



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Made to Thrive volunteer Dave Caldwell talks with Shane Bennett while driving him to a football game recently at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston.

The big assist

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What do a group of 300 kids, ages three to 19, from every corner of the community have in common?

They're all thriving — or at least, they're on their way, with the help of the Made to Thrive program.

The nonprofit, started by Hermiston resident Kriss Dammeyer in 2014, began as a way to help at-risk students build confidence through sports or music.

It's since become a pipeline for all kinds of extracurricular activities — all furnished by the Made to Thrive program.

The program assists families who want to get their kids involved, but need a boost.

"Sometimes, people need help navigating the process of going to practice, finding out when tryouts are, getting the appropriate gear," Dammeyer said. "Some families, we help financially, and some we help with transportation. It's not cookie-cutter. It's a case-by-case basis."

Some Made to Thrive kids are going through foster care, or are in abusive households. Some are from financially solvent families who need help in other areas.

"We help them because they neglect their children," Dammeyer said. "They sit at home and supply the kids with a very fancy phone, but don't put them in activities. To me, that's not thriving."

But Dammeyer said it doesn't matter what kind of family background a person has.

"We're not an organization that hands out things," she said. "We are an organization that teaches life skills, provides guidance and assistance."

The 37 volunteers of Made to Thrive do everything from mentoring and transporting kids to and from practice to assisting families with immigration paperwork.

The latter is not the group's main focus, but Dammeyer said those who need help can find a starting point in Made to Thrive.

"If families we're working with struggle with that piece, we don't hesitate to get them the proper resources."

She added that helping families is easier when children have something to look forward to and be proud of.

"I want the depth of our impact to be more of a priority than the breadth. I want to make sure that for the kids we do impact, it's meaningful and lasting — not just one volleyball season."

A music room sits off to the side of the Made to Thrive office. Thomas Goatley, who learns guitar through the organization, practices with his teacher Mike Kellison.

Kellison watches as Thomas, 14, plays intently, frowning and speaking the notes as he plucks at strings.

"Excellent," Kellison said. "That went from 'oh my gosh' to 'oh, we just played it' in five minutes."

Thomas has been taking lessons for about a year, and his parents have been thrilled with the changes they've seen.

"At the time (he started), Thomas was going to Armand Larive," said his mother Melissa. "He wasn't really fitting in. He was really quiet."

Melissa said her son had been wanting



Guitar instructor Mike Kellison talks about technique with Thomas Goatley recently at the Made to Thrive office in Hermiston.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Made to Thrive volunteer Dave Caldwell checks a bag of supplies for Shane Bennett while dropping him off at a football game recently at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston.

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to learn music, but at the time, the family couldn't afford it. Through Made to Thrive, Thomas started taking classes from Kellison.

The lessons have given him more confidence.

"He's made some friends, he's socializing," Melissa said.

Thomas agreed.

"I've been enjoying it quite a bit," he said. "If something goes on in school or something's happening in the family, it's like my getaway. I can play the guitar and make up random things."

Dammeyer said her volunteers come from around the community.

"They reach out because they love what they're doing," she said. "I seek out men and

women who I know have a heart and passion for children and their families."

Because the program is free to students and families, Dammeyer and her board of directors have to find ways to finance the music teachers, sports teams and activities. There are some private donors as well as federal, state and local grants. They hold three annual fundraisers, including a garage sale, a raffle, and a Father's Day car show. She estimated the program costs about \$20,000 per year to finance.

Lenora Artz said her grandson, Shane Bennett, has gotten a lot from the program.

"I found out (about Made to Thrive) through someone at Sunset Elementary," she said. "I asked them if there was any way to

get my grandson into Taekwondo."

Bennett's home life hadn't been easy the past few years. He had recently lost his father, and after moving around, he began living with Artz, who stays in a retirement facility.

Not only did he get to do Taekwondo, but he also began playing football.

Bennett has also enjoyed having a mentor, Dave Caldwell. Caldwell transports him to and from practice, helps him with his gear, and cheers him on.

Their friendship has extended beyond football, Artz said, adding that she was thrilled for her grandson to have a positive male role model in his life.

"He'll take him out and fly the drone, or if he wants to talk," Artz said.

Artz said she's noticed many changes in her grandson since he started his extracurricular activities, including a more positive outlook.

"His grades have come up," she said. "The program has helped him with his anger, he's better in school. He feels like he's accomplished something."

"He's got a long way to go," she said. "But he wouldn't even have started without them."

Amanda Arroyo, 15, took African drumming and art classes this summer through Made to Thrive, her first time doing so. Some of her siblings also took soccer and baseball through the program.

"It has a positive impact," she said. Arroyo, a Hermiston resident, enjoyed making friends, and getting to know some of the mentors that worked in the program. Given the opportunity, she said she'd like to work as a mentor when she's older.

"I would volunteer for it," she said.

The program has grown since its inception three years ago, but its goal hasn't changed.

"What makes us unique is that we are involved with families on weekends, evenings," Dammeyer said. "We really don't stop thinking about our families."