



More Than a Gym

YMCA Serves Many Needs

By Robin Roenker

Tired of seeing her two boys laze around on the couch Saturday mornings in front of the tube, single mom Mary Cockriel handed them a YMCA program guide and told them to find something the family could do together. They picked karate and immediately became hooked.

That was five and a half years ago. In all that time, they've missed only two YMCA classes. Cockriel and her sons, Philip, 15, and John, 14, are now black belts.

"It has been the greatest bonding experience for my family," Cockriel said. And if her boys feel overwhelmed by a school project or another task at hand — including climbing Mt. Fuji together in the summer of 2006 — she draws on their shared experience in karate of breaking difficult moves into small, manageable steps to encourage them through it.

"It filters through every aspect of our lives. We use it constantly," she said.

The threesome now volunteers each Thursday night at the Beaumont YMCA to help teach a beginning karate class for 4-to-7-year-olds. At a recent class the Cockriel boys helped their mom focus the energies of nearly 30 kids in tiny, crisp white uniforms as the youngsters stretched, kicked, and hopped their way across the Y's martial arts room.

The family's involvement at the Y has taught the boys patience and self-confidence and has given them an extended family, Cockriel said.

"It's the people there. The people there have done that. At the Y, a community is



KIRK SCHLEA

The martial arts program at the Beaumont YMCA attracts students of all ages.

formed, accomplishments are achieved, and we have a great deal of fun together."

Serving Individuals

The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) was first established in Lexington in 1853 at the First Presbyterian Church on the corner of Broadway and Second Street. True to its name, back then, the Y was primarily a Bible study group for young men. By the late 1800s the local Y — like others throughout the country — had broadened its services to include the health and wellness focus we associate with the organization today. (The downtown building that is now home to

ArtsPlace was built in 1904 as Lexington's first dedicated YMCA building, complete with an indoor gym and track.)

Today the YMCA of Central Kentucky boasts more than 23,000 members across its three Lexington facilities and its Scott County and Jessamine County branches. In 2007 the agency served more than 46,000 individuals — both members and nonmembers alike — through its many program activities.

Think the YMCA is just a gym? Think again. Today's YMCA is much more than basketball or swimming, though it still is those things, too. In addition to an array of health and wellness classes that run



KIRK SCHLEA PHOTOS

From students to instructors, from left: John, Mary, and Philip Cockriel are experts in karate.

the gamut from yoga and pilates to cycling, fencing, and volleyball, the Y offers an increasing range of arts and humanities classes — everything from painting and drama to Spanish language classes, ballroom dance, and guitar.

In fact, with more than 350 participants in 2007, the YMCA of Central Kentucky's guitar program is the largest of any of the 2,600 YMCAs in the country. Dave Peterson, director of arts and humanities for the local Y, gets frequent calls from YMCAs in other, often larger, cities, asking for tips on launching their own guitar programs, he said.

"Most people join (the YMCA) because of wellness or health," said Jan Brucato, president and CEO of the YMCA of Central Kentucky. "But what they get introduced to once they walk in the doors is another issue. Often times they find additional program opportunities, friendships, and social support systems."

That's why when people ask Brucato, "What do you do at the Y?" her initial reaction is often, "how much time do you have?" Conveying the scope and variety of the Y's services in a sound bite or two isn't easy. There's just too much to mention.

There's the Y's Black Achievers program, which since 1985 has encouraged nearly 7,000 African-American students in grades seven through 12 to explore the diverse array of careers and higher-education opportunities available to them. Program leaders sponsor college tours and help seniors target and apply for college funding, to great success: The 2007 senior class netted more than \$750,000 in scholarships. The program also pairs students with community mentors who help them explore various career fields — from business and medical to engineering and law. The program helped current Henry Clay High School senior Jasmin Hamilton find her post-graduation goals: Having clicked with mentors in the program's medical cluster, she plans to attend UK and major in chemistry and pre-dental.

"Our goal is to give (participants) the idea that they can do and become basically whatever they want to," said Curtis Warren, board chair for the Black Achievers program.

The Y's Early Childhood Center, housed at the North Lexington Family YMCA, provides full-day care to 50 kids, ages 6 weeks to 5 years. There, director Susan Nelson has transformed a corner hallway into a

cozy family reading corner, with monthly themed books and activities. (Recently, in honor of A.A. Milne's birthday, the area was chock full of Pooh Bear.) The space encourages parents to sit for five or 10 minutes and read with their kids.

"It ties them to memories of their parents, here in the center," Nelson said.

Then there's the Y's Before and After School Care programs at 23 elementary and middle schools in Fayette, Scott, and Jessamine counties. There, kids can enjoy a chance to play with friends, exercise, get homework help, and enjoy healthy snacks until it's time for school to start or for their parents to pick them up after work. To celebrate Crazy Hat Day at Picadome Elementary School's after-school program earlier this year, friends Haley Todd, 9, Keaton Carroll, 8, and London Adams, 10, crafted unique hats out of newspaper, crepe paper, and pipe cleaners. (The crepe on Haley's smart, beanie-like creation matched the blue of her glasses exactly.) Nearby, Josh Pearse, 10, found a quieter spot to study for his upcoming spelling test. The program has grown each year, and it now serves more than 2,000 kids, said Kelly Easton, executive director of the YMCA of Central Kentucky's Child Development Branch. In fact, the Y is the area's largest provider of childcare, serving more than 1,200 families annually.

"Parents tell us all the time they don't know what they'd do without us," Easton said.

There are the Y's famed summer camps — such as the Bar Y outdoor camp on Versailles Road, which lets kids get a taste of the wilderness right in the city. Its array of youth sports programs introduced 4,500 kids last year to soccer, t-ball, basketball, and more. Its Wild About Reading campaign distributed 6,000 new books



From right, Dave Thomas, Joey Grubb, and Ron Rogers practice guitar at the Beaumont YMCA.



MATT GOINS

Award-winner Cynthia Saunders, right, flashes a smile during the 2006 YMCA Black Achievers awards banquet.



KIRK SCHLEA

The Y's after-school activities keep kids engaged and entertained.



KIRK SCHLEA

Jan Brucato, president and CEO of the YMCA of Central Kentucky

to low-income children last year. And its swim lessons — including the Y's special "Splash" event, which provides free swim lessons during spring break — helped 4,300 area kids become safer near the water last year.

"When you think about those num-

bers," said Fran Taylor, director of the Keeneland Foundation and current YMCA of Central Kentucky Metro board chair, referring to the tens of thousands of YMCA members and program participants each year, "there is no other organization that I can think of in our community that has

touched so many lives and made them better, and in such meaningful ways."

Serving the Community

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away from membership or participation in its programs due to inability to pay. Last year the YMCA awarded more than \$691,000 in financial aid, allowing families to pay for services on a sliding scale.

When you throw in the value of the YMCA's in-kind donations of facilities space to various community organizations — the Y often offers its pools and gyms and meeting spaces for free or at a reduced cost to area preschools or Boy Scouts or even the Health Department for monthly diabetes screenings — “that's easily another half million dollars that the Y is providing to this community,” Brucato said.

Brucato encourages her staff members to take their expertise outside of the YMCA walls. Some, for example, lead anger management classes for inmates at the Division of Community Corrections. Others conduct exercise classes at area retirement communities. Often, other community agencies seek the Y's time-tested leadership, hoping to get new projects off the ground. Staff members David Elsen and Jeannie Thé, for example, are working with the Lexington Youth Lacrosse Association to develop a youth lacrosse feeder program that will be offered through the YMCA.

“We are a resource for the entire community,” Brucato said.

But conveying that message has been difficult, as recent struggles to raise money to construct YMCAs in the Hamburg area and in Nicholasville illustrate.

While the YMCA annually raises more than \$400,000 in its Campaign for Kids, which helps fund financial aid for YMCA services, its capital campaigns for the new YMCAs have faced challenges. That may be, Brucato thinks, because some people “hear ‘capital campaign’ and think ‘building’ — and the fact that major donors are currently focused on programming vs. bricks and mortar. They aren't connecting the dots to realize that without the facilities you can't offer programming.”

But ask YMCA members such as the Cockriel family or Julie Vosler of Georgetown, whose son Brandt, 7, has participated in the Scott County YMCA's after-school program and many of its sports lessons and summer camps, and they'll tell you: What goes on inside the YMCA's walls is nothing short of life-changing.

“Brandt was terribly afraid of the water, but (his YMCA instructors) knew when to push him and when to pull back,” Vosler said. “And now he can swim. That was huge. The YMCA's success stems from the quality of its programs and the people who run them. Those are the keys.”

“The YMCA is about more than pushing weights,” said Gerry van der Meer, 2006-2007 chair of the YMCA of Central Kentucky's Metropolitan Board of Directors. For its members, “it becomes a home. It offers so many things to bring people into who they are as a person — not just the physical, but their whole selves.” 🏊

Web site: <http://www.ymcaofcentralky.org/>