

## Program pushes single mothers, children to succeed Against the Grain Ministries offers important education for struggling families



Katie Kendall, daughter of Against the Grain Ministries founders Rob and Meredith Kendall, works with preschoolers in the Reading in the Park program. The ministry works with single mothers and their children. SUBMITTED PHOTO

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**FRANKLIN** — The line starts early Monday evenings at Strong Tower Bible Church's community center on Natchez Street. Each Monday night, 30-50 children from preschool through junior high come to a mentoring and tutoring program run by Against the Grain Ministries, founded by Meredith and Rob Kendall.

"It starts at 6:30, but they start showing up about 5:45 or 6 o'clock," Meredith Kendall said. The Monday night "Reach and Teach" sessions are an offshoot of

the ministry the Kendalls began two years ago as a way of helping empower single mothers.

In 2002, while making a six-figure income, the Kendalls decided their life was not what they wanted. Meredith urged her husband to take a year off while the family lived on the proceeds of her real estate work and decide what God wanted them to do. At nearly the end of the time, she went on a women's retreat sponsored by Strong Tower. "She rode for two and a half hours with a single mother. She listened to this lady tell her story — three kids, no high school diploma and no hope of getting out of the situation she was in," Rob Kendall said.

"She came home and told me about it. All of a sudden, light bulbs started going off. I went off and in 10 minutes had an entire outline of what to do — a ministry for single moms. She started crying, and said, 'This is exactly what I had been thinking.' " Meredith hired the young woman as an assistant.

"We walked with her. One day she came to me and said, 'I've got friends who want what I have.' I said, 'But I can't hire them all.' She said that they wanted help as single moms," she said.

The couple set up a cookout in July 2003 at Strahl Park. Six mothers and their children showed up. "We asked the moms what they need more than anything else. They told us they feel overwhelmed. They had never been taught to raise children. They don't have a lot of job skills, don't have a good, solid educational background. They don't know how to get out of the situation they're in," Rob Kendall said.

The couple started a program to help.

"We provide help in three areas. Help in the Christian growth area with Bible studies. We have a life-skills area to work with them on parenting skills, homemaking skills and helping them figure out what they want to do in their lives. We also provide help financially through our Felt Needs Fund.

"When someone is in poverty and gets a job, they initially lose more in benefits. This helps them for the short time

until they start getting checks in. But we hold people accountable. They must go through budget training. They have to have a plan," Rob Kendall said. Through the fund, the couple buys gasoline, diapers and other items to tide the women over until their lives are going smoothly again.

In the past two years, the couple has helped more than 100 mothers and their children, Rob Kendall said. "After three to six months of walking with a mom, we kind of back off and let them begin to walk on their own," he said. The relationships that have been built with these women have led naturally to relationships with the children.

When Meredith Kendall discovered Franklin Community Ministries' Reading in the Park program was going to be canceled because of a lack of volunteer help, she volunteered to take the project on herself. She passed out fliers, and 30 or so children showed up. "We read all summer long. We played, did crafts. We met outside in the park. Later in the summer, when it started getting dark earlier, we realized we had to get inside," she said. They called around to several churches for space, but only one provided it. Strong Tower members agreed to let them use its community center.

They and volunteers help the children with their homework. When that is finished or they don't have any, they use curriculum donated by Dalmatian Press and the Franklin Special School District to work on extra math or English. Preschoolers study letters and colors. They also have music and crafts.

"We had pizza and a movie at the end of the year. We thought the kids would enjoy not doing homework, and they didn't have any anyway. About halfway through, they said they wanted to do homework. They got out the curriculum we have and got pizza boxes for desks and were sitting on the front porch doing homework," Meredith Kendall said.

The ministry receives money and volunteers from several churches and other organizations. The Predators gave them money for a computer, and Middle Tennessee Electric Membership Corp. has given a grant for single-parenting classes.

In the future, the Kendalls hope to start a youth group for teenage girls. Some daughters of their single mothers have told them they don't want to become single mothers themselves. "The programs I have seen don't work. That's because they're just about abstinence. We want to be about relationships. That's what works with kids and adults," Meredith Kendall said. •