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University strives to be ‘beacon of hope’ for Midtown students
BY LAUREN HENSLEY and SHELBY BOURGEOIS
NNB Student Reporters

ST. PETERSBURG – From atop the new College of Business building going up at the University of South Florida, Fred Bennett says, you will be able to see some of the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

They are places where unemployment and crime are high, opportunities and ambition low. And they are home to several of the state’s most challenged elementary schools.

Many of the students in those schools “have never been outside their ZIP code,” said Bennett, a former executive for Lykes Bros. Inc. who is now an adjunct instructor and community liaison in the College of Education. “They live not 20 minutes from the beach and had no idea it was there.”

Since the summer of 2013, students and faculty at the university have had a partnership with one of those schools, Fairmount Park Elementary at 575 41st St. S. They have hosted camps on the university campus, led field trips and volunteered in the struggling school’s classrooms.

It’s been eye-opening.

They have learned, for example, that some of the school’s students had never left their neighborhood. That some had never seen downtown St. Petersburg. That driving over the Howard Frankland Bridge felt like being on a rocket ship.

“I was reading a book about being a kid for a small group and they didn’t know what a roller coaster was,” said Tiffany Lyp, a student volunteer. “It’s just hard for me to know they don’t really know
anything outside of their backyards and neighborhoods.”

At the center of the USFSP-Fairmount Park partnership is Bennett, who says the university is in a special position to help Fairmount Park and other struggling schools in the Midtown and Childs Park neighborhoods just south of Central Avenue.

“I always wonder, are we shining like an ivory tower right next to these neighborhoods?” said Bennett. “Our College of Business has this big beautiful building going up, and from the top of that building you’re going to see some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the area. What kind of irony is that?

He said he prefers to think of the university not as an ivory tower “but a beacon of hope for these students in St. Pete as well as shining the light of knowledge for them to see.”

Fairmount Park is less than 4 miles from the university campus, but it can seem much farther.

Reading scores at the school were so bad that in 2014 state education officials labeled it the second worst elementary in Florida – one of five St. Petersburg elementaries in the bottom 25. The others were Melrose, Campbell Park, Lakewood and Maximo.

In response, the Pinellas School District and the state have made changes in the leadership and teaching staffs at the schools and put new emphasis on math, reading, student discipline and parental involvement.

Nina Pollauf, the principal of Fairmount Park Elementary, said the support her school has received from the university has been a blessing.

“Our relationship with USFSP has extended so many learning and enrichment opportunities for our students,” said Pollauf.

She said the literacy coaches, guidance counselors, field trips and other resources provided by the university have complemented the work of Fairmount’s staff.

“It has truly added so much to what we do that would not be there without Fred and USFSP,” Pollauf said.
To date, the university has had more than 200 student volunteers working with Fairmount Park students and their teachers.

This summer, for the third year in a row, USF is hosting a summer camp for students from Fairmount Park. Some students from Campbell Park are there as well.

In previous years, the summer camp has offered third and fourth graders the opportunity to learn how to sail a boat, kayak and swim, take field trips to Fort De Soto Park and Boyd Hill Nature Preserve, attend a Tampa Bay Rays game and participate in a variety of educational activities.

The camp was designed to operate on a budget of $30,000. That’s enough to hire four teachers from the school district and eight students from the university and pay for field trips and activities.

But only $5,000 is available this year – all of it from the Tampa Bay Rays Foundation – so Bennett says there are only 32 elementary students and four USFSP counselors and fewer activities during the camp, which began June 22 and ends July 24.

“We are going to use this summer to build a better curriculum and some better assessment tools,” he said.

In its partnership with Fairmount Park, “our goal is to engage the elementary students and get them excited about their future,” said Bennett. “We also want to inspire students from the College of Education to go out into the community and make a difference.”

Pinellas County has “over 20 schools that are considered high need, the majority of them right here in St. Pete,” said Bennett. “Maybe we can’t go and fight ISIS, but this is real. This is tangible. This is something we can affect right here in our backyard.”

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