

Answering violence with a gift of learning

After-school program provides stability and skills to KCK youths.

By MALCOLM GARCIA
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Peering over the boy's shoulder, Brad Grabs scrutinized the carefully printed numbers.

"You got good penmanship, Justin," Grabs said.

"What's this?"

"Add it up and see."

Justin wrote 15.

"You got it," Grabs said. "Good."

He stepped over to the next student, another harmless boy, no different from the boys who had assaulted him in 2000. His assailants were yet another example, if he needed one, that life indeed is full of surprises. Had they ignored him on that fall day, he never would have started the Learning Club, a Kansas City, Kan., after-school program that meets every week at the Blessed Sacrament Family Center on Parallel Parkway.

As many as 20 students ages 7 to 13 squeeze into a classroom on Monday and Wednesday af-

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ternoons to practice reading, writing, math and nonacademic skills such as cooking and speaking.

"Usually a kid just shows up," Grabs said as he walked from one desk to another inspecting the students' work. "I rarely see the parent. I walk the streets with fliers about the school. They enjoy learning without the pressure of learning."

Most of the students had been underperforming in school when they first came to Grabs. He has had eighth-graders with the skills of kindergartners in some subjects.

After an assessment, he places students with volunteer tutors who work with them at their current skill levels. That way, they experience success at a pace comfortable for them. Most of the kids maintain near-perfect attendance because, Grabs has concluded, few other activities are available to them after school.

"We give them a lot of individual attention," he said.

Starting a youth program was not something Grabs planned the October afternoon he walked through a park on Parallel Parkway, not far from where he worked part time at Shalom House and where he is now the director of its shelter program.

Two kids about 16 years old started to follow him. They yelled at him, asking for directions to a street he'd never heard of, and he kept walking. But he knew. Knew before they caught up with him and demanded a dollar what was about to happen.

He refused to give them a dollar. They told him to empty



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Brad Grabs showed a student that he still had some growing to do recently during the Learning Center program at Blessed Sacrament Family Center in Kansas City, Kan.

his pockets. Grabs had nothing but keys. Then one of the boys grabbed him and the other began punching him and cut an ear. Grabs broke loose and ran across the street to a convenience store. He thought he noticed the boys go into a house but wasn't sure. The police took a report, but no arrests were made.

"They were just bored," Grabs said of the boys in a soft voice that offered no hint of anger. "Walking in the neighborhood. They see a guy they think doesn't belong there and formed an opinion. I've known too many people who are good but do bad things. Decent people can make bad choices."

His cuts healed but left their

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students in KCK

mark. He concluded that too many kids the same age as his assailants had no one to help them occupy their time. Grabs had worked at an Arkansas after-school program when he graduated from college and had seen how it improved the students' self-esteem. He spent about two years researching after-school programs before he opened the center in 2002.

"The assault bothered me," Grabs said. "The nature of it, how it happened in the middle of the day, I was angry, but I don't think they were out looking for trouble. They didn't have positive adult interactions and attention. I had to think beyond what happened to me to what was responsible for it."

Last year the Learning Center provided 58 sessions of after-school study for 25 students focusing on reading and math fundamentals; workshops on positive thinking and the

power of laughter; nutrition classes; soccer clinics; and art instruction, among other activities. On average, students improved their reading by about two grade levels. Their math skills advanced by more than two grade levels. About 30 volunteers helped tutor.

"The opportunities these kids have are so limited compared to the kids I work with," said assistant director Ken Gates, who works as a teacher's aide in Lenexa. "For those kids, college is assumed. But not here. In our little way, I hope we help a few find stability."

Learning Center students earn points for attendance, tests and other tasks to encourage a sense of responsibility. They can use points to "buy" T-shirts, hygiene products, pencils, pens and pads of paper. The students often use points to buy birthday and Christmas presents for their

parents and siblings.

"I didn't want to come here," said Donovan Watts, 10, who has grown to love math. "I was forced by my grandmother so I could learn something. It's kind of cool that we can buy stuff."

Grabs laughed listening to Donovan. Whatever works.

These days, Grabs doesn't walk much in the neighborhood. His caution, however, didn't spare him. He was assaulted again a few years ago when he interrupted two young men breaking into a car.

"I see so much anger," he said. "Whenever there's a crime, there's an obvious victim, but the perpetrator is also a victim. Once young people get involved in crime, it's hard for them to get out of it. It corrupts their spirit. It hurts them in its own way."

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