

COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

Part 1

Making an impact on the lives of students for 35 years

BY ANN LOUDEN, RESIDENT

Since 1989, Communities In Schools has played an essential role in partnering with educators to benefit students in Chatham County. The mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. Based in Siler City, the Chatham County CIS is one of 18 affiliates in North Carolina and 111 nationwide.

“We are so proud of the great work we do in this County,” says Tych Cowdin, executive director. “Just last year alone, we positively impacted the lives of 1800

young people -- students from elementary through high school -- who received support to successfully navigate a pivotal time in their lives.”

Communities In Schools delivers services through both staff and volunteer initiatives. The CIS Model Schools program embeds staff – called Student Support Specialists – to work inside schools, providing academic support, crisis intervention, and mental health resources. In space allocated by the schools, CIS staff create a home away from home for



students who will benefit from additional resources. Stocked with everything from care kits for hygiene needs to give-away suit jackets, CIS offices are a friendly, welcoming space.

To receive services from CIS, students who are struggling with challenges like absenteeism, academics, or emotional wellness are nominated by guidance counselors and teachers for CIS case management.

Caitlyn, an 11th-grade student at Jordan-Matthews High School, one of six Chatham County schools where CIS works, credits Travis Patterson, Student Support Specialist, with helping her imagine a

better future. “Mr. T. made a difference in my life,” she explains. “I had some troubles. As a freshman, I was skipping school. Now I get 80’s and 90’s in my grades. I want to graduate and be an EMT.”

Ruby, also an 11th grader, describes the impact of CIS on her life. “They give you support. I have somebody to count on.”

An elected city commissioner-at-large in Siler City, Travis Patterson is the perfect person to serve as CIS Student Support Specialist at the high school level. “He has great relationships in the community,” brags Tych. “He is a visible and fantastic representative for our work

across the County. Plus, he really relates to the students who think he's awesome and cool. And so do the parents!"

Travis shares how he engages with youth. "I like to think I help them break out of a box by giving them the confidence to see things through a different lens. We empower them to learn self-advocacy skills and understand what healthy relationships can look like."

Governors Club resident and former Board Chair Mayme Boyd is so impressed by the work of CIS. "Our numbers are stellar," she says proudly. "Every single member of the staff is 100% committed. I am wowed by what they do with so little. The team is small but mighty."

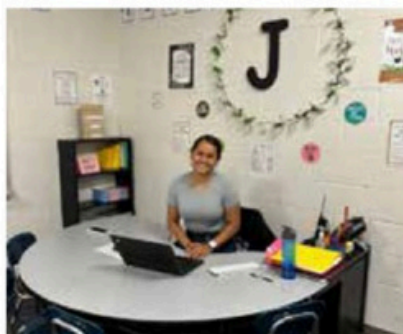
As one of many volunteers who donate valuable time and financial support, Mayme finds her work with CIS most rewarding. "We take the holistic approach and meet them where they are. Often, the children are left behind because parents have challenges: language barriers, hourly work, undependable transportation, single parenting responsibilities, and lack of understanding about the educational process.

Just last week, I took two little girls and their mother to Red Robin Burgers so I could explain how to navigate the enrollment process to get the youngest in Pre-K. I needed to help get her signed up. The family didn't know how."

Joan Bullard, another Governors Club resident, has served as a CIS Lunch Buddy. Assigned to visit with 1st grader Guillermo during lunch at North Chatham Elementary, Joan went once a week to meet him in the cafeteria.

"At first, I did all the talking. I asked about school and his pets. He was very shy, and it was hard to get him to say anything," shared Joan. She wasn't sure how to coax him out of his shell. Then she had an idea.

"I don't have children or grandchildren," Joan told Guillermo. "I need your help on



how to talk to a 6-year-old." She smiles, remembering his answer: "Why don't you have any?!"

Explaining why she gives her time to CIS, Joan cites an investment in the next generation. "The future is our youth. We have an obligation to provide support because it's tough to grow up without any."

To volunteer or make a charitable contribution, contact Shirille Lee at shirille@cischatham.org. To learn more, go to cischatham.org.

