



St. Mary's County Health Department

NEWS RELEASE

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ST. MARY'S COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT AND KIWANIS CLUB OF ST. MARY'S COUNTY PARTNER IN CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND SAFETY EDUCATION

(LEONARDTOWN, MD) April 18, 2007 -- St. Mary's County Health Department is pleased to announce the formation of a partnership with The Kiwanis Club of St. Mary's County aimed at providing education about public health and safety to children.

“The partnership is breathing life into an idea shared by the health department and Kiwanis Club – that children absorb more of what they learn when they are enjoying the experience, “ said Leslie Payne, spokesperson for the health department.

St. Mary's County Health Department created a mascot in 2006 to capture the interest of children and families in the form of an otter named Opie. Opie the Otter has been featured in printed promotional and educational materials for the health department since his creation.

Members of the Kiwanis Club of St. Mary's County approached the health department after they

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learned of the new mascot, wanting to learn more about the agency's plans. They offered a \$2,500 grant to the health department for the purchase of a custom-made mascot suit to bring the animated version to life.

Bob Owen, chairman of the Kiwanis Club's Young Children Priority One committee, reflected on the reason the Kiwanis Club became interested in working with the health department. "The idea of a health-oriented, larger-than-life character was appealing," he said. "Since the health department educates children about health issues, it appeared to be a perfect choice for a Kiwanis service project"

"Kiwanis International's motto is 'Serving the Children of the World.' At the local club level that means starting with children in our local community. Not only could we do something for local kids, but we see Opie as an opportunity for students in our Service Leadership Programs like Key Club, Builders Club, K-Kids and Circle K join with us on this outreach program," he added.

"It's a very positive way to involve the students and at the same time stay close with what the health department feels are the important issues in the community. Once the Kiwanis Club Board of Directors was briefed on the idea, the plan took off."

Opie the Otter was officially introduced to the public in March 27, 2007 at a meeting of the St. Mary's County Board of County Commissioners. Opie made a big splash at various events during National Public Health Week in April including appearances at the Public Health Heroes Breakfast, a local elementary school and the Lexington Park and Charlotte Hall libraries where

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he brought lessons in public health to children and adults. Opie will appear at the Health & Safety Fair on May 12, 2007, which is an annual event sponsored by the St. Mary's Kiwanis. Plans are also forming to induct him as an honorary member of the Kiwanis club.

The impact of the new mascot is very exciting to see. "We are so pleased that the Kiwanis came through for St. Mary's kids in this way," said Leslie Payne, public information officer for the health department. "Our live Opie is capturing the hearts of everyone he meets, and teaching kids that being healthy and having fun go hand in hand."

According to St Mary's County Kiwanis Club President Cynthia Laessig, the Kiwanis' goal of serving children is a natural partnership with the health department. "Opie has given us the opportunity to engage the entire Kiwanis family here in a united experience. Not only are our children and K-Family students learning something – they are helping to carry the message of good health habits to others as well."

The health department and Kiwanis club plan to regularly call for volunteers from the local Key Club at St. Mary's Ryken High School and Circle K Club at St. Mary's College to wear the suit during outreach and promotional events.

For more information about Opie the Otter, or to have Opie make an appearance at your next event, please call Leslie Payne, public information officer at 301-475-4318.

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Photo Caption: Opie Otter poses with two new friends, John and Christian Burch of Mechanicsville, MD.