

# FAMILY TIES



CHES grads Amanda Lightsey and Dre Vaden work to make families strong at Tuscaloosa's One Place.

For more than 20 years, Tuscaloosa's One Place (TOP) has worked to improve quality of life in West Alabama. The agency strives to be the "one place" families can come for services that empower them to achieve their full potential. TOP meets the needs of their clients through after-school programs, healthy relationship education, parenting and fatherhood programs, career development, GED classes, teen intervention and community outreach.

Amanda Lightsey, executive director of TOP and a CHES graduate, explains what drives the agency and the way they work, "We believe in the power of families and, that's where change happens. It's our job to help our families to have the resources they need to be safe, healthy and strong," adding, "Strong families build strong communities."

Throughout the agency's history, it has enjoyed a strong connection with the department of human development and family studies in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "TOP, CHES interns and CHES graduates at all levels, are working together to support families in Tuscaloosa. TOP has had a long, close and mutually beneficial relationship with CHES and HDFS involving students, faculty and alumni," says Dr. Robert Laird, chair of the department.

It is no wonder these two entities have close ties. They are aligned by a common mission, to improve the lives of individuals and families using evidence-based practice and a strengths-based perspective. Lightsey says, "Our relationship goes back to the beginning of TOP. The field of human development aligns so much with what we do. Human development is strength-based and so is our work. It's holistic with an emphasis on family and interpersonal dynamics."

Over a friendly lunch in 2000, a cooperative arrangement between the newly established family resource center and HDFS was created by Dr. Mary Liz Curtner-Smith and the center's founding director, Teresa Costanzo. Curtner-Smith's Parent and Family Development class, HD382, had a service-learning requirement and the center's after school program needed mentors. So, each semester for many years, over 100 CHES students served as positive role models for elementary and middle school children during two hours of academic and social enrichment.

HDFS interns soon found a place for experiential learning at TOP. "In many ways, TOP is a real-world example of what

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place



Intern, Raine Cook, will take what she learned from TOP to law school and a practice in family law.

TOP's after school program includes enrichment opportunities like this music demonstration.

Fun times at TOP's annual Fathers in the Park community event.

Members of the TOP team together during Child Abuse Prevention Month activities including CHES grads, Amanda Lightsey Torre McDonald, Alisha Dunning, Tiffiney Jenkins and Vadonna Williams.

HDFS teaches students in the classroom where they learn about developmental principles that impact child development, healthy family functioning and positive relationships," says HDFS academic advisor and internship coordinator, Kelly Schaefer. She learned on a personal level how valuable the TOP internship could be when she completed her internship there in 2013.

One of the biggest benefits for CHES students interning at TOP is the breadth of programs there. Students are usually assigned to one of the programs as their primary responsibility, and they develop close relationships with the employees and clients in that program. But the agency requires them to shadow all of the programs, which helps students discern and clarify what they want to do after graduation.

The list of family-centered services at TOP that provide meaningful experiential learning opportunities for CHES students is long. In addition to after school programs, the agency offers a Summer Academy in June where children spend four hours in a safe, structured environment that is designed to promote academic retention and improvement, reduce behavioral problems and improve self-esteem. The agency is also there for new parents offering two initiatives, Baby Box and Cribs for Kids, to promote safe sleeping in infants and reduce SIDS/SUID.

For kids who may be involved in the juvenile court system, the agency provides civil legal assistance, family-centered intervention services and mentoring. Lightsey says, "A lot of families don't know what to do when they are in the court system. They are overwhelmed. Being able to be a support system for those families is crucial." As with every program under their umbrella, TOP serves more than the individual. Lightsey explains why it is so important to involve the entire family, "Limited change would happen if we worked just with them [the individual client] but if we work with them and their families, we are increasing their opportunities for success because we are changing some of the dynamics inside the family."

The agency coordinates community outreach projects like an annual Fathers in the Park which celebrates fathers and the parent-child relationship, and Tinsel Trail which brings the entire community together over the holidays. "We are also feeding Tuscaloosa families with weekly mobile food pantries. We have secured funds to help others we serve who have been affected by COVID and have lost their jobs by helping them make mortgage payments and meet other basic needs. Workforce development, always an important TOP service, has taken on increased importance with the need to link people back to employment after COVID-related job loss," says Lightsey.

As you can see, there is much to do at Tuscaloosa's One Place. Every year, they serve about 8,500 people or 2,500 families with 36 full-time employees. Volunteers and interns play an important role at the agency. In just the last five years, HDFS has placed 29 students at TOP. Each intern works at least 300 hours during the semester, so this represents over 8,700 hours of service to the community.

The most important things executive director Lightsey tells interns when they start at TOP are "Whatever they put into their experience, they will get out of their experience. And I advise them not to limit themselves to working with only one population. So often we hear interns say, 'I don't want to work with children, I want to work just with adults.' Then it turns out they are fabulous working with children. I always tell them that you have an opportunity here to work with young children, adolescents and adults and doing that will help you figure out what you want to do."

Raine Cook graduated in May 2020 and during her last semester at UA enjoyed an internship at TOP. She appreciates what the agency taught her about family dynamics, child development and the resources available to children and families. All will help her when she finishes law school at The University of Alabama and follows her plan to practice family law.

Aubriana Minimi who completed her internship in August 2020, says, "I think the most important thing I learned during this internship was the value of being there for others during their time of need. It takes a lot for someone to come in and ask for help. This internship has exposed me to real situations that people are going through and reminded me that at any time I could be that person too, if life happens to throw tough circumstances at me. I think knowing this will enable me to treat others with dignity, even when they possibly don't feel dignified." She plans to work in social services and continue learning Spanish, so she can help a population that is often underserved due to language barriers.

While many interns have come and gone over the years at TOP, some like Dre Vaden find a home there. She finished her internship early to start work there and received her first paycheck before graduation.

Vaden complimented TOP for doing a great job of allowing student workers to gain experience in each program that they offer. Her big takeaway from the internship was this, "I learned that I can help people and provide them with resources and the tools they need to grow and be successful."

Today, she is making a difference in lives by working as a case manager in TOP's Youth Workforce Training Initiative. "The thing I like most about my job is helping the youth and being able to be a mentor for them." She is the go-to person when clients need anything from coordinating transportation to teaching financial literacy and soft skills that prepare them to enter the work place.

At last count, the agency employs 10 CHES graduates including its leader, Amanda Lightsey, who first learned of TOP while taking Dr. Curtner-Smith's HD382 class. "Two years later," Lightsey says, "when it was time for me to do an internship, I went to Dr. Curtner-Smith and said, 'Where do you think I should go?' And she said, 'you should go to Tuscaloosa's One Place.'" Lightsey did, and again, found she loved the agency and the people who worked with her.

Lightsey went on to get a master's in marriage and family therapy at CHES. She did one-on-one and crisis counseling but knew that wasn't what she wanted to do long term. Remembering how much she enjoyed Tuscaloosa's One Place, Lightsey contacted the agency's director inquiring about job openings. She began a part-time position at TOP teaching healthy marriage classes in the evening. Four months later, she accepted a full-time position as the intake and volunteer coordinator which included responsibility for over 2,000 volunteers. A year later, she was promoted to a supervisory position. Next, she took on fundraising for the agency and developed Tinsel Trail. After the founding executive director retired, Lightsey was promoted and has been leading the organization where she first started as a volunteer.

In her 11 years at the agency, Lightsey has been a committed and caring leader who hopes her legacy is that people look at Tuscaloosa's One Place and know how much they care about the community. She says, "I want us to be a generous agency. I want us to be an agency that goes the extra mile for people. I want families to feel good when they walk out of our doors and feel like people care about them and are on their side."

By providing resources that promote self-sufficiency, strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect, Lightsey and the agency she runs have had a lasting impact on the local community. TOP had served 35,000 families and 110,000 individuals in West Alabama by its 20th anniversary in 2019.

At the College of Human Environmental Sciences, we are proud to have played a part in TOP's success story through the efforts of CHES students, faculty and alumni. We look forward to a long and meaningful relationship with Tuscaloosa's One Place that strengthens our HDFS programs, student growth and, most importantly, West Alabama families for years to come.