Embracing Change to Succeed
Brian Gibbons, CEO, Greenberg Gibbons

Sustainable Investing
More than a decade ago, Steve and Marlyn Gambrill knew they could be doing something more to reach children and families in need in Harford County.

Their Christian faith propelled them to undertake mission trips and community outreach, but, says Steve, “There should be a way of growing these relationships and making a bigger impact.” Since he was a children’s entertainer, used to captivating children with balloon creations and magic, focusing on the needs of children in underserved areas and one-parent families was a natural fit.

Twelve years ago, the couple started Extreme Family Outreach, a network of programs that help children develop character and foster life lessons. Loosely modeled after Metro World Child in New York, which the couple attended, Extreme Family Outreach began as a drop-in after-school program right in the heart of underserved communities.

“Originally we started doing after-school programs because we saw there was such a need out there,” Steve says, explaining that the mobile programs, conducted out of a van, could be set up in playgrounds and churches for children who didn’t have transportation or a parent to take them to recreation centers. Often, they would conduct the program where the school bus dropped off kids, providing a safe haven in which to play.

“But we saw the needs in families, so we started doing outreach all year long,” Steve adds.

Today, the nonprofit, faith-based organization employs three and has some 30 dedicated volunteers serving about 400 children at several sites each week. Additional volunteers help with annual events. Its Scooby Doo After School programs offer fun activities but also introduce serious messages, such as not smoking, saying no to drugs and staying in school. Gratified volunteers often hear a bus full of kids chanting “Scooby Doo, Scooby Doo” as the bus approaches the program site.

In addition to the after-school programs, which are free and open to any elementary and middle school student, the Extreme Family Outreach also holds Back to School Bashes, supplying students with school supplies and a message on the importance of staying in school.

It also organizes the Holiday of Hope campaign, which provides needy families with holiday dinners at Thanksgiving and Christmas gifts and parties for children. “Warm Hands/Warm Hearts” is a winter outreach program that provides hats, gloves and scarves.

To expand its reach, Extreme Family Outreach partners with local churches, businesses and other nonprofit organizations. In the Windsor Valley Community, for example, they partner with the Boys & Girls Club.

“There are so many wonderful children out there, and we can make a difference by stepping into their world,” Marlyn says. “That’s why partners are so important. Together we are better.”

The nonprofit partners with government agencies, too, such as the health department, to offer programs with messages about proper nutrition. Steve and Marlyn also praise the efforts and credit the success of Extreme Family Outreach to Debbie Wilhelm, the organization’s director of operations, and her husband, Frank, the organization’s vice president for their years of dedication and service.

As children participate in the program’s activities, they can win prizes, and receive a snack, bag of grocery items and bread sponsored by Panera Bread. But, recognizing that often the whole family needs support, Extreme Family Outreach includes a visitation program. It offers support to families who may be struggling with addiction or
desperately trying to improve their circumstances against what often seem like insurmountable odds.

“We build relationships and friendships,” Marlyn says, adding that the organization is there, offering support, when people realize they’ve made poor choices and are caught in a damaging cycle. “They say, ‘I’m ready to go into recovery’ or ‘I’m sick of living like this – I know I need to get my GED.’” Volunteers then connect families with the resources they need to make the life changes.

“Sometimes, all they need is encouragement,” Steve adds. “We try to have as many partnerships as we can to find out what the needs are and get families plugged in to the resources they need.”

The couple even went so far as to shelter one family in their own home for a year while the mother was involved with the Habitat for Humanity program to meet all of its requirements.

“This lady worked hard and now she is a proud homeowner,” Steve says.

Although the organization is Christian based, it is not affiliated with any particular church – several local churches support its efforts – and includes children from all denominations. “Everyone is welcome,” Steve says.

The organization is active in neighborhoods such as Harford Square in Edgewood, the Edgewater Village area on Brookside Drive, Sunrise Community, Windsor Valley, Cedar Grove and Somerset Manor Community in Havre de Grace.
For the older children who are veterans of the program, Extreme Family Outreach has started a leadership program to keep them involved. Student leaders get to wear a much-coveted green tie-dyed shirt.

“The kids agree to stay in school and not smoke, and they become leaders in their own community,” Steve says. Having persuaded children to stay in school, the couple hopes to start a scholarship program through the organization to help make college more affordable.

The organization’s single largest fundraiser is its dinner auction, an annual event held at the Richlin Ballroom, which this year raised $21,000.

Extreme Family Outreach is sponsored by local businesses as well, including, Korey Home Builders, Pat’s Pizza & Family Restaurant Edgewood, Kris Konstruction, Frito-Lay, Advanced Allergy and Asthma Centers, Humpty Dumpsters, Fortunato Brothers Abingdon, and Big House Signs.

When organizing events in the community, Extreme Family Outreach uses what it calls a “tri-fold partnership.” They ask a church to sponsor one-third of the cost, a local business or organization to sponsor another third, and then Extreme Family Outreach fundraises to garner the final third.

“We all have a stake in it,” Steve says. “You can see where your money is going; come with us as we go right into a local neighborhood.”

To volunteer, see a wish list, or to make a donation, visit www.extremefamilyoutreach.com.

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