

SOUTH STRAND NEWS



Denise Chatman, founder of Optimism Preventive Services, right, stands with students she works with in front of the organization's new home at 1503 Winyah St. in Georgetown. From left are Georgetown High School students Maya Morris, Miguel Holmes and Xavier Thompson, Jerica Knox, a junior at the University of South Carolina, and Georgetown High student Jordan German.

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Denise Chatman has been working with local youth for about 20 years, first starting with Unity Community Youth Group in 1996, then starting Optimism Preventive Services Inc. in 2010.

Her second group, which is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, has now moved from 622B Washington St. to partner with the Georgetown County Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission at its new home on Winyah Street in Georgetown. The organization has grown from an after-school program serving four children to now providing, in addition to an after-school program, summer enrichment, mentoring and healthy relations programs.

“We are really excited about this move,” Chatman said. “We are changing both our after-school program, which is now called OPS After-school Academy, as well as expanding our prevention portion.”

OPS helps local high school students become part of a charter chapter of a national organization called Students Against Violence Everywhere, also known as SAVE. Students in that group meet with students from around the country for a youth summit in March. The group also organizes a Unity Day and a Bully Free Walk locally, among other projects. Students who are involved earn community service hours and can earn an honor cord to wear during his or her graduation.

Currently, OPS is gearing up for its next event on Feb. 6, a day of workshops about teen dating and violence. Held just before Valentine’s Day, the event will feature workshops for teens and their parents, Chatman said.

“February is Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month, so we try to educate teens about dating risks,” Chatman said.

Xavier Thompson, a senior at Georgetown High School and president of the local SAVE chapter, said it is important for teens to hear advice from other teens. He said the workshop event about teen dating violence is important.

“Most teens are really naïve about dating, so there are a lot of things they need to watch out for,” Thompson said. “They need to learn how to have a good time without getting in trouble or getting into the wrong things.”

Jordan German, a junior at Georgetown High, has served on the youth council for the national SAVE group for two years. She said she thinks that all teens in the community should be involved with OPS and SAVE.

She agreed that the upcoming workshops will help teens be more aware while dating.

“One example is being careful what you put on the Internet through social media,” German said. “Also, when teens are texting, they need to be careful what they are texting because that can end up on the Internet.”

Maya Morris, also a junior at Georgetown High, will serve on the national SAVE youth council this year. She said the group provides a good example for people her age. “It sounds like a fun experience. I am ready to go,” she said.

Thompson’s mother, Leona Bonds, who was a former member of Unity Community Youth Group, said she is proud of her son and the other teens involved in SAVE.

“I think these kids really have the ability to impact Georgetown in a really positive way,” Bonds said.

Jerica Knox, a junior at the University of South Carolina who volunteers with OPS, said working with the program is helping her experience what she is learning as a psychology major.

“I’m really glad to be a part of such a great organization and I can’t wait to see what else is in store for the next year,” Knox said.

Chatman urges anyone who would like to get involved with OPS or SAVE to visit the new location at 1503 Winyah St., at the intersection of Winyah and Hazard streets, call the office at 843-527-3148, or visit the group’s website at www.optimism2010.org.

The SAVE group meets every Monday at 6:15 p.m. and the OPS After-school Academy will start back up in February, Chatman said.