

Federation sheds light on the blind

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By Keiana Page

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(Third in a series about United Way-funded agencies in Laurens County.)

The Bell Federation Center of the Blind offers a ray of light to those living without sight in Laurens County.

The federation's mission is to serve and improve the lives of Laurens County's blind population. The non-profit organization is affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina and works closely with the South Carolina Commission for the Blind and the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind.

Bell Federation is located at 1103 Harper St. in Laurens and serves an estimated 50 people each year.

"(We) give them support and help. We try to give them a hand up, not a hand out," said Federation Director Robert Bell.

The agency's services include counseling, support, training classes, referrals and social activities, such as luncheons and trips. Bell Federation also furnishes emergency transportation for the blind.

Blind, Page 3A

Blind

From 1A 9-26-07

Bell Federation has been providing these important services to the county for more than 20 years.

"We feel like the blind have more knowledge of what the blind need," said Bell, adding the federation is the only agency in the county solely dedicated to the blind.

Education is another major function of the Bell Federation.

With proper training, the blind can do what anyone else can do, said Bell.

The agency teaches others about the needs and stereotypes of the vision impaired to groups and in schools.

"One of our goals is to educate the sighted population," he said. "That's one of the handicaps (of) the blind."

The federation also supports the Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference Center of the Blind in Pickens County.

Bell Federation offers these services on a small budget of an estimated \$30,000. The agency is funded by donations and holds small fundraisers.

The federation also receives funding from the City of Laurens, Laurens County and United Way of Laurens County. The United Way provided the Bell Federation with \$7,500 this year.

"Without them, we probably wouldn't be able to operate," said Bell. "They've been our biggest supporter for a number of years."

He encourages the community to support the United Way, which recently kicked off its annual fundraising campaign. This year's campaign goal is \$500,000.

The Bell Federation currently needs additional funding for operations and a full-time employee. The agency is planning a raffle fundraiser for 2008 to include several prizes like a beach vacation.

For more information, to volunteer or to make a donation, call 984-4714.