

Pittsburg entrepreneur finds greatest reward in helping needy children

By Paul Burgarino
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Jim Craft is photographed at Foothill Elementary School in Pittsburg, Calif., on Wednesday, Feb....

Working in education is the last thing Jim Craft expected in his career. Now, the business entrepreneur can't imagine doing anything else.

Craft spent more than 30 years working as a consultant and operator of a large trucking warehouse business. But some coaxing from his son persuaded him to apply his skills toward an education venture.

In 2004, Delon Craft, now a math teacher at Pittsburg's Rancho Medanos Junior High School, was disheartened by the number of students failing math and doing poorly in other subjects. At the same time, his father was looking for a new business venture.

Together, they gathered donations from local businesses and individuals to lease community space and start tutoring a few youngsters. The first year, most of the money to pay two teachers, a coordinator and two high school students who worked as aides came out of Jim Craft's savings.

In the second year, the Crafts worked with the Pittsburg school district and collaborated with the after-school program it had in place.

"The ball started rolling so fast, because of my enthusiasm and my dad's dedication," Delon Craft said. "He knew how to write a business

plan, and how to talk with the district to make it work."

Eventually, the Success Through Self Academy was born. Its mission: to give latchkey students a structured environment to learn once the last school bell of the day rings.

"A lot of these kids missed the boat early on," Jim Craft said. "We wanted to try and do something to help the students who were falling through the cracks, and not getting the support they needed."

Things are different for students today from when Craft, 60, grew up in tiny Jefferson, Texas. The days of stay-at-home parents are gone, he said.

Craft's parents made sure he studied every day, and Delon Craft said his father was also a stickler for academics. Many kids don't have that now, they said.

Without the STS Academy, there likely would be more problems with fights, theft, loitering and mischief in an "unsupervised environment," Jim Craft said.

"Children are not prone to just do their homework they aren't pushed to do so," he said.



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Fifth-graders in the program at Willow Cove Elementary agreed. Most said they likely would be in the television and certainly not doing homework.

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Instead, they hang out in Room 23 at the school, working on homework, cracking jokes about one another, eating healthy snacks, and playing such outdoor sports as tetherball and dodge ball. The girls usually win, student Chris Cendejas said.

The STS Academy holds after-school programs at five elementary school sites, tutoring and homework assistance for junior high students, and career-oriented programs at Pittsburg and Riverside high schools.

As executive director, Craft plays a supervisory role. He said he's hands-on with the 75 to 80 staff members, and likes to know how kids are progressing. The main goal is to ensure each student is prepared for each class each day.

Progress is reviewed weekly to make sure the academy is successful, he said. The cost for students is minimal, and sometimes free, because of grants and donations.

The program has been positive at Highlands Elementary because of the competent and organized site coordinators, Principal Steve Ahonen said.

"I've had no worries and no issues; it's such a positive thing and a tremendous benefit to our parents," he said.

If there is an issue or concern with a student, Ahonen said he can e-mail or call Craft or other site leaders and they take care of it.

It took about a year for Craft to transition "from dealing with boxes to dealing with 6-year-olds," his son said.

"He knew how to crunch numbers, but he couldn't tell you what an assessment was. I'm surprised how well he adjusted, and how his personality's come through. He's transformed," Delon Craft said.

In January, Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover awarded STS Academy one of two Chair of the Board awards recognizing the organization's role in improving the quality of life in Glover's district (the second award went to Antioch's Opportunity Junction).

Though the first few years were rocky, STS Academy's finances are now on solid footing. The academy has received significant grant funding, including a 21st Century Community Learning Center Grant, because of Craft's efforts.



He has worked to place an emphasis on employment programs for students at the high school level in such fields as auto shop, entrepreneurship, forklift training and computer tech through his work contacts.

Participation from Riverside High has grown for classes like forklift training, said Martha Strock, principal at the continuation high school.

Craft also takes youngsters to 100 Black Men of the Bay Area galas, theater performances and other events to help them network and see they can be successful.

"It's to expose the kids to a way of life that they haven't seen, and meet successful people that they likely never would have," Craft said.

When Craft's wife, Pittsburg recreation supervisor Merl Lewis-Craft, met him at Pittsburg's Black Diamond Blues Festival in 1999, she said he was taken aback by her passion for her profession.

"Jim couldn't believe I enjoyed what I did," said Lewis-Craft, who married Craft two years ago. "When he started STS, I said, 'You watch. Once you volunteer, you'll be hooked.'"

There's been a metamorphosis in Craft, she said, both because of the kids and because "once he starts something, he puts his whole heart and energy into it."

"Once you see the need, and you see these kids do well, there's a feeling of accomplishment that's addicting," Craft said. "It's been so rewarding that I'm hooked."

Craft said he hopes to expand the academy to Antioch.

"It's important that though we continue to grow, we don't want to lose the true objective of helping every student succeed," he said.