Pharmacy Student Helps Improve Toddler Nutrition
by Sheila Roberson

Cara McCalley, a fourth-year student at the University of Georgia College of Pharmacy, loves her hometown of Moultrie and “giving back” to her community is a priority for her. “I know it sounds like a cliché but it’s important to me to help out a place that has given so much to me.”

That desire to help is how she came to develop a program on toddler nutrition for Moultrie’s Hope House Pregnancy Care Center, a non-profit outreach ministry designed to help teens and young women make good decisions about pregnancy and parenting. The center offers pregnancy testing, information on birth control, classes on parenting and even a thrift shop for clothes and baby items.

McCalley’s idea initially was part of a final project for a public health elective she took during her third year in pharmacy school. Her assignment was to develop an education awareness project that would promote wellness and positive lifestyle choices and could be implemented in a community. McCalley chose toddler nutrition since her research showed that a child’s diet impacts cell development and lifelong health, beginning in the toddler years.

“I was amazed to learn that one third of America’s children are overweight or obese, and $2 million is spent annually on nutrition education,” she said, adding that the last decade has witnessed a distinct rise in childhood obesity, diabetes and hypertension, which could be attributed to poor nutrition and physical health.

“Parents make the choices for what kids eat from the ages of 1 to 4, and later kids choose for themselves;” she added. “So we need to make sure parents receive the appropriate information to make good nutrition choices for their young children. The Hope House was a natural place to implement my project after the elective course ended.”

McCalley took it upon herself to develop a curriculum, design visual aids, and create handouts for the four-week class she taught in August. Some 10-12 parents attended the classes and each was given the opportunity to earn attendance vouchers -- called Mommie Money or Daddy Dollars -- to use for purchases in the thrift shop.

“Since most of the parents were young and undereducated, I dealt with nutrition basics including the importance of protein intake at a young age,” she said, adding that she was surprised by the overall lack of knowledge about nutrition. “Coursework focused on practical eating habits, portion size, healthy alternatives and foods that harm good health.

“My goal was to promote an awareness of establishing healthy eating habits in a child’s early years and the importance of making the connection to future health problems, such as diabetes, obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure, through poor dietary choices.”

She also offered pre- and post-class quizzes to measure what the parents had learned during the course. Even though the course only lasted four weeks, McCalley organized her materials so they could be used in future classes at Hope House. In fact, she is working with the Moultrie Junior Women’s Club to continue the toddler nutrition course as its community service project.

“This was such an interesting experience for me in many ways,” said McCalley, who hopes to do a residency after she graduates in May 2015. “As a future pharmacist, it was interesting that I could be on the front end of promoting lifestyle choices rather than on the back end of fixing health problems.”