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ASPIRE to greatness



Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer

Amelia Graff is chased by Bram Tabachnick during a game of Duck, Duck, Goose at the Meeting Waters YMCA ASPIRE program at Academy School, Thursday afternoon.

10 years of transformation

Fortiers celebrate decade at Meeting Waters YMCA

By ERIC PERO
Reformer Staff

BELLOWS FALLS — The world was a different place 10 years ago. The Sept. 11 attacks hadn't "changed everything," Bill Clinton's infamous intern sex scandal was just coming to light, and Terry Nichols was sentenced to life for his involvement in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Locally, the year 1998 was a tough time for the regional Meeting Waters YMCA, in Bellows Falls, which was in near financial crisis and without leadership.

But all that changed a decade ago when the husband and wife team of Steve and Sue Fortier joined the Meeting Waters staff — as executive director and senior program director, respectively.

As the parents of two children in the Meeting Waters' Childspace Child Care Center at the time, the Fortiers saw an opportunity to bring their skills and experiences to the struggling organization.

The duo approached the board with a business plan that centered around their two different skill sets and experiences and now, 10 years later, the organization is thriving with dozens of quality program and services for youth up and down the Connecticut River Valley.

"When our son first started here



Submitted photo

Sue and Steve Fortier

there was no overall leadership, there was nobody asking 'what can we be doing?'" Steve said. "The situation was bleak, but at least there was a Meeting Waters YMCA."

The couple first met, somewhat ironically, when Steve hired Sue as both the youth and aquatics director at the Keene, N.H., YMCA. Sue jokes that they "got together" there, but her experiences with the YMCA started much earlier.

Sue was one of six children raised by a single mother and basically grew up at the Greater Burlington YMCA. She went through the Y Leadership Corps program, along with many others, and that path led

her to work with the YMCA as a profession.

Her lifelong commitment to the Y gave her the broad background to run an organization like the Meeting Waters YMCA.

"Whatever the community needs, Sue can develop the programs, train the staff and then move onto the next thing," Steve said. "Sue's got the breadth of experience to lead the way."

Steve, on the other hand, comes from a community health background and helped create the Leadership Project, which brought him to more than 38 states and 34 countries to implement the program.

From a leadership standpoint, Steve has a master's degree in organizational leadership and management, and has a book credit to his name, "Youth Leadership Development."

Sue says his skills help give the organization long-term direction.

"Steve can see the big picture and make those connections," Sue said. "Our complimentary and diverse skill sets have allowed us to be extremely efficient. The puzzle pieces came together well."

The first new program the couple created for Meeting Waters was ASPIRE, an after-school program that focuses on the YMCA's approach to develop spirit, mind and body.

Steve says they wrote letters to school principals up and down the valley to see if there was a commu-

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Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer

Charlie Allen is chased by Elizabeth Day during a game of Duck, Duck, Goose at the Meeting Waters YMCA ASPIRE program at Academy School, Thursday afternoon.

Fortiers

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nity need for after-school programs. There was an immediate "snowball" effect and it was immediate clear that the need was great.

Fast forward 10 years, and ASPIRE programs are now in place at schools across the region. The Meeting Waters is actually the biggest child care provider for school-age children in Brattleboro.

"We weren't just throwing darts with our eyes closed. We needed to make sure there was a community need," Steve said. "Now it's year-round after school care for hundreds of parents."

The one strong program at Meeting Waters in 1998 was the Lewis Day Camp, in Springfield, which continues to thrive to this day. The camp is celebrated its 44th year in 2008 and more than 10,000 children have participated in that time.

Sue remembers attending YMCA camp when she was a child at the YMCA and she enjoys being involved with the Lewis Day Camp. She says her own children even come to help out at the camp each summer.

"I wouldn't have had the opportunities I had growing up if it wasn't for the Y," Sue said. "The more people I can provide that opportunity and experience to, the better."

Other successful programs through Meeting Waters include an active adults fitness program, childcare transportation programs, teen leadership and government programs and more. When the numbers all tallied, the Fortiers have helped instigate more than 30 programs in the past 10 years.

While the YMCA is a "national" organization, the Meeting Waters YMCA doesn't receive any funding or curriculum requirements from a regional or national office. All the local programs are developed locally and all the money comes from local sources.

Best of all, Steve says, is every penny raised stays local.

"Yes, we're part of a national organization," Steve said. "But Y's are community-created and community-led."

"We're a mom and pop organization," Sue added. "They don't provide us with a curriculum, and they certainly don't provide any startup money."

Despite all the Fortiers' success at Meeting Waters, there have been some hard times too.

The organization recently got some bad news when plans to build a \$8.4 million YMCA facility in Brattleboro were shelved because of economic concerns, and because funding from state and federal sources weren't available.

Meeting Waters currently serves the Brattleboro area with satellite programs, the "Y Without Walls," but the couple says the construction of a brick-and-mortar facility would better serve the more than 6,000 area residents who would benefit from it.

"It was to be another vehicle for our mission," Sue added. "But, we're playing a leadership role in Brattleboro and we will continue to do that."

Steve and Sue have already heard from many Brattleboro-area residents expressing their disappointment, but they want community residents to know they will not give up on the project.

When the economic situation improves, they plan to do another feasibility study and hopefully improve the chances of success for a Brattleboro YMCA facility.

"I think the needs will only continue to grow for a community hub," Steve said. "It has to come around again at some point. And we're hearing that from many people."

Recent setbacks aside, the Fortiers are happy about their decade of success with the Meeting Waters YMCA, and plan to continue assessing community needs, developing programs and working toward improving communities in the areas they serve.

And despite the long hours the couple spends together, both at home and at work, they see a happy future for themselves with Meeting Waters YMCA.

"When we came to this organization it was as a family," Sue said. "We support each other well and keep each other in check."