

City Parks & Recreation Staff Innovates to Continue Serving Children and Families

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Though COVID-19 has greatly impacted the City's regular parks and recreation offerings, staff finds new paths forward



Kim Moultrie knew a lot of things were going to have to change in a hurry back in March when the City of Spartanburg started closing facilities and cancelling events in response to the novel coronavirus that was sweeping the globe.

But there was at least one thing the city's Parks & Recreation Superintendent knew couldn't change: the city's connection with its citizens.

For a great many people, that connection with their city comes primarily — in some cases exclusively — through their use of the city's community centers, trails and parks. Whether you play pickup basketball several times a week or occasionally eat lunch in a city park, COVID-19 meant a temporary halt to much of the fun, recreation, safety, mentoring, and social connections made possible by the city's Parks & Recreation Department.

Note we said "much of" — not "all."

Not content to sit back and wait for an all-clear to resume normal operations for which no one could predict a timeline, Moultrie and her staff went to work, brainstorming new ways to bring programs, resources and opportunities to the people since the people could not come to them. They met virtually with other parks and recreation officials across the country to share ideas.

And then they quickly created a handful of new programs, while not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good. They knew that not everything they would try would be a homerun, knowing also that a steady stream of singles and doubles would translate into a lot of wins during their community's time of need.

All that stuff that gets thrown around about government being slow to act and adapt? Not in this town. Not in this time.

"We knew we needed to stay connected to the people of our community," Moultrie said. "Especially our young people and teens. They rely on us more than anyone else we feel. We have to stay connected to

them. We see a lot of them every day in our centers. So first of all we wanted to make sure they knew we still care about them and we are still available whether we can see them face-to-face or not.

“We wanted to reassure them that even though our facilities are not open, they haven’t been abandoned.”

To do that, Moultrie’s team has focused on two primary areas: Outreach and Virtual Programming.

1. Outreach: With schools, parks, community centers and most businesses closed, Moultrie and her staff were rightly concerned about the lack of opportunities for physical and mental stimulation for the city’s young people. They also knew that parents needed support more than ever during a confusing time.

Their solution was to create “program kits” — all-in-one kits that included instructions for some kind of a project or craft, as well as additional reading and learning material. Parents were able to drive up to the community centers and pick up kits at the curbside, and staff delivered hundreds more to the homes of families who either might not have heard about the program or who did not have transportation.

The effort kicked off with an early spring gardening kit. Included was everything the child needed to start their own plants at home: two kinds of seeds, potting soil, pots and instructions. Kits with Easter and Mother’s Day themes followed, and a Father’s Day kit is planned.

To date, the city has distributed close to 2,200 activity kits.

2. Virtual Programming: Moultrie’s department has also made a major leap forward in virtual programming during the COVID-19 crisis.

Videos are produced in-house by parks & recreation staff and shared on Facebook. Each day of week, the video reflects a different theme. For example, Motivational Mondays focus on uplifting messages and mentoring, while Tuesdays are reserved for sports-related videos such as sport-specific skill development or home workouts. Posted at 2 pm each day.

In addition, city-sponsored Boy Scout Explorer and other peer group meetings are now offered via Zoom.

We really had not done much (virtual programming) before this,” Moultrie said. “Sometimes in the past we might record part of a session and make it available, but that was about the extent of it. We are fortunate that we have a young man in our department who does all of our videos for us.

“Even when we do reopen, some people might not come back to us early on. So I see us keeping this as another layer of programming and keeping us connected going forward. We have seen that our young people really enjoy seeing faces and being connected even when we can’t physically be together. And it

doesn't require a lot to add this and create this type of expanded accessibility — just a little bit of planning and the technical expertise.”

There have been other lessons.

“One of the things we've learned is not just to rely on our own professional understanding and knowledge,” Moultrie said. “A lot of the programming ideas we have implemented, we would not have thought of.

“That's where having relationships with the community, real relationships with families, goes a long way. We heard from some parents who said that one of the most important things their kids needed right now was some encouragement. That's where the idea for Motivational Mondays came from. Parents also told us that their kids were really anxious and worried about what was happening and what might happen. So we have built some programming around writing and showing young people how you can write to get some of your emotions out.

“So our parents have really helped us, and in turn I hope we have been able to support and help them and their children.”