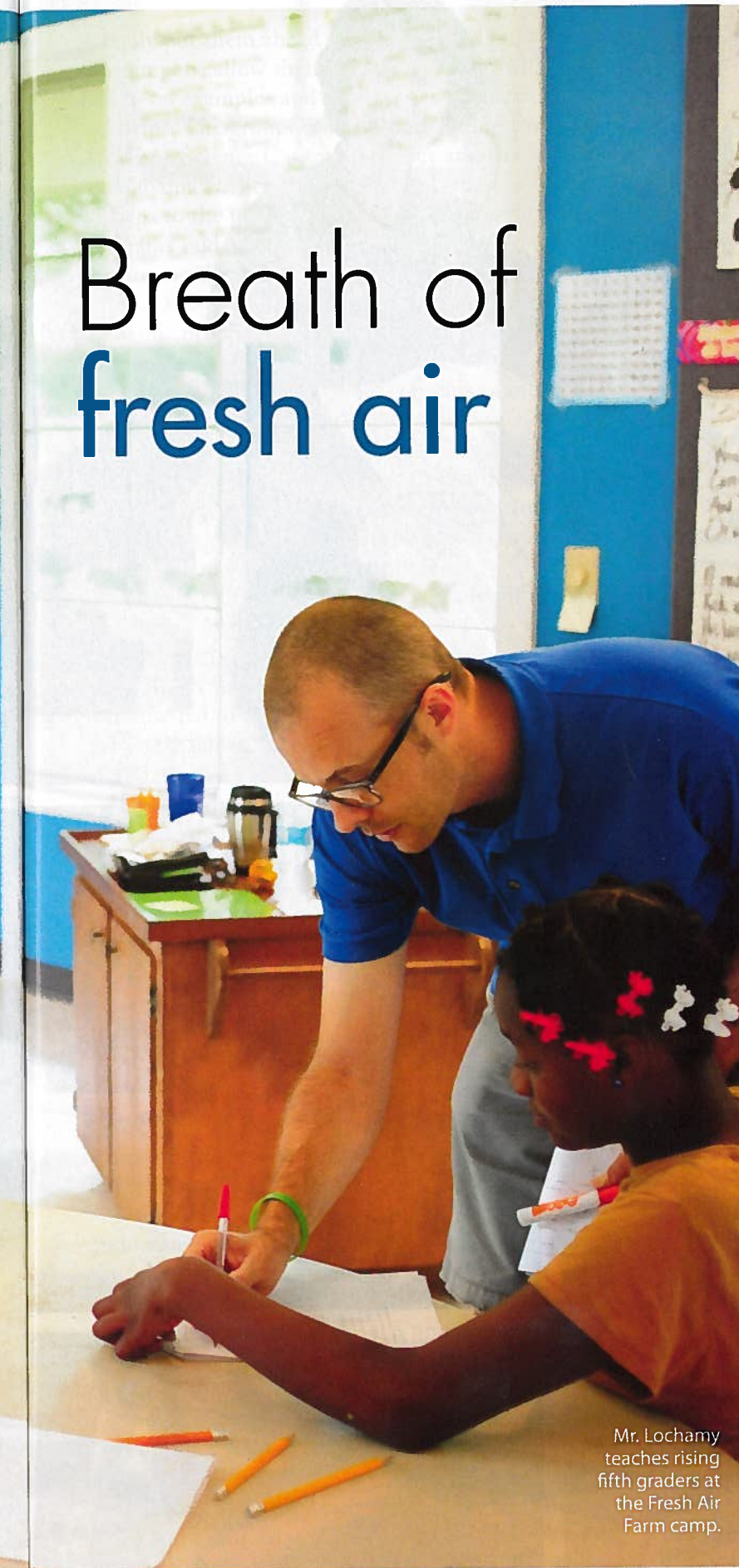




Breath of fresh air



Camp meets all of students' needs in the summer

WRITTEN BY **LAUREN HEARTSILL DOWDLE**

PHOTOS BY **JON GOERING**

While some children feverishly count down the days until summer break, others know the last day of school can mean an end to learning and guaranteed meals for a few months.

Recognizing this need, the Independent Presbyterian Church in Birmingham started a six-week camp for local students. When it first opened on Park Avenue in 1923, the summer program and its volunteers provided medical treatment, food and other necessities to the poverty-stricken children. And through this process, the Hoover camp earned its name: the Children's Fresh Air Farm.

"The children literally got out of polluted neighborhoods and into the fresh air," said Gini Williams, CFAF director.

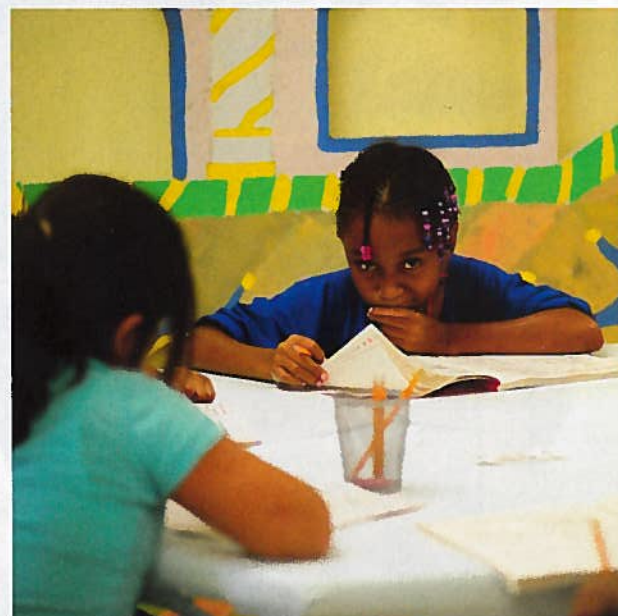
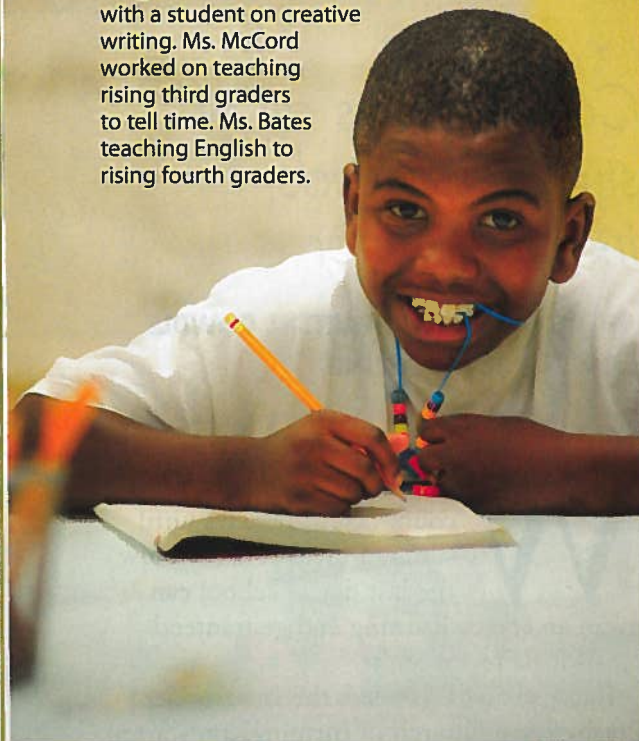
As the camp grew and continued to help meet the physical needs of local second through fifth grade students, the volunteers decided they wanted the program to evolve and support the children's educational growth, as well. So in 2010, the camp expanded its mission to include reading, writing and math classes, in addition to daily meals.

"When they're out of the classroom, they can lose some of the skills they learned during the school year," Williams said. "And for underprivileged kids who don't have opportunities during the summer, they can lose three months of grade-level learning."

To keep this from happening — and

Mr. Lochamy teaches rising fifth graders at the Fresh Air Farm camp.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The camp includes reading, writing and math classes, in addition to daily meals. Gini Williams, Fresh Air Farm director, gets a hug. Some rising third graders work to complete their assignments. Mr. Owens works with a student on creative writing. Ms. McCord worked on teaching rising third graders to tell time. Ms. Bates teaching English to rising fourth graders.



actually put them ahead — the teachers study with the campers, allow them to practice their skills with hands-on examples and take them on educational fieldtrips. The group visits sites, including the McWane Science Center, museums and the University of Alabama at Birmingham, every Friday.

Trips to the university are especially important, Williams said, because the children should realize continuing their education is an option.

“The kids need to be positively engaged in the academic process,” she said. “I want them to be lifelong learners — both career- and college-focused.”

During the rest of the week, musicians and groups such as the Red Cross and Red Mountain Theatre Company come to the camp to share their talents, whether through music lessons, swimming instruction or learning about acting and drama. The campers are also able to garden, create arts and crafts, learn from the Bible and enjoy the great outdoors.

“We’re feeding them physically, academically and spiritually,” Williams said.

This past July, the camp graduated 66 students, all from Hayes Elementary School. Most of the children were invited to the camp after their teachers noticed they were falling behind and recommended they attend.

“The children who come to the camp are months ahead of where they would have been if they hadn’t come,” Williams said. “It’s really exciting to know you’ve prepared them for success in the upcoming school year.”

It’s clear many of these children have not had the easiest lives thus far, so seeing their transformations from the time they start to when they leave the camp is a joy and added bonus for the volunteers, Williams said.

“The kids know they are loved here,” she said. “We’re able to send them back to school with supplies, a new uniform, shoes and a summer experience they’ll never forget.”

Financially supported by donations and an endowment, the CFAF group continues to experience the vast reach of its ministry after holding the camp for 90 years.

“I see past campers all of the time. They stop by just to say ‘Hi’ and how much the camp helped them,” Williams said. “It’s possible to make a lasting difference in children’s lives.”

“For me, this is a mission,” she added. “It’s about the relationships I’ve made with the children and their families and the opportunity to impact their lives.”

To learn more about the Children’s Fresh Air Farm or how to get involved, visit Ipc-usa.org/cfaf. ■



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