

Tutoring underprivileged girls paying dividends

Eastport Girls Club reading scores, grades, attitude improving

By **EARL KELLY**
Staff Writer

It appears that a group founded to help Eastport girls in public housing and low-income communities perform better in school — and develop interests outside their immediate surroundings — may be succeeding.

Two years ago, a group of women calmly and quietly set out to help these girls. They knew it would be a long process, but their efforts appear to be bearing fruit.

The roughly 15 girls in the Eastport Girls Club have greatly

increased their reading ability, as scored by the Test of Word Reading Efficiency, or TOWRE, exam, the club's founders said.

The exam measures the ability to recognize familiar words as "sight words," and the ability to sound out words.

Last fall, according to the club's founders, the girls averaged 2.1 grade levels below where they should have been. When tested again this spring, they were only half a level behind.

The group's founders, along with others, including some men, have been tutoring the girls. Also, to spice up the learning process, the mentors have been taking the girls to music camps and cooking classes, and to

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By Joshua McKerrow — The Capital

Taiyla Simms, 11, works on one of the computers at the Eastport Girls Club as mentor Suzie Galler watches. Club members' reading scores improved greatly during the past year, after organizers began tutoring the girls and taking them to museums, lectures and classes. "This is part of our lives now," Galler said. "This is what we do."

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museums and civic events.

Earlier this month, for example, one of the founders, Suzie Galler, took a group of girls to a museum in Washington, D.C. — the first time some of the girls had ever ridden on the Metro.

"It was fun to see it (the train) go underground," said Newtowne 20 resident Taiyla Simms, who is 11 and in the sixth grade at Annapolis Middle School. "We went to see Obama's wife's dress (at the National Museum of American History). I liked the (dress) with the sparklies on it — I think it was George Bush's wife's dress."

The girls who participate in the Eastport Girls Club also seem to be finding new interests in the larger world around them.

"I got A's on my report card for the first time," one girl wrote in describing how the Eastport Girls Club has helped her. Another spoke of making the honor roll in math, and a third wrote "all of my grades went up a letter; for example in math, science, gym and Spanish."

Participating in the after-school program requires focus and dedication, and one girl wrote, "I have learned to be a more committed person."

Jenelle Murph, one of the group's organizers, said the girls have started pushing



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Karen Feldman was one of the women who founded the Eastport Girls Club two years ago, with an eye toward working with low-income girls in public and subsidized housing. She said the work is one of the most rewarding and productive endeavors she has ever undertaken.

each other to participate fully in the club and to do well in school.

"The girls have started to take ownership," Murph said.

The women who formed the Eastport Girls Club organized the group in response to another citizens group, active about two years ago, that aimed to clamp down on crime in public housing communities.

Instead of trying to impose order on public housing from the outside, the founders of the Eastport Girls Club decided to go into the communities and work with the girls, their parents and the school system.

"A bunch of us ... real-

ized 'Stop the gunfire' was a catchy phrase, but we did not want it to be us versus them," said Karen Feldman, one of the club's founders.

During its first year, the Eastport Girls Club lacked focus and needed structure, according to the sponsors.

"When we started, we had girls from 6 to 15, and we were really more a drop-in (affair)," Feldman said. "It was very hard to manage. Some weeks we would have 25 girls, some weeks we would have 12."

Starting about a year ago, the group limited membership to about 15 girls, all of whom had to be between 11 and 15 years old.

The club's organizers also

solicited donors who gave computers, desks, books and cash, and they obtained a \$15,000 city grant to hire a part-time reading instructor and a part-time counselor. (Both professionals also volunteer at the club.)

"The grant made it possible to bring in some expertise," Feldman said.

Also, the Annapolis Housing Authority let the group clean up and decorate a room in the Eastport Terrace community center, where the group meets at specified times.

The club also has a book collection for the girls, thanks to some local book clubs.

Tutors and mentors say it takes a lot of commitment to work with the girls, but their lives have become intertwined in a significant way.

Mentors often include the girls in their own family functions, the women said, as when one of the women recently invited some of the girls to attend her daughter's college graduation party.

"This is part of our lives now," Galler said, "This is what we do... The important thing is consistency. It is not just a once-in-a-while thing. It is a family."

For more information about the Eastport Girls Club, visit its website at eastportgirlsclub.org.

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