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## **Clemson Celebrates Landmark Initiative to Protect Children**

In a luncheon today at Reedy River Missionary Baptist Church, Clemson University leaders joined more than 100 Greenville-area civic, political, business, and religious leaders to celebrate the largest community effort ever undertaken to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Since the launch of Strong Communities for Children in the Golden Strip in spring 2002, approximately 3,000 individuals have volunteered their time and talents. Remarkably diverse community organizations have also joined in the effort to keep children safe: more than 100 churches; nearly 50 civic clubs and other voluntary associations; most of the public safety agencies, and all of the municipal governments.

More than 100 businesses have joined in the discussions, and nearly half have participated in at least two Strong Communities activities for support of families of young children. Schools and human service agencies have also joined in the initiative, which is based at The Golden Strip Center in Simpsonville and led by the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, a Public Service Activity of Clemson.

The volunteers themselves are quite diverse. About one-third are ethnic minorities. Although projects focused on improving children's well-being typically rely primarily on women, about 40% of the volunteers in Strong Communities are male. The volunteers also vary widely in age. One-fourth are under 30, but almost as many are over 50.

Dr. Gary B. Melton, the leader of the Strong Communities initiative and the director of Clemson's Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, concluded, "The best news that Strong Communities has generated is that the ideas are powerful! Everyone wants to be a part of a community in which they themselves, their children, their grandchildren—and, yes, their neighbors—can depend on being cared for and noticed. This wish transcends the usual divisions of ethnicity, religion, politics, class, gender, and age."

Stretching across southern Greenville County and adjoining areas of Anderson and Laurens counties, Strong Communities is supported by a long-term, multi-million-dollar grant. Since 2002, The Duke Endowment has awarded more than \$5 million for Strong Communities, of which approximately \$1.5 million has been directed to community organizations.

For 2005, The Duke Endowment just announced a grant to the Clemson University Research Foundation for \$1.6 million for use in Strong Communities. Of those funds, approximately \$600,000 will be subcontracted to community organizations in Greenville and Anderson counties. The latter figure exceeds the total state funds received by the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life through the Clemson budget.

"Protecting children has been one of The Duke Endowment's priorities since its establishment in 1924, but the Strong Communities program and an allied program in North Carolina represent our most substantive efforts specifically focused on preventing child abuse and neglect," said Rhett N. Mabry, director of the Child Care Division of the Endowment. "We are excited by this program's potential not only to help children and families in the Golden Strip area, but to serve as model for similar programs across the nation."

Clemson President James F. Barker noted that the university's work in the Strong Communities initiative complements its efforts in technological development at the new

International Center for Automotive Research campus, which will be located within the Strong Communities service area. The two initiatives offer world-class examples of research that will support economic and social development in the Greenville area. Barker added that Strong Communities reflects Clemson's emphasis on Family and Community Living.

"The Strong Communities initiative," Melton noted, "...is based on the premise that, to be effective, child protection must be part of everyday life. Therefore, Strong Communities involves efforts throughout the participating communities to ensure that all children and all parents know that whenever they have reason to rejoice, worry, or grieve, someone will notice and someone will care."

Pres. Barker and his wife Marcia led the assembled university and community leaders in signing pledges to do their best to watch out for children, to learn the names of the children in the 10 homes closest to their own and to take time regularly to help a family with young children.

Dr. Asher Ben-Arieh, an Israeli social work professor who directs a global network of scholars involved in measuring and monitoring children's well-being, praised Strong Communities for the knowledge that the initiative is generating about volunteerism. "Planned as a decade-long effort, Strong Communities is unprecedented in its potential to add to knowledge about prevention of child abuse and neglect," Ben-Arieh added.

During an era in which social isolation has become more common, Strong Communities has already made great strides in increasing connections among people. Fire Chief Jerry "Butch" Nichols noted dramatic changes that have occurred in the Piedmont community. "I have been doing this job for 40 years, and Strong Communities has made a difference. I have more organizations working together now than ever before," said Nichols.

These sentiments were echoed by Larry Turner, manager of Aladdin Manor Apartments in the Gantt community. “We are either going to be a part of the problem or a part of the solution. I want to be a part of the solution. For seven years I have been looking for an organization to help, and Strong Communities is that organization,” added Turner.

Recognizing organizations that had made exceptional contributions to building safer communities for children, Clemson honored 10 organizations as the 2005 Champions for Children. The awardees included: Augusta Acres Community Association and H. J. Brand, Inc., in the Conestee-Gantt area; Fairforest Baptist Church in the Laurel Creek neighborhood; Fountain Inn Wesleyan Church; Mauldin Police Department; Augusta Road United Methodist Church, Pelzer Elementary School, and Valley Brook Outreach Baptist Church in Pelzer; Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church and Jumping Jukebox in Simpsonville.

Previous honorees were also recognized. They included: Aladdin Manor Apartments; Belmont Fire Department; Carolina Refinishing Co., Fountain Inn; Cryovac Division, Sealed Air Corp., Simpsonville; Eastminster Presbyterian Church, Simpsonville; Fork Shoals YMCA Community Center; Fountain Inn Presbyterian Church; First Baptist Church, Mauldin; Modern Woodmen of America; Piedmont Fire Department; Pride in Piedmont; Reedy River Missionary Baptist Church; Resurrected Treasure Ministries, Gantt; Shady Grove Baptist Church, Pelzer; Sue Cleveland Elementary School, Piedmont; Trinity United Methodist Church, Fountain Inn.

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**Strong Communities for Children in the Golden Strip** (Strong Communities) is a comprehensive, community-wide initiative to prevent child abuse and neglect in southern Greenville County by building systems of care for families of young children. Strong Communities, based at the Golden Strip Family and Child Development Center, is a public service activity of the Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life at Clemson University and supported by a multi-year grant from The Duke Endowment. For more information on Strong Communities, please visit [www.clemson.edu/strongcommunities](http://www.clemson.edu/strongcommunities).