



King Street Center

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY

INSIDE BURLINGTON'S KING STREET CENTER ON A SUNNY, LATE-SPRING AFTER-NOON, four adolescent boys meticulously chop vegetables for a Vietnamese salad. Across the hall, a dozen fourth and fifth graders, some wearing colorful hijabs, others in jeans and skateboard shoes, take turns choosing the next hour's activity. Down the hall, kindergartners and first graders finish snacks and settle down to a Responsive Classroom-style meeting. Next door, the preschoolers—the only kids who've been in the building the entire day—are fresh from their afternoon naps and ready to get back to the sandbox and Legos. And in the basement, 10 middle and high schoolers relax on soft, worn couches and discuss the latest celebrity gossip.



Opposite: King Street Center's second place Rotary-Hoopapalooza Team. Top row, from left: Preschool friends, Afterschool Excellence reading buddies, and Gardens-for-Learning Kids Café snack presentation. Center: Preschool artist; Junior & Senior Buddy pair. Above: Vermont Marathon relay team.

“There’s a sense of family here,” says Director Vicky Smith, and in many ways it does feel like a home—albeit that of an admittedly large clan, since on an average day there might be 120 kids ranging in age from 3 to 19 in the building. Preschoolers are fed breakfast and lunch family style and taught proper table manners. Older kids’ street talk and attitudes are monitored and gently corrected by staff. But at the same time, the atmosphere is that of a school. The elementary-age kids are divided into two-grade pairings (K–1, 2–3, 4–5), and each group has its own classroom

space with desks and chairs. Everyone follows Responsive Classroom practices. There’s a kitchen, a computer lab, and space for arts and crafts.

Academics, Athletics, and Attitude

Twenty full- and part-time staff members work with the kids, aided by some 150 volunteers. “We believe in choice and in fostering what it means to make a choice and stick with it,” says Smith, explaining that every child is responsible for selecting an appropriate afternoon activity.

King Street’s programming focuses on “the



Top: Executive Director Vicky Smith surrounded by students from Afterschool Excellence Program. Above: Preschool teacher Henry brings kids to Burlington Waterfront for a spring walk. Opposite: Afterschool Excellence reader. Two-year Each One Reach One pair celebrate at popsicle party.

three As”: academics, athletics, and attitude. The focus on academics in the after-school program came about as staff began to notice a need for help with homework “bubbling to the top.”

“The kids want to do their work—they’re hardworking and motivated,” Smith says. But staff heard reports that many kids were routinely skipping homework. At school, students called them “dumb,” a message that was often internalized. In fact, for a large percentage of King Street participants, the problem is that English is not their native language. Now homework time is a popular offering, and every child who needs help has access to one-on-one time with a volunteer tutor.

The building has a gym with basketball hoops and a climbing wall, as well as an outdoor playground, so everyone has the option of daily exercise. The nationally recognized tennis program for at-risk youth, Kids on the Ball, originated at King Street and is now reaching kids citywide.



Life Lessons

Walking through the hallways, Smith greets every child by name. In a tone that's equal parts mother and principal, she models the attitude piece. "It's okay to say, 'Excuse me, can I pass?'" she says to a girl squeezing through a doorway conversation, and later, "I like the words 'excuse me' and 'thank you'" to another child, reinforcing his good manners. In the kitchen, she shows 12-year-old Adballa how to safely slice a daikon radish. "Mother in the kitchen!" Smith says, laughing.

Food and nutrition are essential components of the King Street day. Preschoolers bake bread, and they're taught the importance of healthy foods. Midday meals include Pad Thai and black bean corncakes cooked on-site. Kids' Café, the afternoon cooking activity, is a popular twice-a-week offering. Recipes using seasonal ingredients are culled from *EatingWell* and frequently reflect the many ethnicities represented at the center; participants are involved in

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all aspects of planning, preparation, and cleanup. In addition, a monthly family meal brings together not only King Street families but also neighborhood residents.

Kids' Activities and Beyond

King Street Center's programs include off-site adventures too. On Fridays, the preschoolers travel to Shelburne Farms on a red bus. On snowy days, when "Clifford" can't make it, the chickens (and farmer) come to King Street instead. Other field trips include the Flynn Theater, ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center, The Edge, and Shelburne Museum. In the winter, teens take part in Burton's Chill Program, where they learn to snowboard. And every spring, there's at least one King Street relay team in the Vermont City Marathon.

Teen Futures, for ages 11 to 18, offers a job club, a college club that exposes teens to post-high-school opportunities, and a mindfulness training program. It grew organically as staff saw a need for activities for kids beyond the elementary school years, particularly in response to the continued commitment of one boy, Josh Bennett, who came to King Street in second grade. Bennett graduated from UVM this spring, the first person in his family to attend college. Smith explains that Bennett had to work hard for that milestone and might have gone down a different path. "I asked him how he did it," she says, "how he got where he is, and he looked surprised. 'It was King Street!' he said, astonished that I hadn't known that."

Because the center serves a growing population of refugee families, adult family members are welcomed too. Through partnerships with Vermont Adult Learning and Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, free classes are available for those who need to improve their English or want better computer or social skills.

King Street doesn't stop humming when school closes. Indeed, the majority of the after-school program participants return for an eight-week program of traditional camp fun with an academic twist. The BOOST program, a collaborative effort with the Burlington School District, reinforces reading and math skills so there's no need to play catch-up in the fall. For teens, there's the chance to gain valuable work experience and earn money at the familiar Kids' Lemonade Stand on Church Street.

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Looking Ahead

Staff longevity—several, including Smith, have been there 15 years or more—adds to the sense of continuity and family. “We like to think of ourselves as the locavore version of a community center,” says Development Director Susannah Kerest. She describes the roles of the many volunteers: reading to preschoolers, playing basketball with older kids, and tutoring. A group from Northfield Savings Bank recently visited to “gussy up” the facility.

Like any large family, however, King Street Center needs more space. It’s becoming increasingly challenging for dedicated staff members to meet the needs of those they serve in the current facility. There’s no parking to speak of, creating a hazard at pickup time, and the playground, though equipped with a modern play structure, is cramped. The basement is difficult to heat, resulting in chilled teens during the winter. An improved technology center with updated software and more hardware would offer participants in the after-school program—many of whom don’t have computers at home—a chance to keep up with their classmates. Smith hopes that funds for significant renovations to the current facility will be raised through a capital campaign slated for 2012.

King Street was founded in 1971 by six mothers who were concerned about their kids hanging out on the street with nothing to do. Forty years later, with an operating budget of one million dollars, it plays an essential role in the lives of many Burlington families. Over the course of an average year, children from some 500 Burlington-area families take part in its programs.

“We do sweat the small things,” says Smith. She notes that there are many who, like Bennett, started coming in early elementary school and continued throughout high school, some even returning as volunteers. “It’s quite magical here.”

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