the summer before college to not only assist the college-bound students but those who plan to begin a career right out of high school.

*“I have no doubt that there will be students in this program who go to college and do great things in their lives,” said Gilmore. “There is so much to do to get ready and we are here to help them every way we can.”*

## Indianola Freedom Community Garden



*In many ways, the Indianola Promise Community is like a garden; a place where seeds of success are sown in the hope that they will grow and ripen into healthy, productive and well-educated adults. So it is that the Indianola Freedom Community Garden represents an important part of IPC.*

“At one time, we had community gardens throughout the Delta. When that program ended last year, we discussed the importance of keeping the garden in Indianola and making it part of the Indianola Promise Community,” said Leslie Johnson, program manager of the Indianola Freedom Community Garden.

To do that, IPC decided to wrap the garden project into another highly successful program – the Indianola Youth Council. In its second year, the Youth Council is comprised of 15-20 members in 8th through 12th grades. While the main goal of the Youth Council is provide those students a voice within their schools and community, and to make them part of the decision-making process into their future, the Freedom Community Garden will give them something more.

“It’s about responsibility and learning to raise the fresh foods that will keep them healthy,” said Johnson. “It teaches the importance of volunteerism and organization. They will go out and find other students and parents to be involved in the planting and harvesting. A garden does so many things.”

Beginning this fall, council members will begin cleaning the existing garden, located next to Carver Elementary School, and preparing it for spring planting. With its raised beds, the garden will mostly be planted with vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and beans.

“Hopefully, through their efforts, we will have the support of community volunteers who see the value of a garden right here in their neighborhood and city,” she said. “It’s important because fresh vegetables and fruits are vital for a healthy lifestyle, and this teaches them the art of raising their own food.”

Childhood obesity has been a growing problem in the Mississippi Delta and the Freedom Community Garden is one way to fight it. Many children don’t even know where their vegetables come from, except the grocery store, said Johnson.

“We have fast food in Indianola and that’s pretty much been it,” she said. “We want to introduce our children to the importance health eating.”

The Indianola Youth Council was developed to help determine ways to improve the school system from a students’ perspective, not just from the perspective of parents and school officials. To join the council, prospective members go through an application process in August that includes writing essays about themselves and letters of recommendation. Applicants are then interviewed and a final group is chosen to serve. For the 2014-2015 year, the Youth Council will have 20 members, including ten returning members from the previous year.

Their decisions as council members affect every student in the school district because they represent all students. To do that, the students learn how government operates; the duties of governmental positions within the city, state and nation; the election and voting process; creation of laws; and problem solving on a city level. Overseen by a five-member adult advisory board, the Youth Council was created and developed by the Indianola Promise Community. Youth Council officers are elected by its members who facilitate their own meetings.

“The Youth Council has so many important elements and functions, but gardening is not something they’re used to,” said Johnson. “We’re educating them on the process so that, by the time planting season comes around, they will be ready.”

# Indianola Promise School



## For the four-year-old students at the Indianola Promise School, one date stands above the rest: 2026.

"From day one, we start impressing on these kids that this is their high school graduating class. With graduation rates so low, we tell them, 'Look around you. All of you must graduate together,'" said Jeffrey Blackmon, a principal during the school year and director of the Promise School in the summer.

With 126 children and 27 teachers, the Promise School is one of the most successful early learning programs in the Mississippi Delta, preparing children for kindergarten. It is one of nine summer programs offered by the Delta Health Alliance's Indianola Promise Community. The Indianola Public Schools is the program sponsor.

The Promise School, located at Lockard Elementary School, has grown in reputation as a program that really makes a difference. Children come to the program from Head Start, traditional daycare and from families that home school.

With about 14 students and three teachers per class, each child receives the individual attention needed to learn. From 8 a.m. to noon each day, five days a week for nearly a month, the young students are involved in activities that will put them about nine weeks ahead of other kindergartners.

"In the past, there was very little communication between Head Start teachers and kindergarten teachers," Blackmon said. "In this program, each class has a Head Start teacher, a kindergarten teacher as well as a teaching assistant from Lockard Elementary. We want to establish all those relationships before the regular school year."

The school focuses on the basics – early literacy, spelling, writing skills, sound fluency, math and social skills. Equally important, the program concentrates on structure, a component often overlooked.

"Walking in line. Sounds easy to you and me. But when you have 20 four-year-olds, it's not that easy," Blackmon said. "They need that sense of order."

One student, Caleb Lipsey, said that, because of the Promise School, he feels like he's already in kindergarten. "I can read. I can count to 100. I'm ready to go."

Caleb's attitude is important to teachers such as Efunday Clemmons. "When they come in here from Head Start they're scared. They're not used to a structured environment. But they have grown so much in 3 ½ weeks. Some of them are now learning addition, recognizing the alphabet and numbers and primary colors."

Something as seemingly simple as using a restroom by themselves is a major accomplishment and gives the students a sense of independence, which is something that Blackmon and Clemmons say is vital as the students move toward the year 2026.

'Now it's like, 'Hey, I'm in a big kid school,'" said Clemmons. "They are so proud of themselves."



## **P A R T N E R S**

AmeriCorps\*VISTA  
B.B. King Museum  
Children's Defense Fund  
City of Indianola  
Delta State University  
Excel By 5  
Mayor's Health Council  
Mississippi Center for Education Innovation  
Mississippi Center for Justice  
Mississippi State Department of Health  
Mississippi Low Income Childcare Initiative  
P-16 Council  
Parents as Teachers  
Parents for Public Schools/Jackson  
Save the Children  
Sunflower County Childcare Association  
Sunflower County Consolidated School District  
Sunflower County Ministerial Alliance  
Sunflower-Humphreys County Progress, Inc.  
Urban Child Institute  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation



**Indianola Promise Community Office**

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Visit our website at [www.deltahealthalliance.org](http://www.deltahealthalliance.org)*



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