

A CARING COMMUNITY

BUILDING BRIDGES

Somerset County's EmPoWER Family Success Center helps strengthen individuals, families and the community



Volunteers help children decorate pumpkins Oct. 31 during the Family Success Center's Halloween Spooktacular, a free family event held on Division Street in Somerville that drew more than 500 attendees. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMPOWER FAMILY SUCCESS CENTER

By Susan Bloom

Special to the Courier News

Kathleen Hicks had high hopes for starting anew when she moved from Florida to New Jersey this year, but her arrival was soon fraught with setbacks.

Legally responsible for raising her daughter's children, the 53-year-old grandmother's duties caring for the four young ones, ages 5 months to 7 years, rendered her unable to work full time. The unfurnished apartment she found for them in New Brunswick required immediate cash outlays.

Requests for financial support from social services were denied and her case was dismissed.

"I was broke by the time we moved in," Hicks said. "It was one week before the kids had to start school and we had no food in the fridge, no school supplies and no source of income. I had no idea what we were going to do next," she said. "We needed a miracle."

Hicks ended up contacting the EmPoWER Family Success Center in Somerville, hoping simply to find a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren so that she could vent about her plight with others in the same situation. What she



From left, Casey Randazzo, Tim Wolf and Tara Hesse at the 6th annual Family Success Center Conference in June. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMPOWER FAMILY SUCCESS CENTER

See BRIDGES, Page A2

BRIDGES

Continued from Page A1

got, however, was so much more.

"Pastor Tim answered the phone and asked me to share my whole story, making a list of everything I needed. I was crying, but he kept saying, 'don't worry about anything—I know people,'" she recalled. "Two days later he came back in a green minivan and brought boxes and boxes of new clothes, school uniforms, coats, toys and food collected through members of his local church, as well as diapers and homemade blankets and bedspreads. I was screaming with joy and tears," she said. "It was like a red carpet welcome to New Jersey that truly got us going."

Critical connections

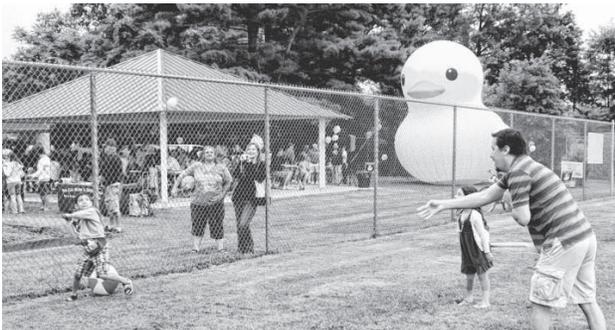
Bridging people and making critical connections are what the Family Success Center is all about.

"One of our main goals is to connect individuals and families with resources they may not even know are available," said Tim Wolf, 54, pastor of New Horizon Christian Fellowship in Hillsborough and director of The EmPoWER Family Success Center in Somerville. "There are so many good county and state organizations and nonprofits out there that people aren't even aware of, but we're very well connected and can help pull the network together when people come to us in need of anything."

As Somerset was one of only four counties in New Jersey that didn't have its own Family Success Center as of early 2012, Brenda Esler, executive director of parent organization EmPoWER, said she knew the county was long overdue for this dedicated brand of support.

"At EmPoWER Somerset — an acronym for Encouraging Prevention With Education and Resources — we strengthen families and neighborhoods by assisting people in making positive lifestyle choices and promoting healthy, drug-free communities through education, collaboration and linkages to resources," she explained of the nearly 40-year-old organization and its new outreach program, which is now one of more than 40 Family Success Centers located throughout the state.

After successfully securing a \$200,000-plus grant from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families in the fall of 2011, EmPoWER Somerset leased a 1,200-square-foot suite on the second floor of 34 W.



A family at play at the Family Success Center's After Hours Pool Party at Frelinghuysen Park in Raritan this past summer. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMPOWER FAMILY SUCCESS CENTER



EmPoWER Family Success Center sign at 34 W. Main St. in Somerville. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMPOWER FAMILY SUCCESS CENTER

Main St. in Somerville and officially opened its new EmPoWER Family Success Center in March 2012.

Less than two years later, "we're here to link people to almost anything they need and provide personal and family success," said Family Success Center Coordinator of Community Partnerships Casey Randazzo, stressing the word "anything."

Armed with an in-depth knowledge of local resources related to child care, housing assistance, job search support, legal, mental health, substance abuse, immigration services, counseling and so much more, "if we can't help people here, we'll link them to someone who can," Randazzo said. This has included everything from hiring a teacher this summer to tutor five Somerville High School students who couldn't afford an SAT prep course, to helping an area resident secure a new stroller for just \$5.

"People need help and don't always realize it, or sometimes they're too embarrassed to ask for it, so we're about making people feel welcome. There's no stigma and it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from — we're open to everyone," said Tara Hesse, a Family Success specialist with training in interpersonal skills who speaks English and Spanish. In addition to providing critical resources, she noted, "we also offer instruction in our space, such as nutrition classes, English as a Second Language classes, or workshops on fun ways to save money, such as through couponing." Outside groups can use either of the Family Success Center's two conference rooms for free.

Everyone also is invited to participate in the

free family events, which include movie nights, events at local parks and community parties, such as the first-ever Halloween Spooktacular, which the Family Success Center hosted on Division Street on Oct. 31.

"Every family deserves free fun provided to them by the town," Randazzo said of the after-school Halloween celebration, which drew more than 500 attendees.

The gift that keeps on giving

Confident that "everyone could benefit from the Family Success Center if they just know we're here," said Randazzo, the team is working diligently to promote awareness of its presence throughout the entire county, expand its growing legion of loyal volunteers, and raise additional money through initiatives like Dine to Donate events.

"I'd love to see us funded beyond the grant so that we can do more to help the community, be more sustainable, and encourage increased collaboration with other area businesses and organizations," Wolf said. "We hope to see this initiative take on a life of its own."

"People like to help and will give what they can from the bottom of their hearts if they just know what others' needs are," Hesse said. "We want to spread the word that we're here to help and that everyone is welcome to call us, see us and participate in our family events."

Randazzo agreed. "We live in a great area where there are so many people who want to give back to their community."

"Like many people, we

RESOURCES

For more information on the EmPoWER Family Success Center, at 34 W. Main St., Suite 201 in Somerville, call 908-722-4400 or visit www.empowersomerset.com, www.empowerfsc.com or www.facebook.com/EmpowerFsc. All are invited to the next free family event, Christmas Movie Night, at the Family Success Center from 6 to 8 p.m. Dec. 12; call 908-722-4400 or email fsc@empowersomerset.com to register.

Other Central Jersey Family Success Centers include:

In Hunterdon County: **Hunterdon County Family Success Center**, 3 E. Main St., Flemington, NJ 08822. 908-237-0465; www.hcfscc.com.

In Middlesex County: **New Brunswick Family Success Center at the Puerto Rican Action Board**, 90 Jersey Ave., New Brunswick, NJ 08903. 732-828-4510; prab.org/programs-services/family-success-center.

In Union County: **Plainfield Center for Stronger Families Family Success Center**, 504 Madison Ave., Plainfield, NJ 07060. 908-731-4200, ext. 5235; www.plainfieldnj12.org/Parents/FamilySuccessCenter.php. **Jefferson Park Ministries Family Success Center**, 213 Jefferson Ave., Elizabeth, NJ 07201. 908-469-9508; www.jeffersonparkministries.org/#service/vstc1=family-center.

have pride in our family, but not always all the resources," Hicks said. "The Family Success Center is a blessing and was truly a lifeline for me and my family."

"We're not providing therapy, more like life coaching," Wolf said of the EmPoWER Family Success Center's charter and his own passion to serve others. "We just want to give people someone to stand alongside them and offer them hope, because society is pretty hopeless sometimes."

