



May/June 2019

Focus

MAKING AN IMPACT...Alaia's Story



High school senior, Alaia with Foundation Executive Director Nada Wheelock and Family-Community Resource Coordinator, Chelsea Unger.

For many teens, it can be difficult to ask for help. For 17-year-old Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) student, Alaia, who grew up being told "money doesn't grow on trees," lack of adequate food, clothing, and school supplies was an accepted way of life. "Not having what I needed made me feel less than," Alaia says. Her life was transformed thanks to her high school's Family-Community Resource Center (FCRC) and the meaningful support from the on-site coordinator, Chelsea.

How can students focus on learning when they lack the basic necessities to be successful? Recognizing these challenges, VPS created FCRCs in 18 of its highest-poverty schools along with two-mobile units to support the remaining schools. With funding from the Foundation for VPS and support from community partners, FCRCs offer a single source for resources such as food, clothing, housing support, and access to medical services. They also serve as a safe, accepting place for students to gather and provide activities to expand parent involvement.

Alaia often didn't have what she needed to be prepared for school. Her mother, a single parent, worked the graveyard shift to provide for her three children. A series of mounting bills, including medical expenses and college loans, put Alaia's family under extreme financial stress. Eventually, Alaia stopped asking her mom for her needs. She and her siblings learned to be self-sufficient.

Throughout elementary and middle school, Alaia continued to struggle with feelings of inadequacy due to a lack of basic needs. The daily strain meant Alaia was often late for school. During her freshman year, she started skipping school with her friends. "I wasn't motivated to go to school," she says. "I didn't eat breakfast very often because there wasn't food at home. Maybe a Pop-Tart here and there. My friends often shared their lunch with me. I was afraid to let teachers know that I was hungry or needed school supplies."

"I was walking the path laid out for me by poverty, but one day in my freshman year, I walked into the FCRC with a friend." They were hungry, and the friend knew they could get a free snack. That decision changed the trajectory of Alaia's life.

"Chelsea told me: 'Everything you need, we're here to give it to you.' I started coming into the FCRC for snacks every day, but I found so much more than a snack. I'd get clothing and counseling because of the safe vibe. And I found community. I started learning to ask for what I needed. I learned that people do care

[Continued, pg 2](#)



INSPIRING STUDENTS... Opening a Window to the World at Lake Shore Elementary

Deepening cultural awareness and sensitivity among students can improve learning outcomes and foster equity. Hoping to inspire this in her students, Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) Creative Movement teacher Wendy Thompson used a Foundation for VPS Engagement Grant to bring renowned Ghanaian drum artist, Alex Addy, to Lake Shore Elementary as a month-long artist-in-residence. "Drum circles offer ethnic and cultural bridges; they harmoniously bring diverse people, instruments and musical styles together," said Thompson.

Bringing diverse people and instruments together is what Addy does best. The drum artist and teacher with The Right Brain Initiative uses drumming techniques from the various cultures of

[Continued, pg 2](#)

In this issue:

- ~ Making an Impact: Alaia's Story
- ~ Inspiring Students: Enrichment at Lake Shore
- ~ Donor Highlights: Luncheon, Firstenburg Grant
- ~ Supporting Students: Fort's Cindy Cooper
- ~ Save the Date: September 19 is Give More 24!

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Supporting Students: FCRC Coordinator, Cindy Cooper



As the Family-Community Resource Center Coordinator at Fort Vancouver High School, Cindy Cooper works daily with students and families to help identify non-academic barriers to learning.

Often these barriers include the need for food, clothing, housing, or medical support. For Cooper, it all begins with relationship building. Many students visit the resource center seeking one resource, often food or clothing. "Because I work at a school with lots of very hungry teenagers, snacks seem to be an initial contact that is good tool for me to build the student engagement piece," says Cooper.

By making the center a safe and welcoming space, students visit regularly and share more of their story, enabling Cooper to connect them to the resources they need. Many teens, whose lives at home are chaotic, visit the center seeking a connection with a positive adult. "It's been very helpful for our students to simply have the basic things they need to be ready to learn," says Cooper, "They're coming to school more and feel like they're part of their peers. That's been a big value."

Donors Making a Difference: Annual Luncheon Raises Record \$300,000

The Foundation for Vancouver Public Schools (VPS) held its 17th Annual Luncheon on May 7, 2019. The event saw its largest attendance to date and raised a record \$300,000 in support of the 23,000 students in 37 VPS schools and programs across the district.

During the event, it was announced that the Firstenburg Foundation awarded the Foundation for VPS a \$50,000 challenge grant in support of Community Schools to fund basic needs, family-stability services and enrichment activities in schools across the district.

Alaia's Story cont...

about me. I started speaking out. I realized I wanted to come to school. This one little noon snack changed my life. Now that I was getting help, the fog cleared. I started being able to see my peers and how many were hungry."

Alaia thought she was the only student going through these challenges. However, more than 48 percent of VPS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a federal indicator of poverty. "Teachers expect kids to have a normal family situation, but that's really not the case for about half of the kids," she said.

Reflecting on her first experiences with the FCRC, Alaia recalls, "It's one of the first times I've felt loved and cared for. I went from being resentful to super grateful. I started projecting gratitude to others. If I see somebody who's hungry, I say, 'Go to Chelsea.' Since my freshman year, I've seen the number of kids going to the FCRC grow exponentially.

Before she connected with her school's FCRC, she said, "I was resentful toward the world for everything that had happened to me. In high school, I have grown up. I realize that I have experienced a lot of trauma, but I am resilient. I wasn't going to graduate, but now I am."

Alaia was recently honored with a Rotary Club of Vancouver scholarship. She has applied to Clark College and dreams of attending Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland to study video journalism.

Lake Shore: Ghanaian drummer, Alex Addy cont...



Ghana, West Africa, to explore social, cultural and historical roles of music and rhythm. He believes sharing stories from different cultures has the power to "open new windows into the world." As a native of Ghana, Addy shares his own stories and love of music to teach students respect for different cultures and each other while learning how to succeed individually and as a group.

The residency at Lake Shore began with a 45-minute all school assembly where Addy and his group of drummers and dancers captivated the 450+ students with Ghanaian rhythm and authentic-costume dance. Over the course of the month, students participated in a variety of activities learning cultural awareness and the social-emotional benefits of drumming. For Thompson, the project exceeded her expectations. "Students at Lake Shore ultimately respected and appreciated a cultural experience that might be, for some, a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Lake Shore's introduction to traditional Ghanaian culture is just one example of an impactful project made possible through a Foundation for VPS Engagement Grant. Each year, the Foundation for VPS offers grants to all schools in the district for mentoring and enrichment activities to help spark students' interests in learning. During the 2018-19 school year, more than \$100,000 was awarded for 52 unique activities, benefiting over 13,000 students at 31 VPS schools. Since 1998, the Foundation for VPS has awarded more than one million dollars to fund innovative and exciting projects that enrich student learning.

Ways to engage: Give More 24! is September 19th. Your donations to the Foundation for VPS go further during this community on-line giving day.

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