



Young participants in the McGehee Desha Alumni Community Center sell fruits and vegetables they helped grow. The proceeds will go toward their future college education.

The Center provides workforce development in Desha County and beyond

By Sara Whisenhunt

Workforce and education are at the heart of successful economic development across Arkansas. At the end of 2016, Arkansas posted an unemployment rate of 3.9 percent, the lowest unemployment rate in the state's history. There are multiple programs in the state that help support training and development of those who are preparing to enter the workforce. These programs ensure that Arkansas workers are employable and prepared for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

Desha County has two organizations that approach workforce development through different programs,

while still sharing a similar goal: economic development and empowerment of local citizens.

One of these training programs is housed in the McGehee Desha Alumni Community Center (the Center) in the heart of the Delta. The efforts of the Center are focused in Ashley, Bradley, Chicot, Desha, and Drew counties. According to its website, www.deshaalumnnicenter.org, "The Center offers multi-social services to help individuals become productive members of the community through subject tutoring, workforce training and gainful employment." The Center works not only with adults but also with middle school and high school students to help prepare them

for college through programs such as Crisis at the Core, Sustaining Health through Agriculture Project, the Center's Computer Lab, and the C.B. King Memorial Training Center.

The Center currently has 49 students enrolled in the 529 College Education Plan. These students participate in various activities to raise and save money for their college tuition. They also receive the benefit of being able to participate in activities in the community and be exposed to arts and culture by attending events such as "Disney on Ice" and "Julius Caesar" at the Greenwood Little Theatre in Greenwood, Miss. They also make a difference in their local community by visiting churches, nursing homes, and performing plays and music for the community.

Although many of these students are the first in their family to go to college, the Center wants to "provide the opportunity to change that," Ruby Emerson, a staff member at the Center, shared with us.

The students raise money for their college tuition by receiving good grades, having a positive attitude and good behavior at school. The 529 College Education Plan totals over \$3,000 in college tuition.

In 2012 the McGehee Center received a grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation for \$9,450 in order to continue to provide educational programs and workforce training to local students. One of the key programs these funds supported was the McGehee Center's Bicycle Factory. The Bicycle Factory equipped and taught students how to repair bicycles. The proceeds from the bicycle sales were set aside to fund college tuition for the students. The factory closed in March 2017 and the bikes were given to children in need. Now the students are learning to grow fruits and vegetables in a "hoop house," or green house. They sell these vegetables and fruits, and the proceeds are also put into college funds. Not only does this program raise money for college tuition, it teaches children about nature and where their food comes from.

In addition to the McGehee Center, the Delta Technology Education Center (DTEC) is also an

asset in the Delta region. The concept for the Delta Technology Education Center was born after tornadoes struck Dumas in 2007. The Center opened in 2010 and consists of two main classrooms in which classes are taught by the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, Southeast Arkansas College, University of Arkansas at Monticello-College at Technology-McGehee, and Phillips Community College. The Arkansas Department of Workforce Services also has a local office on the campus and offers information about job placement, resume development, unemployment assistance, tax services, and more.

Dr. David Rainey, former state representative and chairman of the DTEC board, shared how DTEC has positively impacted the workforce.

"We have been able to provide a place where folks who are underemployed can get assistance and support based on their current situation," he said.

DTEC provides resources, services and skills training to citizens to help them move from unemployment to employment or up their career ladder.

"Our ultimate goal is to help people help themselves," Dr. Rainey said.

The future of DTEC depends on the needs of citizens and local businesses. Dr. Rainey shared that DTEC is prepared to modify services based on the needs of the community, and that DTEC is committed to providing quality programs and services to the delta for many years to come.

To learn more about the programs mentioned in this article, visit www.deshaalumnnicenter.org or www.delta-tech.org.



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