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Agency surpasses \$6M goal

BY LARRY GIERER
Staff Writer

Billy Jackson knows exactly how many children the Boys and Girls Club of Phenix/Russell would serve if not for funds from the United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley.

"None," said Jackson, executive director of the club, which works with 175 to 200 children a day. "We'd be closed."

That's why Jackson was thrilled Thursday to hear that this year's fundraising campaign not only reached its goal for the first time in four years but surpassed it with the highest total of cash pledges in the organization's history.

This year's goal was \$6 million and the final total, revealed at an afternoon celebration in the W.C. Bradley Museum, was \$6,361,430. "That's the most United Way has ever gone over the goal," said a proud Sheree Mitchell, the campaign leader.

"Every year, I'm praying for the campaign to do well," said Jackson, "because the money does so much good. I don't know just how many speeches I've given in support of the United Way on both sides of the river but it's a lot."

And why does Jackson feel the campaign went so well this time?

"I think Hurricane Katrina had a lot to do with it," he said. "I think people became aware of how much the United Way agencies were helping the storm evacuees. It made them aware that something terrible like that could happen to them."

United Way President Guy Sims agreed with Jackson's assessment.

"Early in the campaign I was feeling good about our chances of reaching the goal, maybe passing it," said Sims, "but I never expected anything like this. I think Hurricane Katrina made a lot of people open their hearts and minds and realized a lot of those hurricane victims were being helped right here."

He added that an improved economy also played a part. "That was reflected in the donations by employees," he said.

Mitchell said: "The corporate community really exceeded expectations -- really, just exploded."

The United Way supports 49 programs in 21 agencies -- Open Door Community House, Second Harvest Food Bank, Stewart Community House, Children's Tree House and the Family Center are just a few in the eight-county area.

"I told people at the beginning of this campaign that it is something personal," Mitchell said. "Sooner or later, everybody is going to need help from some United Way agency. With this money, we're taking care of each other."