In This Issue

Inspiring Alumni
Read about Josh Degnan, a former KECSAC student who is successfully thriving as an adult.

Leadership Highlight: Cindy Caswell
As School Administrator of The Life Connection education program, Cindy Caswell brings 31 years of teaching expertise as well as her compassion to a group of students who are often traumatized and educationally delayed.
Dear KECSAC Community,

Earlier this year our teachers, administrators, treatment staff, partners and supporters gathered together for a panel discussion with several recent graduates of our programs. As our students shared their experiences about the educational process and how we can all work to improve their opportunities, I gazed across the room. Teachers were sitting on the edge of their seats, they were eager to hear how they could make things better, eager to hear what worked well and what they need to improve. The students were energized, articulate and passionate about how they navigated the foster care system, the judicial system and ultimately their education programs. There are many days I wonder out loud how we are impacting our children and youth. As a result, KECSAC has initiated roundtable discussions, reviewed educational policies and updated our monitoring process to ensure appropriate services are being delivered. And, yet there still remains more to be done. The target of achievement is constantly moving and we have to move with it. As I listened to the stories of those students, so rich, so diverse, so impassioned, so accurate, I was literally moved to tears. Teachers know that it is rare to hear back from students after they leave us, graduating or transitioning to other educational programs. We know that the payoff isn’t typically expressed as a thank you or pat on the back. We know that going into this field, but that day, with those students, we all got to see a glimpse of the greatness within our students and we saw how much of an impact our programs have on empowering them to achieve at incredibly high levels. After that day when I think of the incredible work our programs are offering, I think of those students and I am reminded that what we do matters, that what we do makes a difference and that what we do changes the world.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Nolan, Ed.D.
Director, KECSAC
No one can ever claim that Josh Degnan doesn't know the value and commitment of hard work. At 21-years-old he holds three jobs, and has completed all the requirements for his associate’s degree in Fire Rescue Science and Technology from Jefferson Community and Technical College (JCTC).

Josh is currently a full-time employee of the Harrodsburg City Fire Department, and he also works in Louisville outfitting police cars, fire trucks, and other emergency vehicles with various equipment and features that are unique to those types of vehicles. On top of that, Josh is also an active member of the Voices of the Commonwealth Youth Leadership Council (VOC) through Murray State University. The VOC is an advocacy group made up of foster and former foster youth ages 16 through 23 who are instrumental in communicating to foster/adoptive parents, out of home care staff, community partners, and government agencies the issues and needs of youth in care and those who have aged out of the system. As a part of his advocacy work through this group, Josh participated in a student panel at this year's Alternative Strategies for Educating Students At-Risk Summit, which is conducted annually by KECSAC.

Josh was himself a former foster youth who entered into a pre-independent living program when he was a junior in high school at the KECSAC program, Boys’ and Girls’ Haven, in Louisville. It was during this time in his life that he began the path that lead him to his current career and helped develop his drive and appreciation for learning. He had previously been homeschooled in Oldham County where he grew up.
“Being at Boys’ and Girls’ Haven gave me a different perspective on people in general,” Josh said. “Since I was homeschooled prior, by being in that program I was exposed to more different types of people and got to know more people, and it changed my whole outlook I had of, ‘I just want to run away from the life I have now,’ to where I began thinking, ‘It would be okay to stay where I am and start a life and try to reach for higher goals.’”

Prior to entering his pre-independent living program, Josh said he was adamant on joining the military and getting as far away from home that he could. However, teachers and mentors at the program helped him envision a new life.

“I had two teachers that influenced me a lot, because before that I didn’t have any aspirations. Anyone who asked me if I was going to do any higher learning or go to college or anything like that, I would tell them absolutely not,” Josh said. “So by going through the state agency school I saw I could have a normal life and settle down somewhere. I also realized that by staying with the state and recommitting, taking advantage of free tuition and things like that, it definitely changed my outlook.”

Since Josh graduated high school after about a year at the Boys’ and Girls’ Haven program at the age of 17, he began his post-secondary education somewhat early. His time there, however, showed him that he had the skills and the drive to be successful moving forward.

“Being homeschooled I was always kind of curious whether I’d be able to succeed in a normal school setting – so seeing that I was in a more normal setting surrounded by a lot of other students and the diversity of all the teachers and programs, I saw I was able to succeed there and that encouraged me to see that college would be an option,” Josh explained.

The two teachers who influenced Josh also became mentors to him. Their guidance is something he credits to helping him discover his career interests. He also encourages other students in state agency programs to seek out the teachers, volunteers, and mentors that can help them in their path as well.

“The main thing I’d encourage students to do who are in the situation I was in, is try and find a mentor or someone who is in the field they are looking to go into. Finding somebody that can teach them things they need to be doing to prepare for that field is key,” Josh said. “I had someone like that over at Boys’ and Girls’ Haven. He was a firefighter before he worked there and he told me some of the things he went through and things that were beneficial to him. So I was able to use his advice and knowledge to help me. So having a mentor in life that is on the path you want to pursue would be a huge help.”

Things weren’t always easy for Josh though. When he was in college and working several jobs he got to the point where he was overwhelmed and on the point of burning out. This experience also provided him with the personal wisdom and resiliency he shares with other youth now.

“I’ve always kept a number of jobs, and there was one point in time where I was volunteer fire fighting, and going through recruit class as well as going to school, and I still had two other jobs,” Josh said. “With all the stress I pretty much just broke down one night and I told my friend I was going through recruit class with that, ‘I’m just done with all of it I need a break.’ But, within a couple of weeks I got a full-time position. So that was kind of the moment I realized it does get worse before it gets better and when I hit rock bottom, that’s when it finally all started going the way I needed it to go.”

Josh participated in a state-agency youth panel at KECSAC’s At-Risk Summit this past summer where he shared his experiences and answered questions from the audience.

... Continued on page 8
School Administrator, principal, secretary, comedienne, guidance counselor, mother figure, authoritarian, social studies teacher, transition coordinator, life skills instructor: these are some of the hats Cindy Caswell wears at The Life Connection education program in Larue County. And even after 31 years of teaching and juggling many roles – 18 of which were spent in KECSAC programs – Caswell says she’ll still miss it. This summer will mark her final year of teaching full-time when she retires after a long and fulfilling career.

“I will miss it terribly,” Caswell said fondly. “I’ve already told my teachers I’ll be subbing or whatever they need when I’m allowed to come back.”

Caswell said she is more than confident in her replacement, vice principal and math teacher D.W. Cruse, but it’s easy to see when talking with her why she is so connected to the program.

“Working in KECSAC programs have just been a blessing to me. I don’t think I would’ve made it teaching 31 years had I not been in a KECSAC program,” Caswell said. She credits her ability to fit well in this school environment because she is extremely structured and enjoys the respectful ‘yes ma’am and no ma’am’ atmosphere that is created in their small classrooms. There is no denying, however, her commitment and care to her students has been a significant influence on the longevity of her career as well.

“This is going to sound cliché, but I just try to make a difference in students’ lives,” Caswell said. “Our goal as an education staff is to do everything we can to help them be productive members of society, not to be takers but to be givers. I guess to make a difference I want kids to be productive, further their education, or to get work, even if they are low functioning.”

Caswell knew she wanted to be a teacher since she was a young girl, especially since her mother and some of her aunts were teachers as well.

“I grew up in the local high school because my mom was a high school teacher, and back in the day teachers did everything. I grew up in the home economics room, in the gym, and on the bleachers, and I knew all the other teachers and their kids and we just lived there practically. So I think that had a lot to do with it,” Caswell explained.

She earned her undergraduate and master’s degree in Elementary Education, and her Rank 1 in Instructional Supervision, from Western Kentucky University. She later earned her Principalship from Eastern Kentucky University.

Her first teaching job out of college was at Campbellsville Elementary for one year where she taught fifth grade. After that year, her principal asked her to move to the middle school with him, and she ended up teaching at Campbellsville Middle School for 12 years.

As part of an ongoing series in the Collaborative, we interviewed The Life Connection School Administrator Cindy Caswell to reflect on her long career of teaching state agency youth and helping them transition into successful adults.
While Caswell was teaching in Campbellsville, she actually lived in Washington County with her husband. She also had friends on the board of education in Washington County who suggested she might be a perfect fit for the education program in a Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) facility that was opening soon in the district, called Central Kentucky Youth Academy (which later became the Care Academy).

“Honestly, I was peer-pressured at first,” Caswell said chuckling. “My friends in Washington County were like, ‘You have got to try this Cindy, you’ll love it, you are so structured!’ Well The DJJ facility was definitely structured and when I went there to interview I thought, ‘I could do this,’ and then after being there six months I thought ‘I can never go back.’”

After teaching in the DJJ facilities for seven years, the private owners abruptly closed the program one winter and Caswell went to Washington High School as a half-time assistant principal and half-time alternative school principal. In the meantime, the superintendent of Larue County had put out feelers to find someone for The Life Connection education program. A friend of hers who taught there at the time, advised her to visit the program. After interviewing and accepting a job, she was released from her Washington County contract and began teaching at The Life Connection on February 19, 2007 since they needed someone immediately.

The Life Connection, a residential program situated in the beautiful rolling fields of Larue County is surrounded by a picturesque lake and trees. Students in the program are typically between the ages of 11 and 21, always male and often identified as having an educational disability. A large number of the students are identified as Functionally Mentally Disabled (FMD), while others grapple with oppositional defiant disorders, bipolar disorders, and histories of sexual, emotional and physical abuse.

Working with what some would call a “difficult” population who often have heartbreaking stories, doesn’t intimidate Caswell though. She has learned through her time in KECSAC programs that connecting with students and being flexible and up for challenges is key in these programs.

“When I first started I cried all the time, but you have to build a relationship with students or you might as well not even come,” Caswell explained. “And you don’t really harden your heart, but for example, when we have to send a kid away, you just have to realize that our facility is not the facility for every kid. If we’re not meeting their needs you have to do what’s best for the students. It took me a while to get over when students would leave, because many of them would be right back in the game once they left.”

Many people in Caswell’s life often ask how she doesn’t burn out on the upsetting histories of students and daily stress, but she sees every day as an opportunity and a challenge.

“I don’t mean this in a bad way, but you never know what to expect here, because it’s different every day. Because it’s a new challenge every day, you don’t become complacent and burn out. And my goal is to make the kids feel worthy, help them be productive, and feel good about themselves, and to not let all the terrible things that have happened to them hold them down, and that’s really hard in some situations.”

Caswell also credits her success to her staff of great teachers who are all there by choice, and all who she had a say in hiring. Dwayne Gibson teaches science, Daniel Risner teaches English, and D.W. Cruse, who is also her assistant principal and replacement next year, teaches Math and has a major role in offering transition services and creating job opportunities through programs with his students.
Inspiring Alumni  ... Continued from page 5

This lead Josh to value balance in life and encourages other young adults to try and develop this key life skill for future success.

“Balance is key. You have to balance work, your personal life, and school. I went through those time periods and you just have to find that right mixture,” Josh advises. “I’ve seen friends who never did any homework because they were too busy with their work and their social life and it hurt them, so you just have to find that right balance.”

Continuing through the hard and stressful times in life, and overcoming adversity is what lead Josh to his most successful accolade to date, which was landing his dream career in December of 2014.

“When I finally got hired on as a full-time firefighter after two years of going to school, and two years of recruit class and volunteering is what I’m most proud of.” Josh has also gone beyond this accomplishment by furthering his training and encouraging others as well.

“I always look for the next opportunity, so I’ve done specialized training with the fire department by getting my hazmat technician training,” Josh said. “Surrounding yourself with people who have similar interests and just a good support group is important. I have some friends who are in the same line of work and I encourage them to pursue their next goal and they encourage me. Having that support helps a lot.”

Josh isn’t stopping there, however. As a man who is at the beginning of his career, and one who values the benefit of education, he plans to further his emergency services training by getting his EMT certification through the Boyle County EMS.

“I never turn down the opportunity to learn something, and I encourage other youth not to as well,” Josh said. “I’ve come to find out that education and knowledge in general will help you in life so much.”

Josh is currently engaged and living in Danville, and has plans to get married next fall. KECSAC wishes Josh the best in all his professional, personal, and educational endeavors!

Leadership Highlight  ... Continued from page 7

Their ultimate goal is to also prepare their students for eventual transition back into a regular school setting.

“My hope for those going back to a regular school is they would be able to function in the general population, even if they’re in a special needs class, and not have to be in an alternative program,” Caswell said. “I also encourage the principal or counselor to put them in a step-down program when they go back because we do not want culture shock since they’re used to being with 10 kids in a classroom. Being in the larger general population would just totally stress them out.”

For older students who are ready to graduate, Caswell and her staff prioritize helping the student receive some type of secondary training to make their transition successful.

“We really work so hard on transition and having a fruitful plan when they leave here,” Caswell said. “It’s wonderful if they further their education, and if they transition into the workforce that’s great too. We have a school-to-work program and we provide a lot of life skills training through the program as well.”
And despite the difficult and sometimes daily challenges that are present with this special population of students, Caswell says the rewards far outweigh any downsides to her job, especially when the students are learning and the content is really clicking with them.

“These students here are so vocal, and that’s the beauty of special needs students,” Caswell said. “They’ll tell you when they get it, and they’re just so honest. They’ll say, ‘I got it ma’am! That’s what you were talking about!’ which is always rewarding.”

And whether it’s from recent students, or students she had her first year of teaching who are now her friends on Facebook, Caswell loves hearing from students who have gone on to be successful in life.

“Getting phone calls from kids who have been successful, though I don’t get as many as I would like to, is my greatest joy as a teacher,” Caswell said. “To know they are successfully transitioning into the real world is huge. Seeing kids graduate is also a big deal.”

Caswell recently heard from a student who is now going on to college and has an apartment of his own, who credited his teachers at The Life Connection for his success saying, “I never could have made it without you guys at The Life Connection. I would literally be homeless if you all hadn’t helped me and told me to get an education.”

Apart from the student success stories, Caswell also jokingly shared the best compliment she’s received as an educator in 31 years.

“I once had a student tell me, ‘You are the best principal ever: you’re funny, you listen to the top 20, and you wear cowboy boots’! I mean what more could a woman want! That’s the biggest compliment I’ve gotten.”

When Caswell isn’t teaching she enjoys attending UK games with her husband and friends, and many outdoor activities such as four-wheeling, horseback riding, and camping and boating at Green River Lake. She also enjoys spending time at the beach and traveling with her husband and friends, and reading and spending time with their many pets at home.

KECSAC News

Peggy Shearer joins KECSAC Team as Eastern Region Program Improvement Specialist

KECSAC is pleased to welcome Peggy Shearer to our team as our new program improvement specialist. Peggy is the former principal of the Otter Creek Academy in Wayne County where she served for the preceding seven years. Peggy formerly served for 10 years as principal of Wayne County High School, three years as assistant principal of Wayne County High School, and a combined 20 years in the classroom teaching English and language arts in both Shelby and Wayne Counties. She is a veteran teacher, bringing more than 38 years of direct education experience to our programs.

We are confident that Peggy will continue her lifelong mission of improving educational outcomes for our children and youth. We are thrilled to have her on board and look forward to our shared work. Peggy will be charged with serving the eastern region of Kentucky and has already hit the ground running. Please join us in welcoming Peggy Shearer to the KECSAC team.
Technology Fridays at Owensboro Day Treatment

Over the past three years, teachers at Owensboro Day Treatment have been involved with blended learning with technology training through their affiliation with The Center for Educational Excellence in Alternative Settings (CEEAS). Through this affiliation, Owensboro Day Treatment has received Maker Kits. These kits contain various types of technology that encourage and teach 21st century educational skills. Students are active in learning the coding process through Code Combat, Hour of Code, and writing code to program Spheros, which are small spherical robots, and a classroom drone. Students are also jumping into the world of 3D printing with a 3D printer and 3D doodle pens. Through the use of Jimu Robot and Finch Robot kits students are entering the world of Robotics. Students are developing their creativity while using the digital embroidery machine, Ricoh Theta cameras to produce panoramic pictures, and developing their own video games with Bloxel. As a result, every Friday afternoon from 11:45 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. students at the program experience Technology Friday. During this time, all students will be in a rotation in which they will get to experience all of these technologies and curriculum to broaden their skill base. This fantastic experience has been made possible by funds from the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) Education Branch and Title I Part D Subpart 1.

Student Donates Hair for Special Cause

In the summer of 2015, a student at Christian County Day Treatment Center (CCDTC) named Tanner decided to let his hair grow out. At the time, Tanner was 14-years-old and said at this point in his life he was making poor choices and did not care what others thought. Now almost 17, Tanner has said that since enrolling in the CCDTC program, his overall attitude has changed, and it has helped him in many ways. He actually likes school now and attends on a daily basis, and he has become more caring toward others and has been helping out around his house. On November 13, 2017, Tanner decided to have his long hair trimmed after school. While having a conversation with the hairstylist, she told him that his hair measured 16 inches in length, which is long enough to donate to a program called Children Without Hair. This program provides wigs to children who have lost their hair due to cancer. When he found out he had the opportunity to donate, Tanner told the stylist to cut it all off. He said he never had second thoughts about cutting his hair because this small act of kindness made him feel really good knowing he was helping a child in need.
College Street Campus Students Build Empathy at Soup Kitchen

On November 7, 2017 students from College Street Campus were invited to work in the Community Soup Kitchen in Glasgow, Ky. The charity organization serves a free hot lunch four days a week to approximately 150 people in the community. Students were on hand that day to prep food, serve people, clean up, and re-shelve the kitchen’s pantry. At the end of the day the students thoroughly enjoyed the experience and asked if they could return to do it again. The director of the soup kitchen also commented that the College Street students were “great” and had performed as well, if not better than any group that had come to volunteer. This service learning opportunity taught students that there are hungry people everywhere, and they were surprised by how many families and single men came to the free lunch. It was a great empathy building experience for all who volunteered.

Science and Service at Calloway County Day Treatment

This Fall students at Calloway County Day Treatment were busy beefing up their science skills with several hands-experiments. One of their experiments was making ice cream by hand to illustrate different phase changes of materials. They used milk, ice cream salt, ice, vanilla extract, and sugar as materials. They placed the milk, sugar, and vanilla extract in a small Ziploc bag while the ice cream salt and ice were placed in a gallon sized Ziploc bag. Then the small bag was placed inside the gallon sized bag and they moved them around observing the changes that were happening on the outside of the bag, inside of the gallon bag, and inside the small bag. After 10 minutes, edible ice cream was made. A density experiment was also conducted to display and calculate different densities of water with food coloring. Four cups of water were filled with varying amounts of salt, which was dissolved with warm water, then food coloring was added. The students tested the densities by adding the different colors together to make a color band that represented the most dense to the least dense liquid.

Students at the Day Treatment also recently visited the Calloway County Senior Citizen Center this Fall to visit with their community elders and to compete in a cornhole tournament with them. Each student was pared with a senior who they got to know throughout the tournament.