



Communities of COASTAL GEORGIA FOUNDATION

A FAMILY'S VISION GROWS

by Valerie Hepburn, President & CEO Communities of Coastal Georgia Foundation
Photos by Chris Moncus

The Gathering Place's
College Interns



It began as a simple effort, a family's vision to provide a safe, entertaining setting and character building experiences for their own children and their friends. In two early summers, beginning in 1979, a group of UGA students had come to St. Simons Island and hosted a "Sunday Evening Live" program that was fun and faith-based. The local teenagers really embraced the concept. When the original program moved on to other communities, the locals decided they needed to retain the Sunday evening format.

In 1981, Bill and Ida Walker helped this small group of island youth form The Gathering Place – and the Walkers have been The Gathering Place's lead sponsors, volunteers and cheerleaders ever since. Now approaching its 34th Anniversary, The Gathering Place has grown from an island-based summer ministry led by volunteers supporting 100 high school youths into a regional, year-round "happening," providing student mentoring, leadership development and intensive wrap-around services for youth ages 12-25. Initially, the orga-

nization helped fill the gap for young people of faith before the days of strong church-based youth ministries. Now, The Gathering Place serves as an extension of many churches, bringing together diverse students of many faiths and backgrounds – and others who may still be searching – to explore, learn, engage and strengthen both character and soul.

To support the organization, Bill and Ida Walker and nine other couples started an Anonymous Sponsors group and provided

The Gathering Place's first years of funding – \$10,000. In those days, there was no paid staff. The Walkers, the kids and other families filled that role, from setting up chairs each week to serving as music director. The Gathering Place had to use outdoor space because their numbers had grown too large for any public, indoor facility in the county. Amazingly, they never once got rained on!

The annual budget of The Gathering Place now exceeds \$600,000, supporting 4 full time and 3 part-time paid staff and participation of some 12,000 students annually. The Gathering Place charges no membership fees or dues for the young people. All events, including The Main Event – the much-treasured, regular summer Sunday evening gathering now at its permanent home at Epworth-by-the-Sea, are free to all participants throughout Glynn County and adjacent communities. The Gathering Place supports hundreds of college students through Converge, a non-denominational ministry at the College of Coastal Georgia and one of the campus' largest student organizations.

Nearly 1,000 students are touched each week through programs in the Glynn County schools. And, ten percent of all Glynn County students, 6th grade and older, participate in the 707 mentor program, which pairs volunteer adult leaders with small groups of youth who meet one morning each week at 7:07am throughout the school year. Each summer, The Gathering Place brings college interns from around the country to serve and be educated in community-based ministry.

Focused on character building and peer support, the ministry and its range of programs

can point to many successes. It boasts one of the largest and most socially, economically, geographically and religiously diverse youth organizations on the Coast. Leading professionals in the community today were Gathering Place attendees two and three decades ago and Gathering Place parents today. First generation students supported by The Gathering Place staff and peers have gone on to achieve great success in college and careers. Sixteen of the area's local church leaders found their interest in professional ministry through voluntary participation with The Gathering Place. Through philanthropy and faith, thousands of young people have been touched, strengthened and enriched.

The Gathering Place has been so successful that communities across the country have visited in hopes of copying the model. Recently, Georgia's Governor and other state leaders had the opportunity to learn about The Gathering Place through meetings with Executive Director Lucas Ramirez. With the goals of strengthening resilience and protecting at-risk youth, officials are considering how The Gathering Place might be replicated in other communities.

Through all of the years and all of the many programs – everything has been supported completely through philanthropic gifts from individuals, foundations and corporations. From that early group of 10 Anonymous Sponsors the support base has now grown into the thousands. Leading the charge and living the mission, with generosity and faithfulness for the past 34 years, are Bill and Ida Walker. And, fortunately for the area's young people and the community as a whole, the Walkers show no sign of slowing down.

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TO LEARN MORE FROM LOCAL STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

about how The Gathering Place is changing lives and impacting our community, you're invited to attend The Gathering Place Main Event for Adults at McKinnon Airport on St Simons Island, Thursday, February 26. The inspirational night begins at 6:00 p.m. and will feature special music by former intern Eugene Wade and dinner provided by Tasteful Temptations. This free event is the primary fundraiser of the GP and all contributions are used for leadership and mentoring programs for local students. Reservations required. For more details, visit thegp.org/MEFA or email rsvp@thegp.org.