Dear Partners,

Welcome to the first online issue of The Harvest Foundation magazine. In an effort to better communicate our work we teamed with two local young people who grew up in Martinsville and Henry County, Haskell Harris, Carlisle alum ('99) and Karyn Walker Johnson, Carver Alum ('87). Both have creative backgrounds (publishing and graphic design respectively) and both are passionate about the beauty and potential of Martinsville and Henry County. In lieu of a standard newsletter we have created a magazine style report complete with compelling photography and stories of the people and places that make this such a wonderful area to call home.

Don’t miss the story about the future of the New College Institute on page 2, the piece on the dramatic work of the Hope Initiative’s volunteer tax assistance program, and learn how Activate is helping our community become more physically fit.

This issue is only the beginning. A second issue will be published online in December 2010, and we’ll keep them coming. Please let us know what you think, and more importantly, enjoy!

Happy Summer,

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The Little College that Can

Martinsville and Henry County’s New College Institute readies for a hopeful year with a star-studded new planning commission.
Though NCI has accomplished much in its four year history—from opening a year ahead of schedule, to creating seventeen new degree programs in growing job fields—the school and all its community partners are proactively looking forward to 2012, the year that the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) will present their evaluation and suggested funding for NCI to the Virginia General Assembly.

To prepare for that event, the Harvest Foundation announced the formation of the New College 2010 Commission on April 1st, 2010. Led by two of Virginia’s most respected experts in higher education, soon to be retired (July 2010) University of Virginia President John Casteen and retired Virginia Commonwealth University President Gene Trani, the volunteer commission also includes eleven other state and local business people, public officials, and educators. “This community’s future centers around what happens with NCI,” says Harvest Foundation Executive Director Allyson Rothrock. “Through the work of this new Commission, The Harvest Foundation hopes to assist SCHEV as it develops its plans for NCI. Including local people and local perspectives is critical. This will be a great report back to the city and the state and the country.”

Over the next seven months, the Commission will assess NCI’s facilities, finances, staff, and curriculum. Based on those findings, the Commission will recommend one of the following three options to Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, the Virginia General Assembly, and SCHEV in early 2011: that NCI become an independent, publicly funded institution, a branch campus of an existing state university; or remain a higher education center. That timing is pivotal, since all three entities will receive the information a year in advance of the 2012-2014 budget planning sessions of the General Assembly. “The new Commission will position NCI for the future,” says NCI’s Executive Director Dr. Barry Dorsey. “Its recommendations could not come at a better time in the development of the institution. And the Commission’s work should complement Governor McDonnell’s Higher Education Commission on Reform, Innovation, and Investment. It’s my hope that NCI will play a leading role in helping to achieve the Governor’s goal for an additional 100,000 higher education graduates in Virginia over the next 15 years.”

And the Commission will have a remarkable record to go on. Under the leadership of Dorsey and Associate Director Dr. Leanna Blevins, NCI has helped 133 students complete their Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in partnership with eight state universities—a critical service in a rural area once two hours from the nearest state university and devastated by record unemployment. In addition, NCI has repurposed 30,000 square feet of vacant retail space into classrooms and offices, spread the word about the value of higher education to 9000 young people in city and county schools, enrolled 450 citizens in non-credit lectures, organized 60 summer internships for college students, and awarded multiple re-certification points to local teachers during their intensive summer teaching academy programs. “NCI is about so much more than simply providing degree programs,” says Blevins, the first in her family to attend college. “It’s about helping people connect with resources and support to achieve more than they ever thought possible.”

Whatever the outcome, Dorsey hopes to build on NCI’s successful foundation, offering their core degree areas of education, allied health, motorsports engineering, and business with cutting edge programs not yet available at any state university. Those future degrees could include entrepreneurship, renewable energy, technology integration, and more. In turn, the growth of NCI would no doubt stimulate further urban renewal in Uptown Martinsville in the form of restaurants, shops, art galleries, hotels, and academic buildings—a process that would provide an improved quality of life and continue to create a more educated workforce for future industries in the area.

No clear picture exists of what NCI will look like five years from now, but longtime advisors to the Harvest Foundation and NCI, such as former Virginia Governor and education advocate Gerald Baliles, see a bright and far reaching future ahead. “The potential of NCI should not be viewed as being confined to just the Martinsville and Henry County area,” says Baliles. “If NCI succeeds and is perceived to be a leader in education it will draw students and faculty from other parts of the Commonwealth and other states.” Blevins agrees. “The sky is the limit given how far we’ve come in just four years.” And with a little help from the new Commission, Richmond should agree.
Refunding Confidence

The HOPE Initiative’s three-year old Volunteer Tax Assistance Program empowers low income residents through financial literacy.

SAVING GRACE
Left to right: VITA’s training credentials; volunteer Evalyn Chapman on the job
On a brisk Thursday afternoon this past February, retired school teacher Evalyn Chapman made the trip from her house in Henry County to Liberty Fair Mall—but she wasn’t there to shop. Instead, Chapman arrived to offer her skills to the United Way’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, a segment of the HOPE Initiative funded in part by The Harvest Foundation.

As soon as Chapman settled into her seat, a young woman arrived at her station with a little boy in tow. Chapman began processing the woman’s return, noting that the single mother of two worked multiple jobs and took in under $10,000 for the year, leaving her desperately below the poverty line. “When I finished,” Chapman says, “I told her that she would be receiving a refund of $5,200 and she used the rest of the tissues in my box crying. Can you imagine how excited she was to receive more than half of what she took home in her pay checks last year?”

In addition to the $5200 Chapman saved her client that day, VITA saved working Martinsville and Henry County residents over $300,000 dollars in tax preparation fees and recovered over 2 million federal return dollars in the 2010 tax season alone. “We started looking at the financial stability issue in 2006,” says former United Way of Henry County and Martinsville Executive Director Kathy Rogers, “and while there were lots of services providing basic needs, there was a revolving door of money for rent and food. We wanted to find a way to help others progress economically. By the beginning of 2007, we’d set up our first tax site.”

To accomplish its mission, VITA educates residents about the benefits of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a supplement created by the IRS in 1975 to pull working Americans out of poverty. Under the EITC guidelines, a claimant with two children can receive up to $5,028, money that’s vital for an improved quality of life. And VITA’s free, accessible service connects residents making less than $49,000 a year with IRS-trained volunteers to determine eligibility. “With a high rate of poverty and unemployment, it is essential that we provide area residents with the tools needed to be successful,” says Rogers. “And unfortunately, not everyone is aware of the EITC, or if they are aware, they use a Rapid Anticipation Loan to get the credit, which erodes their tax refund. If we can help more families receive the tax credits due to them, and save money on tax preparation and rapid refund loans, we will have helped those who are struggling economically.” Ridgeway resident Tommy Mounce, who had his taxes prepared at the Liberty Fair Mall, is grateful for the service. “I was working all the time and I didn’t know what I was going to do,” he says. “If it wasn’t for this place, I don’t know what I’d be doing.”

As a result, clients like Mounce who have their taxes prepared at either the Grace Network in Bassett or the Liberty Fair Mall VITA locations leave more financially aware. “In the future, the HOPE Initiative will be focused on helping VITA clients with other financial resources, such as banking tools and more financial education,” Rogers says.

In the 2010 tax season, 566 federal returns out of 1651 filed at both of VITA’s locations were eligible for the EITC, a statistic that highlights the contributions VITA is making to the community. But at the end of the day, VITA isn’t just about saving money; it’s about bringing the issue of financial literacy full circle, and that goes for the volunteers as well as the clients. “I believe that knowledge is power,” says Chapman. “As people learn to use their money more wisely their options increase and their self-image improves. Watching that happen with VITA has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”
The Next Step

Activate Martinsville/Henry County’s newest idea gives residents a tangible guide to enjoying fitness.
These days, when 46-year-old Kenny Hairston isn’t working, he’s out riding his bike under the shade of Oak, Poplar, and Maple trees on the Fieldale Trail. Hairston is biking up to five miles a day now, a small feat for a man who suffered a debilitating stroke just a few short years ago. Determined to recover, Hairston joined a low impact walking program sponsored by Activate Martinsville / Henry County, a walking and biking initiative funded by The Harvest Foundation that operates under the umbrella of the Martinsville/Henry County Coalition for Health and Wellness.

“Before my stroke, I sat around by myself all the time,” Hairston says, “but the low impact walking built my endurance up.” After that introduction, it wasn’t long before Hairston noticed other programs on the Activate roster, namely Bike Basics 101, which gave him the confidence to ride on his own. “Now I come out and talk to folks,” he says. “It makes me feel like my old self before the stroke. I’m a bicycle nut!”

To Activate Director Jeannie Frisco, Hairston is a model for what Activate is doing right. “When we need a cheerleader and a success story to see the difference we’re making, all we have to do is look to examples like Kenny,” Frisco says. And now Activate has another success story to be proud of: the Activate Activity Toolkit, a free health and fitness package that includes a 32-page recreation guide and practical accessories like a water bottle and calorie counter to jump start wellness.

The Toolkit—which Martinsville and Henry County residents may register for online, at the Activate office, Liberty Fair Mall, and many Activate events—connects more people with the ongoing programs offered by Activate. These include innovative exercise-and-learn activities like the Uptown Martinsville Historic Walk and the Fieldale Festival Historic Walking Tour, to free walking clubs like Lunch on the Run at the Uptown Farmer’s Market, to the widely popular Bike Basics 101 courses taught at a variety of locations.

The Toolkit also offers a guide to the area’s beautiful natural resources, like Jack Dalton Park in Collinsville, the Uptown Rail Trail in Martinsville, and the Gravely Nature Preserve in Ridgeway—locations that bring all walks of life together for the common goal of relaxation and improved health. “By offering guided walks, bike rides, safety classes, and other events centered around our natural resources, program participants are not only learning about how to become more fit, but they are also learning about the incredible free resources they can access 365 days a year and benefiting from the calming effects of nature for emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing,” says Jennifer Doss, the Director of Tourism for the Martinsville-Henry County Economic Development Corporation.

To date, over 832 toolkits have been distributed and Frisco hopes the number will continue to rise. “The overall goal we hope to accomplish with the Toolkit is to provide citizens with a wide array of group walking/biking activities, individual walking/biking activities, and information about the many trails and parks in our area in order to get more people off the couch,” says Frisco. “Ten years from now, I want people to continue to add activity to their daily routines. Studies have proven that if you make it fun, easy, and convenient, people will continue to walk and bike throughout their life.”
FAMILIAR SCENE: A look up at one of Martinsville’s early nineteenth century neighborhoods from a dip in the road on Ellsworth Street, complete with the steeple of the Starling Avenue Baptist Church and the brick facade of the original gymnasium for Martinsville High School.

Photography courtesy of Steve Sheppard