

# South Carolina First Steps e-Spotlight

May 6, 2016



## “...Their Child’s First Teacher”: Darlington County First Steps Works to Support & Empower Young Parents

On Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, Darlington County First Steps (DCFS) held a ribbon cutting ceremony and open house to celebrate the grand opening of their Diva Den in Hartsville. The Diva Den, supported by the Byerly Foundation, was created with the intention to provide safe haven for expecting and parenting young mothers in the community.

Parental support programs, particularly for young fathers and mothers, have been a focus area for DCFS Executive Director, Darnell McPherson, throughout her tenure at First Steps and in her years working in the early childhood sector. While working with the Parents as Teachers (PAT) program, it became clear to her that there was a need for expansion of supportive programming not only for children in Darlington County, but also for young parents, as they were still growing and learning as well. Another driving force behind the need for more parental support programs for young parents is that Darlington County has had notoriously high rates of teen pregnancy and repeat teen pregnancies.

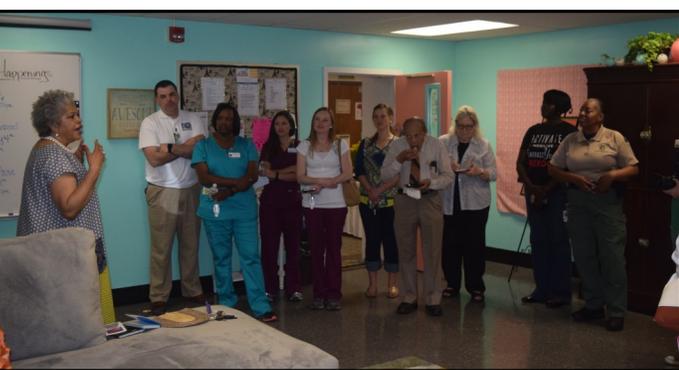
Over the last few years, there has been a growing effort by DCFS and other community agencies to increase pregnancy prevention efforts. As a result of these efforts, DCFS was awarded the Pregnancy Assistance Grant from the SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the Children’s Trust who obtained federal funds from the Office of Adolescent Health. In 2014, DCFS began the Parents are First (PAF) program to work with expecting and parenting mothers and fathers, ages 15-24, from the funds awarded. The grant’s four goals are: reducing repeat pregnancies, increasing educational attainment, improving parenting skills and collaboration with community partners. A unique characteristic of this grant is its mandated fatherhood initiative. As a



Ashely Holman, DCFS project specialist, cuts the ribbon for the Diva Den. She is joined by Brenda Ayers, Parents are First project director with DCFS, left; Richard Puffer, Byerly Foundation executive director; and Darnell McPherson, executive director of DCFS.

response to this requirement and to the community need for this type of programming, in the summer of 2015 DCFS opened the Dad Cave with the goal of providing safe environment for fathers to participate in group activities, receive peer support and assistance from other young fathers, and have access to valuable parenting resources.

After opening the Dad Cave, it was apparent that DCFS also needed a safe-haven with parental support programming for young mothers. Prior to the opening of the Diva Den, DCFS was hosting groups and workshops for young mothers in the Adult Education meeting room inside their existing office, but as a small, stark room that doubled as a break room, it was not a conducive environment for young



Darnell McPherson, executive director of DCFS, addresses the crowd at the Diva Den ribbon cutting ceremony and open house.

mothers to share and learn. Brenda Ayers, PAF Projector Director, applied for and received funding from the local Byerly Foundation, which provides funds in the Hartsville area to promote economic and social growth in the city. As a result of the funding, DCFS staff were able to design, with input from women who participate in the program, a beautiful, inviting, and comfortable room within the existing joint office space of DCFS and the County’s Adult Education program.

There are several evidence-based programs and other learning activities offered in the Diva Den to help young mothers discover their strengths, explore news ideas for personal and parental growth, and develop new skills to ensure a brighter future for themselves and their children. Evidence-based programs are carefully selected to meet the needs

**(The e-Spotlight on DCFS is continued on the next page)**

of the young mothers with additional enrichment and learning activities being provided based on participant interests and requests. Diva Den programs and activities cover a variety of topics and focus areas, including a session entitled “Moms Like Me!” where participants have the opportunity to share their individual needs, challenges and successes as mothers, and Motherread, an evidenced-based family literacy program model. Groups and workshops usually consist of 8-12 participants with PAF’s goal to provide services to 50 young mothers as well as their children. Like the Dad Cave, if a mother enters one of the DCFS educational programs in the Diva Den, she will receive four free childcare hours while the programs are taking place.

DCFS staff and Diva Den participants were proud to open the Diva Den up to the community last Friday for the ribbon cutting and open house event. There were over 30 attendees at the event, with representatives from many of DCFS’s partners as well as several prominent community members. At the event, Mrs. McPherson announced DCFS’ mission for the Diva Den to, “...provide young women with the support and resources needed for self-empowerment which will give them the confidence to follow their dreams.” Richard Puffer, Executive Director of the Byerly Foundation, also shared with attendees the Foundation’s vision of being a catalyst for the community, the changes and growth Hartsville has recently experienced, as well as their appreciation of DCFS’s innovation in providing services for young families.

Many in the community wanted to be involved and helped in the establishment of the Dad Cave and the Diva Den because they, too, had seen younger and younger parents searching for social services, parenting support, careers and various other concrete needs. Welcoming and engaging the Darlington County community in the work has been a key component of creating these spaces for young parents and establishing DCFS’ parental support programs. Through its successful efforts to develop a shared community vision and path towards making Darlington County a place for young families to thrive, DCFS exemplifies First Steps’ goal of being a community convener around issues of importance for Darlington County’s children and families.

***For more information on Darlington County First Steps’ Diva Den, please contact Ashley Holman at 843-639-0282 or [aholman@scfirststeps.org](mailto:aholman@scfirststeps.org).***