Revamped charity grants young people's wishes

By Mike Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

At 20 years old, the Dream Factory of North Carolina barely had a pulse, was teetering on the verge of being relegated to inactive status.

It took another 20-year-old to inject some energy and new life.

James Wagner, an East Carolina University student from Swansboro, confidently stepped in as president and area coordinator, restructured the board of directors and provided a vision for a floundering organization that had granted more than 120 dreams since 1987.

The new leadership group granted its first dream Friday.

"It's just such a breath of fresh air," said Tori Russ, a holdover board member and the vice president of dream fulfillment. "It needed leadership and energy. He really is amazing, not only leadership and energy but somebody with a good heart. ... He puts a lot of time into it, but he loves it. It seems to be headed in a great direction."

See DREAM, A7
program selected the Dream Factory for its leadership service project. The local chapter's president had resigned, and the national headquarters had given a 60-day notice to shut down the chapter and take over its assets.

A Casino Night organized by the ECU students raised about $2,000, and Wagner extended an invitation to join the board.

Still, in January, an e-mail from the home office in Louisville, Ky., informed the chapter that it would be closed if it did not pay its dues and provide monthly reports.

Someone had to take charge.

Enter James Wagner.

"I had never talked to headquarters before, didn't know anything about them," he said. "I got the e-mail on my Blackberry while I was visiting my dad up in Maryland over Martin Luther King holiday.

"I don't know why I can't say no, but I e-mailed them back and said, 'I'll do it.'"

Anne Bunger, national director of The Dream Factory, appreciated Wagner's spunk, but didn't immediately embrace the idea of putting the chapter in the hands of a college student.

The Dream Factory, which relies on volunteer efforts, grants dreams to children ages 3-18 who have been diagnosed with critical or chronic illnesses.

"I didn't know if he possessed the maturity or the skills necessary to direct other volunteers," Bunger said from her Louisville office. "And as a student, I was afraid that he would establish a system and then move on."

Bunger's apprehension was eased after traveling to Greenville in January to meet with Wagner and the new 10-member board.

"After meeting him, my fears were very quickly allayed," she said. "He is a very impressive young man who managed to take the reins of the chapter, and with his confidence and knowledge, convinced all the existing volunteers that he was the natural choice to be their leader.

"They all believed in the organization, but they didn't have the time to head it up," Bunger said. "They were quite glad that James assumed that role."

Wagner has compiled an impressive service resume in a short time. He was named Youth Volunteer of the Year while in high school and also received the North Carolina Outstanding Volunteer of the Year award for his work with the Onslow County Ministries soup kitchen and homeless shelter.

At ECU, where he has completed two years but is classified as a senior, he is president of the university level of Rotary and Kiwanis clubs and also is involved in the Student Government Association and Honor Society.

"Coming to Greenville I didn't have the contacts to really get going, but ECU has provided a great base to getting to know people, and there is a lot of opportunity there," said Wagner, who is pursuing a degree in public relations and communications with a minor in marketing. "At first when I was talking with nationals, I was trying to impress upon them that even though I was a student I was capable of taking this on. ... From my work with different involvements at ECU, I've learned a lot of great skills and have brought them to the board."

In March, he took his ideas to Louisville for The Dream Factory's semiannual national board meeting, stepping into a room of seasoned leaders on the weekend of his 20th birthday. He talked about building an action plan and how to make the organization bigger and better. He gained their attention and respect.

"Without exception, the rest of the board members from across the country were amazed that he was that young because of the significant contributions he made to our long-range planning session," Bunger said. "He is quite visionary. He's got the energy and the vision to help move the organization in the direction that we all would like it to go."

His first steps as president involved returning the local chapter to good standing. Wagner credits Steven Atkinson, treasurer of the board, for organizing the chapter's finances. The board also includes Mary Burton (fund-raising coordinator), Olive Cox (volunteer coordinator), Zenith Nelson (screenings/selections coordinator), Stephanie Smith (student liaison at ECU), Vaishnavi Rao (secretary) and Amanda Waters (board member at large).

"Obviously the board of directors helps me so much," Wagner said. "There really wasn't that much time to ease into it. I'm a very motivated person, and when I want to change something, I like to do it pretty quickly."

Wagner said he has drawn up a constitution for a Dream Factory student organization at ECU that will create a volunteer network of "worker bees" to help out with fundraisers and other chapter events.

The Dream Factory of North Carolina serves a region that includes Pitt County and its seven neighboring counties and a subregion of counties surrounding those.

Wagner said securing office space also is planned.

"The more name recognition we can get out there the better," he said. "That's what we're trying to do. We're trying to get some office space right now just to have a central point of contact other than my second bedroom in my apartment. That will help us get some legitimacy as well. We have a pretty strong brand, just not that many people know about it."

Bunger believes Wagner has the tools to change that. And age is not a factor.

"We have volunteers from all walks of life, all ages, all socioeconomic sectors, but he is by far the youngest person we've ever had to actually assume the leadership of a chapter," she said. "Most people his age don't have the self-confidence to even consider such a role, but he saw a need, he jumped in and filled it."

Mike Grizzard can be contacted at mgrizzard@coxnc.com and 329-9500.
Web opens up science school

Move fights shortage of qualified teachers

BY SAMIHA KHANNA
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — About 100 students who didn’t get into the N.C. School of Science and Mathematics are getting a pretty sweet consolation prize. Starting in August, the runners-up may take NCSSM courses — they’ll just have to do it from home instead of living on the Durham campus.

“I guess it would be the next-best thing to getting into the school,” said Tyler Smith, a 16-year-old from Eastern Randolph High School in Ramseur.

If all goes as hoped, the school next year will enroll a second class of about 100 students in its NCSSM Online program, and eventually participants could receive an NCSSM diploma. For some students, having access to accelerated math and science courses isn’t just an exciting opportunity — it could be a lifeline. Teaching shortages in science and math have been weighing heavily on North Carolina, and the rest of the country, for years.

Frequently, schools lack a qualified teacher for an upper-level class or can’t enroll enough students in such a class to justify hiring a teacher, said Darlene Haught, NCSSM’s dean of distance learning.

“It’s providing opportunities that schools can’t provide, especially in underserved areas,” she said.

The shortage of math and science teachers has become a broad source of concern. A report due out next week by the UNC system on its 15 schools of education will show that its schools prepared 4,003 teachers last year, but just 12 percent were in math or science.

A student missing out on an advanced math and science course in high school is much less likely to pursue the field in college or as a career, said John Dornan, director of the Public School Forum of N.C., a Raleigh-based nonprofit education research and public policy group.

“This is such a big problem that we’re feeling a lot in education, but it’s not exclusive to education,” Dornan said. “The real issue is how you get kids motivated to get excited about science and math leading to an interesting, challenging job.”

Through the NCSSM program, administrators hope they’ll be able to touch more of the state’s brightest students, who clearly are motivated to achieve. “We have a lot of students who want to come here, and are qualified to come here, but because of bed space, couldn’t come,” said the school’s Chancellor Gerald Boarman.

Students choose one or two classes from seven free advanced math and science courses in a Web-based program. Most class activities won’t be conducted in real time — students will complete the work on their own schedules, but may use Web conferences and chat rooms.
during live class discussions.

Participating students will need to have access to computers, but the state-funded school will provide textbooks, software and visits to the Durham campus for labs and other activities.

They’ll either take the course as part of their regular school schedule, or commit to completing the course after school, possibly to earn college credit, Haught said.

Smith, the Randolph County teen, said he hopes to take computational or medicinal chemistry through the program — courses not offered at his school — and will do the work in his spare time.

“I tend to get bored a lot in class, so I might as well get some extra work,” he said.

NCSSM administrators have been considering the online courses for years, Boarman said, particularly because of the enthusiasm of students who apply to the specialty school.

“We get letters from students wanting some piece of the school,” Boarman said. “They say, ‘Can I come here on weekends?’”

Taking courses online — a method suited to students who already use the Internet every day — was a way to broaden the school’s reach. The model isn’t far from the distance-learning NCSSM has already been doing for more than 10 years through videoconferencing.

These days, instructors, such as psychology teacher Cris Clarke, simply pop into one of the school’s four TV studios to teach a class.

In moments, a blue “On Air” sign outside the studio lights up and red-headed Clarke appears in classrooms as far away as Pasquotank and Hertford counties. Microphones and cameras in those faraway classrooms enable two-way communication.

In Durham, Clarke faces a camera and can see both her students, and herself on TV screens. When it’s time to review for an exam, Clarke can integrate a “Jeopardy”-type game she created on her computer, and broadcasts it to the students, complete with the signature music.

“It’s a lot of fun with the bells and whistles,” said Clarke, one of four NCSSM instructors who teaches strictly via video. “We’re able to grab things on the fly.”

Online and distance courses continue to grow — 30 percent annually in grades K-12 — often because they provide opportunities that may not be available in person, said Susan Patrick, president and CEO of the North American Council for Online Learning.

Providing students additional opportunities for accelerated learning can only help, said Sam Houston, president and CEO of the N.C. Science, Math, and Technology Education Center in Research Triangle Park.

The NCSSM program can accommodate students who are excited about science and math, he said, and while maybe even offering some short-term relief from the broader issue of teacher shortages.

“To extend the power of that school virtually, on the Internet, is a great thing for [NCSSM] to do,” Houston said. “We need to have multiple solutions. Distance learning is certainly one of those.”

samiha.khanna@newsobserver.com
or (919) 956-2468
Auditor praises NCSU

N.C. State University has successfully avoided major problems with misuse of state procurement cards, State Auditor Les Merritt said Wednesday.

The auditor, who recently issued a string of blistering audits of UNC-Greensboro, N.C. A&T State University and Fayetteville State University, had praise for NCSU in a news release.

A review of spending card use found that NCSU's internal controls had prevented most improper charges. The review said two NCSU employees used the cards for personal expenses, but the university had already detected the improper use, collected reimbursements and dismissed one of them.
Medical schools graded based on pharmaceutical relationships

FROM STAFF REPORTS

The UNC-Chapel Hill medical school has the best conflict-of-interest policies of the state's four academic medical centers, according to a new study released today.

The study from the American Medical Student Association gave UNC-CH's hospital a "B", while the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University, the state's other public medical school, received a "D".

Wake Forest received an "F", and Duke's medical school was given an incomplete.

The student association takes aim at the relationships between the pharmaceutical and medical industries and academic health centers by evaluating conflict-of-interest policies at 150 medical schools across the nation.
It assessed schools in 11 potential areas of conflict related to industry marketing, such as whether professors, staff or students may accept gifts, meals and pharmaceutical samples, and whether they may enter into consulting relationships or be paid for speaking engagements.

UNC scored relatively well but should have specific guidelines for students, the report states.

East Carolina's policies are "not likely to significantly reduce the impact of pharmaceutical industry marketing and influence," the report states.

Wake Forest received a failing grade apparently because it did not submit any of the organization's requested policies.

Duke submitted new policies but the organization has not yet been able to evaluate them, according to the report. Thus, Duke's score of "incomplete." The report says Duke will receive a new grade within 60 days.

Of the 150 schools evaluated, just seven - or 5 percent - received "A" grades. Those schools are: The University of Pittsburgh, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, University of California-Davis, University of Pennsylvania, UCLA, University of California-San Francisco, and the Uniformed Services University of Health Services, in Maryland.

The report is available at www.amsascorecard.org.

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