

LEARNING CLUBS LEVEL THE FIELD

Founder, volunteers provide direction, hope to inner-city youth

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Jonathan Amiel, a member of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Kansas City, Kansas, tutors a young student at one of The Learning Club sites in Kansas City, Kansas.

KANSAS CITY, Kan. — The only numbers involved were those of expanding hearts and blossoming dreams. Earlier this year, the University of Notre Dame presented its William D. Reynolds Award, recognizing exceptional work with youth, to 1992 graduate and Kansas City resident Brad Grabs. Grabs earned his degree in accounting from the school, but his impact since has had little to do with financial analysis.

As executive director of The Learning Club since 2002, Grabs oversees an expanding afterschool and summer program for children in the urban core. The former Rockhurst High School teacher founded the organization following an encounter in which he was beaten and mugged by two teenagers.

"After I got over my anger and fear, I began to pray and reflect," Grabs said. "I realized that kids in the inner city possess the same qualities as all kids, but they lack the same opportunities. They were in need of direction and hope."

The Learning Club, which operates out of five separate sites in the urban core, has grown to serve more than 120 children each week and now boasts more than 100 volunteer tutors. Most of the students being served live in households in which the total income is less than \$10,000 a year.

Students in the program not only get help with their formal studies, but also learn life and social skills, such as shaking hands and looking people in the eye.



And they learn to dream.

"Some kids haven't yet learned to look beyond the situations which currently imprison them, like poverty and schools which aren't equipped to keep up with their needs," Grabs explained. "We want them to know that their lives have meaning, purpose and dignity. We want them to know they can succeed at many things."

The Learning Club receives help from several parishes, particularly the Church of Nativity in Leawood, but the majority of its donors are individuals.

Stan Nill, a parishioner of Holy Trinity Church in Lenexa, has been volunteering his time for more than two years.

"My three grown kids come down with me and tutor, too," he said. "It's a family activity."

Mary Anne Browne, a retired teacher from St. Pius X Parish in Mission, has also

been involved for two years.

"The consistency of showing up is what's important for these kids," Brown said. "I love working with them. The effort they show is just tremendous. It's amazing."

The actual staff for The Learning Club includes just three employees — two full time and one part time — so the role of volunteers is instrumental in the organization's continued success.

"We must have sustainable funding and a dependable pool of volunteers to survive," Grabs said. "Many people have a huge heart for disadvantaged kids, but they don't necessarily know how to connect or make a difference. We hope that we've made that easier for them."

The executive director said language barriers are an ongoing struggle for the club, since many students have limited or no English skills when they first come through the doors. Many also live in homes where the adults do not speak English, so they have difficulty helping with homework assignments.

"We're constantly improving our assessment system," Grabs said. "And we've seen amazing progress with a lot of the kids. Improving English skills has led to improved grades in many cases."

Grabs, who lives with his wife Dawn and their three children near one of The Learning Club sites, often quotes a favorite Bible verse as inspiration for his work: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn 10: 10).

"I'm following the voice of the Spirit," he said.

Become a tutor

A tutor training session will be held at the Blessed Sacrament Parish cafeteria, 2215 Parallel Ave., Kansas City, Kansas, on Aug. 16 from 4:45 - 6:30 p.m. Interested people should send an email to: bgrabs@LearningClubKCK.org or call (913) 244-5838.