Itta Bena, Mississippi: Growing a Healthy Intergenerational Community

Despite having just under 2,000 residents, Itta Bena, Mississippi has a big vision for its future. The tiny town, located in west central Mississippi, believes it can create “a healthy, thriving college town with positive and deep connections, trust and collaboration among Itta Bena residents of all ages and among Mississippi Valley State University.”

And based on the evidence of the past few years, achieving that vision should be a slam dunk.

Intergenerational connections have always been an important element of Itta Bena’s culture. In 2009, the community ramped up its intergenerational efforts when it joined the National Network of Communities for All Ages, an initiative of The Intergenerational Center at Temple University. In so doing, the community formalized its commitment to achieving a better way of life for people of every age.

In just four years, Itta Bena has employed intergenerational strategies to address a host of challenges. Here are just a few examples:

**Health care:** To reduce the high incidence of diabetes and obesity, the community collaborates with the local university and the local hospital to provide health fairs and quarterly screenings for diabetes, weight, cholesterol and other health factors.

**Physical activity:** The community now offers a wide range of opportunities to get physically active, including a bike-a-thon, fishing rodeo, multigenerational physical exercise classes, monthly intergenerational walking groups, Little League baseball (with older adults serving as coaches), and daily walking at the local high school track.

“Although we are a small town...we hold strong ties to this community, and we spend time improving the community for the betterment of all.”  SHAWNTERIA WARD, HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR
Access to healthy food: Itta Bena has no grocery store, but it has created a prized community garden that engages people of all ages in the planning, harvesting, and distribution of the garden’s produce. (The food is distributed to families with children, older adults, people with disabilities, and all other residents who desire the harvested produce.) In addition, Itta Bena has partnered with the mass transit system at nearby Mississippi Valley State University to transport residents to the closest grocery stores in Greenwood, seven miles away.

What’s next? Itta Bena is currently working towards the next steps to reach their intergenerational goals. Currently, twenty five local community residents ages 15-76 are engaged in leadership training in an effort to increase resident participation and civic engagement. Upon completion of this training, the residents will develop intergenerational projects including a farmers’ market, a Mayor’s Council, and a mentor’s initiative.

“Ours is a community in which local culture and community are currently being severely challenged by desperate economic and academic limitations. We draw deeply on the growing network of positive resources (people, businesses, and programs) … offering support to all ages and encouraging intergenerational partnerships and interdependence on one another.” Rev. Maxine Bolden, Pastor, Samuel Chapel United Methodist Church