

SISTERS, from front

gone forward, but at a much slower pace. The money allowed us to start helping families immediately," said Because We Are Sisters Board Director and Treasurer Meredith Weston.

Inspiration behind Because We Are Sisters

As Sirles explains, the inspiration for the project and the nonprofit came from her own personal experience working with a young pregnant woman in need who came to work in her office as part of the Virginia Initiative for Employment Not Welfare (VIEW).

"Each day I would ask how she was doing and as I learned more about her situation, I knew I had to do something to help. She had moved into one of Richmond's public housing communities from a shelter and had a two-year-old daughter," Sirles recalled. "I discovered she had no support system in place with regard to family or friends who would be there as she welcomed a new life into the world."

The mother had no means of transportation to the hospital, other than the public transit system, and she had no one to watch her two-year-old while she gave birth.

"I just couldn't imagine being in her situation. No one should have to be in that situation," said Because We Are Sisters Board Director and Secretary Barbara Jackson. "My heart goes out to anyone who doesn't have that support."

Ultimately Sirles and her husband decided to convert their children's playroom into short-term housing for the young woman, her two-year-old daughter and baby on the way so she would have assistance getting to and from the hospital, care for her daughter during labor, and postpartum support. Recovery for the young woman was intense as complications from the pregnancy arose.

"With two small children of our own and fulltime jobs, we quickly learned how important support from our friends, family, and community would

be during this process," Sirles said.

Jackson and Weston were two of the pillars in Sirles's support system as she assisted the young mother.

The trials and strains of caring and providing for another family paid off for Sirles, though, when she had the privilege of helping to welcome a baby boy into the world.

"In that moment I knew that I was the one who was most transformed and blessed by the experience. My definition of need was forever altered and I became committed to finding ways to support other families who may face such a milestone moment in their lives without a mother, aunt, sister, or grandmother to call upon for support, to help celebrate, and to care."

"It was a life-changing experience," Jackson said.

"It was eye-opening," Weston added.

That was two years ago. Today Sirles's inspiration has grown into the Because We Are Sisters organization with five board of directors members launching its efforts. Aside Sirles, Jackson, and Weston, there is also Merna Wilson and Barbara Peterson on the board of directors. The Sisters team also includes an advisory board, family mentoring team leaders, and front line community project members, all of whom are volunteers sharing a passion for helping children and families thrive, not just survive.

"If you're completely focused on survival, you don't have the chance to celebrate," Sirles said.



Theresa Sirles



Barbara Jackson



Meredith Weston



Merna Wilson



Barbara Peterson

Partnerships

While anxiously drumming up support during the voting process of Pepsi's Refresh Everything Challenge, Sirles also began contacting potential community partners who could help make a vision a reality. Only one person responded — Johanna Schuchert, director of Prevent Child Abuse Virginia and an advocate for children and families.

Healthy Families Virginia is an initiative coordinated by Prevent Child Abuse America that serves some of the Commonwealth's most overburdened new parents and their children. According to Sirles, voluntary participation in Healthy Families includes the development of long-term relationships with families (up to five years) during which time they are provided with information and guidance about parenting, and connected with services and resources to help address other challenges such as housing, education, employment, financial health, and mental health. Families set goals and are assisted in achieving them.

The directors of several Healthy Families sites in the Greater Richmond and Middle Peninsula areas will screen and identify families for Because We Are Sisters to help by providing a variety of items necessary for welcoming a new baby.

One of the key components of the Fresh Start for Baby project (possible through the Pepsi grant) is not only the items needed to provide for a new baby, but also a group baby shower that will allow the seven selected families to come together and celebrate. The budget for this event (which is still in the planning stages) is small, therefore Because We Are Sisters board members are hoping to

recruit local community partners willing to donate space, time, food, decorations, and favors.

"Celebration is often viewed as a luxury that families in need cannot afford, but our memories of special times are often what carry us through and remind us that this too shall pass," Sirles said.

"Part of this initiative and our family mentoring approach is to help families in need recognize the positive and find joy in the midst of challenges," she added. "Our hope is to secure additional funding that will allow us to reunite with the fresh start families and help celebrate the baby's first birthday as well."

Because We Are Sisters is also working with Virginia Mentoring Partnership to continue the development of their Fresh Start Family Mentoring Team initiative, which will provide additional opportunities for volunteers in the community to become personally involved in helping families in need. One long-term goal is to eventually train families who receive mentoring to become mentors themselves.

The young mother and children Sirles and her support system helped are now living on their own, but Sirles continues to be a part of their lives and she considers it a gift, privilege and blessing.

"We have to become personally invested in one another to make a real difference. That doesn't mean we have to open the doors of our home to every family we meet that needs support, but we do have to open our minds and our hearts," she said.

"We all have something to share — a skill, advice, a listening ear — and those gifts are invaluable."

If you would like to contribute to the cause of Because We Are Sisters, or would like more information on volunteering, please contact Theresa Sirles at 804-310-0516 or email tsirles@becausewesisters.com. You may also contact Meredith Weston at 804-694-6950, email her at meraweston@live.com, or visit the organization's website at www.becausewesisters.com

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Around the Tidewater

By Tom Cunningham

KING WILLIAM- The softball team beat Northumberland 4-2. While the girls track team beat Middlesex and Northumberland. The boys came in third in the event. The baseball and softball teams will host Essex on the

13th while the Soccer team will host W&L on the 14th.

WEST POINT- The soccer team beat Rappahannock 4-0 while the baseball and softball teams lost to Lancaster. Baseball and softball will travel to New Kent on the 12th and host Middlesex on the 13th.

KING & QUEEN- lost to Colonial Beach 15-4 in baseball. The Tigers won't play again until the 15th when they host Charles City

NEW KENT- lost to Lafayette 4-3 in baseball. They will host West Point on the 12th and travel to Jamestown on the 13th. The soccer team will travel to York on the 13th.

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