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Monthlong summer enrichment program serving Lambert, Marks communities

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OXFORD, Miss. – Eighteen youth in Quitman County are working to better themselves and their community, thanks to a University of Mississippi summer enrichment program.

Hands of H.O.P.E., or Helping Others Pursue Excellence, is a four-week, nonprofit effort for students ages 5 to 18. Presented by two Innovation Fellows of the Catalyzing Entrepreneurship and Economic Development, or CEED, initiative at the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, the program meets through July 7 at Youth Opportunities Unlimited in Marks.

“Taeisha Gambrel and Janae Owens, two outstanding students in the McLean Institute, are making a difference in the lives of students in Quitman County in the Mississippi Delta,” said Albert Nylander, McLean Institute director and UM professor of sociology. “This transformative experience, for both the university students and Quitman County residents, is part of the CEED program at the McLean Institute.”

The CEED program, funded through a generous grant from the Hearin Foundation, offers students an opportunity to learn entrepreneurial approaches to improve quality of life for Mississippians.

“While visiting Marks, we have observed that students lack access to the resources they need in order to engage in physical activity, mental health awareness and education,” said Gambrel, a UM graduate student in community health counseling.

“The mission of this summer program is to provide a fun, educational experience for students to keep them engaged during the summer,” said Owens, who recently earned a master’s degree in health education and promotion. “Our goal is that children are continuously learning, developing healthy habits and participating in experiences that build self-esteem.”

Hands of H.O.P.E. has been providing breakfast, lunch and a snack for all participating youth. Other activities include movie screenings, cooking lessons, gardening, financial planning, dressing for success, teen pregnancy and bullying prevention.

A tour of the Ole Miss campus and an awards ceremony at Pirate Adventures in Oxford is also scheduled.

Participants include first-graders Jasmine Anderson and Calton Griffin; second-graders Lizzie Luckett and Jordan Merrell; third-graders Asher Boykins, Ma khi Crawford, Mackenzie Riley, Paris Riley, Sterling Taper and Jamarion Williams; fourth-graders Kentavious Gordon, Jeremiah Pyor and Jaylen Watson; fifth-graders Tiawanna Luckett and Laleah Merrell; sixth-grader Josh Chappell; eighth-grader LaTavies Johnson; and ninth-grade student Robert Page Jr.

Two of the youngest students weighed in on their experiences.

“My favorite activity was movie day,” said Boykins, 8, of Lambert. “We watched ‘Inside Out’ and talked about the different emotions that we feel.”

The cooking class was “really fun” for Luckett, 7, of Carthage. “We got to learn about healthy foods and we got to make our own snack after.”

Halfway through the program, both UM students said they are pleased with its success.
“This is a pilot program,” Gambrel said. “I believe Hands of H.O.P.E has been successful in its attempt to provide children in the community with a safe environment for them to come together and learn about mental and physical health while participating in fun educational activities to keep them engaged during the summer.”

Owens agreed.

“I feel that it has been successful enough to continue,” she said. “After learning that the Marks community did not have many summer programs, I thought it would be great to provide a way for the youth to be active in educational activities that will provide aspirations toward their future, and the kids seem to be benefiting from it so far.”

Quitman County education officials also expressed a desire to see Hands of H.O.P.E. continue and expand.

“Our efforts are not just merely implementing programs for youth, but setting a standard of excellence that ensures quality and professional services for the youth and families we serve,” said Evelyn Jossell, Quitman County superintendent of education and CEO of Youth Opportunities Unlimited. “It is my desire to keep the communities we serve informed of all of our program services and activities.”

“Hands of H.O.P.E. is modeled on another entrepreneurial project conducted last summer by CEED students in Vardaman.”

“The McLean Institute believes such partnerships as this one will advance community and economic development in the state of Mississippi,” Nylander said.

The affirmations are appreciated, but the real benefit for Gambrel and Owens is seeing lives being changed by their efforts.

“Our hope is to use what we are learning in our master’s programs to inspire students to become healthy, productive citizens of Quitman County,” Owens said.

For more about the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, visit [http://mclean.olemiss.edu/](http://mclean.olemiss.edu/). For more about Youth Opportunities Unlimited, go to [http://www.youmsdelta.org/](http://www.youmsdelta.org/).