

# Bringing Together A Neighborhood

by Keith Fanjoy

Bester Elementary School's Homecoming showcased the hopes, dreams, and possibilities of committing to your goals.



Close to 900 people passed through the doors of Bester Elementary School on Nov. 13 for a unique elementary school event with a homecoming theme to celebrate a building, and renewed hope for their neighborhood. Children, families, and community stakeholders alike enjoyed a free dinner together, followed by a diverse program of speakers and special guests, as well as a video montage with voices of the children of the school describing their hopes and dreams not only for their lives but also for their community.

Members of the community were greeted outside Bester under a balloon canopy of green and white set to a soundtrack provided by South Hagerstown High School Jazz Ensemble. Inside, Washington Redskins cheerleaders and the Hagerstown Suns mascot Woolie greeted visitors as they explored the newly transformed cafeteria and



gym. Guests were escorted down a red carpet to festively decorated tables where they were served a spaghetti dinner by an army of volunteers. After guests ate, they mingled with their neighbors and schoolmates and enjoyed activities such as face painting and balloon animals.

After the frenzy of serving meals to over 700 people in one hour, a formal program celebrating the past, present, and future of Bester began and Principal Kristi Bachtell welcomed the crowd to their community's new school. An opening video was played, taking audience members on a tour of the building that displayed all the new resources available to the children and families of Bester — including a technology lab with a combined 300 iPads and MacBooks, a cutting edge science lab, intervention rooms, and music spaces, just to name a few.

Following the video, Kristi introduced Bester volunteer Sgt. First Class Paul Flemings — who recently retired — to share his thoughts regarding his ongoing involvement at the old and new schools. After an ovation from the crowd to acknowledge his service to this country, Paul commended the crowd for participating in the event and told each child about the value of education.

Hagerstown native Christian Binford,

a pitcher for the Kansas City Royals organization who prepped at Mercersburg Academy before hitting the big time, followed Paul at the podium. “Wow, I



wish I had an iPad at school when I was going,” he smiled when describing the opportunities available to the students. He explained that not long ago he played Colt League, Pony League and Federal Little League — all in the Hagerstown area — on his way to success, and that he wasn’t able to achieve his goals without adversity or a little help.

Everyone in attendance received a raffle ticket to win a chance at themed door prizes, including a special raffle

just for Bester students in attendance. Redskins cheerleaders Annie and Lee read off the prizes, which included an extra hour of tech time, one extra encore class, and a special lunch for a student and two friends with Principal Bachtell.

Many of the themes woven throughout the celebration included instilling the hope to believe your dreams are possible, persevering through difficult circumstances, and ultimately achieving success. There was no better representation of those ideals than the keynote speaker, retired NASA Astronaut Don Thomas, a veteran of four missions to space. His story was exciting because of his unique experiences in space, but it was inspiring because of what it took for him to get there.

Don described coming from humble beginnings in Cleveland, Ohio, and experiencing the family challenges of his mother working as a secretary to provide for their family. A self-described average student, Don committed to working hard in high school and graduated with almost straight As. He continued to build on that work ethic, and obtained a bachelor’s degree in physics from Case Western Reserve, and a master of science and a doctorate in materials science from Cornell University. Not bad for an average student! But he had a







long way to go to accomplish his dream of becoming an astronaut.

Don described the painful process of applying to NASA to be an astronaut and being rejected with little consideration on two different occasions. He chose to work harder and tried to find ways to become a more competitive applicant by enhancing his skills. He described teaching college courses and obtaining his pilot's license, which got the attention of NASA who invited him to Houston, Texas, after screening thousands of applicants down to 100. After an exhaustive testing process, Don left confident that his time had finally come. But, again, he was told "thanks for your application; we wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors." For the first time, Don considered quitting, but the next morning he woke up and decided, "I still want to be an astronaut." So what to do now?

Don saw that many of those who were able to successfully become astronauts had been promoted through the NASA system, so he quit his great job at AT&T Bell Laboratories in Princeton, N.J., and moved to Texas to work with Lockheed Martin who was working with NASA. Three years went by, and for a fourth time he applied to be a NASA astronaut. Again, he went through an exhaustive testing process. This time he got the call, "Don, we'd like to know if you are still interested in being an astronaut." Finally arriving at his lifelong dream, Don began a year-long process of preparing to become an astronaut. But just when everything was

finally coming together, he felt a lump on his throat and went to check it out with the doctor. That's when he found out he had thyroid cancer.



Don had two thoughts: "Am I going to die? Does this mean I can't go into space?" Fortunately, just like all the other hurdles, he was able to receive the necessary treatment, and became cancer free. Don continued his training and ultimately completed the hero's journey, achieving space travel on many occasions. The power of Don's story was not that he made it to space — no matter how awe inspiring and incredible that end goal became — it was his refusal to give up, and his never-ending commitment to the idea that his dreams were possible. The crowd gave a big ovation to acknowledge Don's speech, and his hope was that the community that surrounds Bester could adapt these same lessons to their dreams.

Closing the program, it was time for the real stars — the students of Bester Elementary. In a video presentation, students talked about what they wanted to do when they grow up, what they hoped

for in their community, and ultimately what they could do about it. In coordination with their art teacher Ms. Dowell and STEM Teacher Kevin Sandell, the students of Bester helped to write these thoughts on leaves, and they were assembled on a large artistic representation of a tree which represented the seeds of hope living within the hearts and minds of the youth in the school.

Many students talked about their future career goals, including Damir who said, "When I grow up I want to be an astronaut and see all the planets and the moon and walk on the moon." He came to the

right event! Alexis explained her hope for her neighborhood was, "No crime anywhere so people can feel safe to come out of their homes and know they are safe." And Andre summed up his desires with, "My hope for my community is for everyone to try their best and for everyone to achieve their goals."

After the program, the school was open to the community for tours, and the next day a ceremonial tree planting was held in the school courtyard with several students to signify the long-term investment and partnership from the community in helping them to achieve their hopes and dreams.

More than 80 volunteers, teachers, and staff helped to turn this idea into a reality. Casey Family Programs was the lead sponsor for the event, but numerous community businesses and agencies contributed to this effort including Washington County Public Schools and San Mar Children's Home.