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# NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

## **Local Developer, Wife Commit \$2 Million to Local After School Program Challenge Gift to Establish \$4 Million Endowment**

**CHARLOTTE, NC** – A local after school program received a tremendous boost this week, thanks to the generosity of local philanthropists. The Greater Enrichment Program (**GEP**) – the longest running after school program in Charlotte – received a \$2 million challenge gift from local business leader Howard C. “Smoky” Bissell and his wife, Margaret.

The gift was announced at the GEP’s annual fundraising luncheon. The funds will be used to underwrite the **Iris and Bishop George E. Battle, Jr. Greater Enrichment Program**, creating a \$4 million endowment to help sustain the program and allow for growth of the academic and cultural enrichment services.

George E. Battle, Jr, Bishop of the AME Zion Church [and former chairman of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board], founded GEP in 1975 out of his desire to create a safe place for children to gather after school – one where they could learn in a compassionate environment. Today, it is one of the longest running and best managed out of school time programs for children. Often referred to as the safety net after school program, serving some of the most underprivileged children in the community, GEP continues to operate successfully, thanks to community support and the dedication of Bishop Battle. His love for this program and the children and families who are helped by it, is a driving force behind GEP.

“If you could take GEP and let it stand for something else, it’s George Elevates People,” said Margaret Bissell, retired long-time educator with CMS and former head of school at Charlotte Country Day School. “If you look at the 10,000 + children that he has had an impact on – and their families – you can only begin to imagine the profound impact.”

“George Battle will step in wherever he is needed,” said Smoky Bissell, local developer and chairman of the Bissell Companies. “He is a true leader... it’s always about how are we going to add value in people’s lives.”

Other prominent leaders shared Bissell’s sentiments as they paid tribute to Bishop Battle at the luncheon, including Jane McIntyre, Faison; Mac Everett, civic leader; James Woodward,

Chancellor Emeritus of UNC-Charlotte; and Harvey Gantt, Gantt Huberman Architects and former Charlotte mayor. (see video link)

Mike Griffin, chairman of GEP and partner in Griffin Brothers, a local diversified fam business, accepted the Bissell's gift, as well as the challenge to raise the additional funds. "We are well on our way towards achieving the challenge, having received nearly half a million dollars in commitments," he said.

The donations come at a crucial time in the life of the program, which has struggled to keep its sites open after reductions in city funding. "It had become evident that private funding would be crucial to our program, so we couldn't be more grateful to the Bissell's for this unprecedented gift," Griffin added.

The only five-star out of school program of its kind, GEP currently operates at three Charlotte Mecklenburg School sites – Ashley Park Elementary, Merry Oaks Academy, and Thomasboro Academy – as well as the new Movement charter school. Parental involvement is a key component of GEP, which provides academic services, tutoring, mentoring, and unique to this program – transportation home for every student. Community partnerships have been critical to the program, which also emphasizes cultural enrichment, health and fitness, and community service.

"GEP focuses on the whole family, not just the child who is in the program," said Bronica Glover, Executive Director of GEP. "We know parenting and educating children are big jobs, especially for families with limited income and resources."

Thanks to Margaret and Smoky Bissell, the resources for GEP are now much greater, and the lives of hundreds of children will be that much brighter.

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