

For Immediate Release

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Media Release

Major Milestone for Mickey's House and Project H.O.M.E.

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North Charleston, SC - There's a saying that goes "Home is where the heart is." When you take into account the amount of care, effort, passion, and involvement from so many people in the area, you could say Mickey's House is where the Lowcountry's heart is.

An important step in the creation of Mickey's House, a place for homeless students at R.B. Stall High School to call home, took place on May 1, 2017. Community members and Charleston County School District officials gathered for a groundbreaking ceremony to highlight the process that has united prominent business leaders and local organizations for the past 18 months. This project has touched so many who are involved, some on a very personal level.

"When I was a child, I was unable to live with my mother for six months, due to a severe illness she faced," explained City of North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey. "I still remember the difficulty I faced in coping with the separation. I only endured the disconnection for a short time, so I cannot imagine the emotional hardships these kids face. Mickey's House gives these children a sense of certainty and a place to truly call home. The resources they will receive through Mickey's House is invaluable in their development into young adults."

The journey began during the 2015-2016 school year, when former Stall principal, Kim Wilson (now CCSD's Executive Director of Secondary Learning), received an email from one of his teachers, Allison Gable. The communication included a link to an article about a school district in Missouri that purchased a house for some of its homeless students.

"The article jumped out at me," Wilson said. "During my tenure at Stall, we had several juniors and seniors who became homeless. For the most part, the students survived by couch surfing. This seemed like a viable option. We had to do it for our kids."

The timing was perfect. Wilson was preparing to attend the Diversity Leaders Initiative (DLI), a conference put on by the Riley Institute at Furman University, and the conference was asking groups that were attending to come up with a project that would benefit the community in which they serve.

Wilson worked with several other CCSD leaders and law enforcement personnel over the next few months to come up with a plan to create a home for students without a home at Stall. Then, in April 2016, CCSD representatives traveled to the DLI conference and presented their plan. The idea, titled Project H.O.M.E. (Help Others Mirror Excellence), was met with enthusiasm and excitement from both the attendees and organizers of the event.

"It was an ambitious project for sure," Don Gordon, Executive Director of the Riley Institute and professor of Political Science at Furman, thought. "But from the beginning, I could tell Kim Wilson and his team had a solid plan in place; a plan to raise the funds for the house, and a plan to run the house. The group's vision was impressive and grand, but was supported with a solid foundation. We at the Riley Institute knew this [project] would come to pass."

Based on the positive feedback they received at Furman, the CCSD team reached out to members of the community to help create a Board of Directors for Project H.O.M.E. Lt. Kathi Love from North Charleston Police Department and Lt. Rita Zelinsky from the Charleston County Sheriff's Office signed on, and Angela Henderson was named the Chair of the Board and a 501(c)(3) was created.

"I was on board immediately," exclaimed Henderson. "As not only a school volunteer and community leader, I saw this as a means to actually participate in the transformation of young lives. Serving as the board chairperson, I love bringing people together to do significantly great things that will add value to lives of others. I am amazed at how quickly the community has rallied together to see this mission achieve its purpose. Because of the great demand for such a place as Project H.O.M.E., I only wished we thought of it sooner. However, everything has its time and place."

"This is one of the most exciting projects I have worked on in my 27 years working with Charleston County Schools," Love said. "As a police officer, I see many sad cases involving school-age children. So we are always looking for solutions. Now there is a project that will serve children in a positive way to make them more productive citizens under unfortunate circumstances. The board and sponsors have put their hearts where they need to be."

The fundraising task started in June 2016. The goal was to collect enough money to be able to make a down payment on a house and operate the facility. However, the response from the community was so overwhelming, the goal was accomplished in less than a year, and with way more financial support than was ever expected.

Charleston Auto Auction reached out to Wilson, and invited him to attend one of their events in Moncks Corner. So, Wilson made the trip out there on a Friday evening. When he arrived, he was told proceeds from the auction that day were going to Project H.O.M.E.

"I remember Jason Moritz called me and told me he was with Charleston Auto Auction," described Wilson. "He said he saw a news segment on TV and wanted to help; and help they did. They continue to be a driving force behind this project."

"Mr. Wilson and his team have been such a pleasure to work with; they have huge hearts," said Laura Taylor, General Manger of Charleston Auto Auction. "Our customers always participate in the auction fund raisers, but this one is a little more personal for some. As soon as one of our customers told us about the story, we knew we wanted to help."

Charleston Auto Auction actually held several special auctions throughout the course of the past year to raise funds for Project H.O.M.E. To date, they have been able to donate over \$15,000.

"We are so excited about the ground breaking and having students in an environment so they can concentrate on academics and sports, not the place they will sleep at night," added Taylor. "Charleston Auto Auction and its customers plan on continuing donations to make sure Mickey's House is a success for the students."

Wilson described several more examples of generosity from groups and individuals throughout the area. The Stall High School Alumni Association began donating right away, and found ways to raised funds in the community. Project H.O.M.E. also received a \$25,000 grant from Anita Zucker's InterTech Group. Andrea Zucker even asked for donations to be made to Project H.O.M.E. instead of receiving gifts at her recent wedding.

To top it off, Mickey Welch, a retired successful business woman in West Virginia was so moved by the project that she donated enough money for the team to purchase a new, four-bedroom house in North Charleston's Colony North Community. Thus, the name for the residence, Mickey's House was conceived. Up to four senior students who attend R.B. Stall High School will be chosen to live in the home once construction is completed. There will also be two "house parents."

The ground was cleared recently, and Eastwood Homes will start to build the house this month. Construction is expected to be completed before the start of the 2017-2018 school year.

"Project H.O.M.E. has been a labor of love," added Wilson. "The support that we have received from the North Charleston and Charleston communities has been overwhelming. Mickey's House would have not been possible without their support."

"I believe this is just the beginning of an extraordinary movement that will not just make a difference, but be the difference in our society and the lives of its amazing young men and women who will benefit from this opportunity," Henderson said.

"As our motto states, we are 'Helping Others Mirror Excellence.' We are empowering their present as they prepare for their future. It's a good time to be us!"

While four of our area's teenagers will be the residents of Mickey's House, the structure at 2954 Explorer Drive in North Charleston will stand for so much more. It will be a physical example of the area's ability to work together and show love and support for those who need it the most. Mickey's House will be a home for the Lowcountry's heart.

For more information about Mickey's House or Project H.O.M.E., contact CCSD's Office of Strategy and Communications at (843) 937-6303.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and several specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities led by associate superintendents. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.