

A Haven for Whiz Kids

Haven House Shelter Offers One-On-One Tutoring To Disadvantaged Students

BY WILLIAM WOODY

MONTROSE — A bright young girl with an infectious smile stood before a room of her peers, describing her “helpful, optimistic and joyful” feelings about life and divulging her favorite snack (apples).

She was one of nearly a dozen kids who receive volunteer tutoring each Wednesday evening at the Haven House.

Samantha, or “Sam” as she is called, is a 10-year-old student at Olathe Elementary School. For the past couple of years, she has been enrolled in the Whiz Kids Tutoring program at the Haven House, a former farm dormitory north of Olathe that’s now a drug- and alcohol-free transitional living shelter for local homeless families.

Most of these kids are in kin-

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JOYFUL LEARNING — Whiz Kids tutors Joanne Fairchild (left) and Patricia Neubert (center) worked with participating students at the Haven House, which hosts the volunteer-staffed supplemental learning program every Wednesday night, October-April. (Photo by William Woody)



WHIZ KIDS FACTS

- PROGRAM CREATED 23 YEARS AGO
- PARTNERED 10,000 TUTORS WITH ABOUT 10,000 STUDENTS
- OVER 95 PERCENT TUTOR RETENTION RATE
- ORIENTATION AND TRAINING SEMINARS FOR NEW TUTORS
- BOOKS AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS PROVIDED AT EACH SITE

SOURCE: WWW.WHIZKIDSTUTORING.COM

WHIZ KIDS — Ten-year-old Samantha (left photo) delivered a class presentation with the help of her tutor, Judy Peters; tutor Tom Koehler worked with a student (center photo); and a young girl entered Haven House for the start of last week’s Whiz Kids Tutoring session. The program is held Wednesday evenings, October through April, with 11 young student-participants from the Montrose-Olathe area. (Photos by William Woody)

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dergarten and 1st grade, and don't understand words like "recession" or "economic downturn," nor that their families are victims of the ruthless reality of poverty. "I don't know if they realize that, or even know," said Olathe Elementary School teacher Heidi Haugen. "When they're here, they always have friends to play with."

But they do know, subconsciously, whatever situation their families happen to be caught up in, education plays a key role in their daily lives.

Haugen serves as liaison between the Haven House and the Olathe School, working with students, tutors and teachers to make sure the tutoring is aligned with the school curriculum, using new student assessment data provided by the Montrose County School District.

Kids living at Haven House are joined each Wednesday evening by their peers, including former residents whose families have moved on and other kids attending local grade schools. Participants are paired with local volunteers to work on reading, writing, arithmetic, social skills and spiritual lessons.

"What I do is I go and get all the assessments that they do in the classroom," Haugen said. "I talk

with the teachers, I see where the students are, and I bring that here for the tutors.

"And it's that one-on-one [attention] that they can't get in a classroom," she added. "The child feels valuable, because they have this one person who is waiting for them."

Haven House co-creator Lillian Frederickson said that anywhere from 12 to 15 volunteer tutors work with the Whiz Kids program now being used by 11 kids.

"All the kids here either lived in the Haven House or have lived in the Haven House or are from Olathe Elementary School," Frederickson said.

Whiz Kids Tutoring is a Denver-based nonprofit organization; its mission is to "improve the well-being of disadvantaged youth through academic tutoring, positive mentoring relationships and spiritual nurturing."

The program has 46 sites, mostly urban churches throughout the Denver Metro area. Haven House is its only location on the Western Slope.

Frederickson said national statistics indicate children living in poverty have a harder time academically than other children.

Currently about 20 percent of children in America live in some form of poverty; over the past five decades, the achievement gap be-

tween those students and children whose families are not struggling financially has continued to widen.

WHIZ KIDS, NOW IN ITS THIRD YEAR

Beginning in 2011, the newly created Haven House introduced the Whiz Kid method, pairing one adult with one child for a period of about 90 minutes each Wednesday in the facility's cafeteria.

The program mostly focuses on K-5 students with either low Transitional Colorado Assessment Program scores (the TCAP is Colorado's standards-based assessment) or who are in the Free or Reduced Meal program.

The Whiz Kids program at the Haven House follows the Montrose School District holiday calendar, October through April. "We wanted to have a program for the children where they would be able to have one-on-one interaction with adults outside of school," Frederickson said.

Haugen said that now, with the program in its third year, student achievement data and measured results will be more revealing by the end of the 2013-2014 year. "We are lucky to have this; Olathe is lucky to have this," she said.

Leslie Torres, the club leader and tutor of the Haven House Whiz Kids program, said some of

the children have been together in the program for the past two to three years. "I love working with these kids and seeing how the program is supposed to work," Torres said, adding that the demand for volunteer tutors is always greatest after parent-teacher conferences in late October.

"They always ask, 'Can you take on three more kids?'"

"Well, if we have the tutors for them, we can," Torres said.

It's all about volunteerism, said Julie Harris, a Haven House case manager. "When we get some more tutors to volunteer, then we can invite more [kids] from the greater community to participate."

According to Harris, the current Whiz Kids are also enrolled in the local Partners program serving Delta, Montrose and Ouray counties (although, due to volunteer demand, no Whiz Kids are presently paired with Partners volunteers).

"Unfortunately, the number of youth who could benefit from a senior partner is greater than the number of adult volunteers," said Curtis Hearst, a Montrose Case Manager for Partners. "That is one of our biggest challenges. We are always looking for positive role models to be matched with the kids on our waiting list."

Haven House parents "have been very supportive of the pro-

gram," Haven said, to the extent that "we have families who have moved out, but still keep their kids in the program."

According to tutor and Montrose resident Joanne Fairchild, the program works, in large part, because "it's one-on-one time with these kids, and it makes them feel so special. It gives them confidence and self-esteem. They interact well with each other. It's a great program."

"I think if their home life is a bit chaotic, there isn't a lot of that one-on-one alone time with their parents to sit down. They depend a lot on the schools, and the schools are crowded and busy, so it's a real step up. And if the kids are already living in a stressful situation, this is a bit of normalcy."

Back at last week's tutoring session, loud squeals of laughter filled the room by the end of the evening, as the children snacked on fruit and discussed owls, fishing and story books with their tutors.

Samantha, who was the first "Star of the Week" for the 2013-14 Whiz Kids school year, has told her peers that she has not yet decided what she wants to be when she grows up.

Thankfully, she has help.

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