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GETTING PERSONAL

The Learning Club provides one-on-one attention to at-risk kids

STORY BY SHEILA MYERS | PHOTOS BY LORI WOOD HABIGER

The kids in The Learning Club after-school program appear typical.

They are bright, inquisitive, courteous and playful as they participate in a creative exercise one Wednesday afternoon.

But appearances can hide a lot, like the fact that all of the students come from underperforming schools and from families living on the margins in northeast Kansas City, Kan.

"Many [of our families] are enduring our current immigration system," said Father Mark Mertes, who serves as pastor of three parishes in northeast Kansas City, Kan.: Blessed Sacrament, Our Lady & St. Rose, and Christ the King.

"Others are trying to make ends meet on fixed incomes.

"And still others are feeling the effects of budget cuts in the Statehouse."

Director Brad Grabs, a member of Our Lady & St. Rose Parish, started The Learning Club (TLC) in 2002 to provide these neighborhood kids with tools to succeed in school and in life. The free program meets in the Blessed Sacrament School building.

"Brad has a real passion for those that may be missed by other social safety nets," said Father Mertes. "His passion and skill is a blessing for all of us."

TLC celebrated its 10th anniversary in February. Twenty-five students in first through eighth grade come after school twice a week for personal attention, academic tutoring, values education and enrichment activities.

Fourteen high school students come to a weekly leadership academy. And in



Brad Grabs, director of The Learning Club after-school program at Blessed Sacrament in Kansas City, Kan., works with second-grader Erick Gutierrez. TLC celebrated its 10th anniversary in February.

2011, Grabs started a 10-week intervention program for at-risk students at Wyandotte High School and Northwest Middle School.

Grabs understands the issues these children and their families are facing. He has lived in the neighborhood for 14 years, and recently at Shalom House, a Catholic Worker house serving homeless men.

After being mugged by two teens in nearby Mac's Park, Grabs felt a strong desire to help young people so they wouldn't resort to that kind of behavior.

"When young people do bad things, it's because they are facing bad circumstances," Grabs said.

Seeds planted in Arkansas

The seed for TLC was planted in 1993 when Grabs worked with the Vincentian Service Corps in Stamps, Ark.

Stamps is a poor, racially segregated community where poet Maya Angelou spent her childhood; it is the setting of her autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

Grabs worked with African-American children at an after-school program there, also called The Learning Club.

"That really got me to appreciate different people, different circumstances, differ-

ent ideas,” he said. “I felt alive and like what I was doing was making a difference there.”

The mugging in 2000 left Grabs fearful and angry. To find peace, he turned to his faith. He reflected and prayed, and eventually was moved to provide positive activities for young people in the neighborhood.

A collaboration of caring people

Getting TLC off the ground was easy, with financial aid from the then-Gardner Institute (now the Catholic Education Foundation) and help from many volunteers.

Donors stepped up when funding from the Gardner Institute was discontinued. Today, the club’s \$41,000 annual budget is contributed entirely by individual private donors.

“I have a lot of gratitude for all the people that have made The Learning Club a success, and that includes our donors, most of whom are Catholic and give a small amount each year,” Grabs said.

He also credits the many volunteers who tutor the children, run a leadership class or speak about a hobby or career.

“It’s been a collaboration of mostly Catholics coming together and contributing something because they care about inner-city kids,” he said.

Many of the tutors are former teachers, like Pat Rettenmaier of Overland Park. She’s been involved since the club started.

“The kids keep you coming back,” she said.

Ken Gates, TLC’s assistant director and a parishioner of Holy Cross Church in Overland Park, volunteers because it’s a way to stay connected with the neighborhood where he grew up.

“This is one way I can provide tangible help to someone who needs it,” Gates said.

Personal attention is key

Rettenmaier, Gates and others help kids like 12-year-old Antonio Sanchez, an autistic boy being raised by his great-grandmother. Antonio has participated in TLC for five years.

“We’ve seen progress in academics, but, more importantly, in social skills,” Grabs said. “This is where he feels comfortable.”

Antonio’s progress is a result of the personal attention kids receive at TLC, something Grabs feels these kids lack.

“They’re not getting it at home or at school,” he said.

TLC sessions include a one-hour group activity, a snack and reflection time, followed by an hour of one-on-one tutoring. Grabs also arranges field trips on weekends and invites speakers to talk about their hob-



Leaven photo by Lori Wood Habiger

Third-grader Jailyn Batiste listens closely as Brad Grabs directs a group activity.

bies and careers.

A TLC speaker taught 10-year-old Raquelle Barnett about dog care. She also learned ballet from Church of the Nativity volunteer Anne Marie Laville, of Leawood.

Anne Marie, 16, is a junior at Blue Valley North High School in Overland Park. She’s studied ballet since age six. After hearing about TLC from a fellow Nativity parishioner, Anne Marie decided to teach ballet to budding dancers once a week. Currently, they are rehearsing to perform at TLC’s achievement banquet May 9 in the Blessed Sacrament gym.

The girls are coming along with their dance steps, but they’re most interested in the tutus and tiaras.

“I try to tell them all I can and, hopefully, they’ll be able to wear something like that for their costumes,” Anne Marie said.

At the banquet, each student will receive a framed, personalized certificate displaying what the staff and volunteers feel are that student’s greatest accomplishment for the year — academic achievement, leadership, attitude, or self-discipline. The banquet also recognizes the volunteers.

Making an impact

To keep students coming throughout the year, Grabs has developed an incentive system. Students earn points for things like attendance, punctuality and academic work. They redeem the points for prizes.

“The Hot Wheels cars will be gone in a month,” said Colin Barnes, a 12-year-old parishioner of Our Lady & St. Rose, and a five-year TLC student. So will the sports equipment.

Volunteer for TLC

Director Brad Grabs needs young adults and adults to help tutor Learning Club students during the school year and at its summer program June 18 - July 19. Various time slots are available. No prior teaching experience is needed. Tutors receive a brief training.

The Learning Club meets at the Blessed Sacrament School building across from Blessed Sacrament Church, 2203 Parallel Ave., Kansas City, Kan., or at Juniper Gardens, 1980 N. 2nd St., Kansas City, Kan.

For more information, or to donate, visit the website at: www.learningclubkck.org or call Grabs at (913) 244-5838.

Although the point system encourages desired behavior and provides intermittent rewards to the students, the goal of The Learning Club is much bigger than those things.

Grabs’ vision is that TLC will help the students think of the neighborhood in a positive light.

“The impact can be different for different kids,” Grabs said. “It can be, ‘This is where I learned to read,’ or ‘This is where I got the idea to become an architect,’ or ‘That’s where people listened to me.’”

“I want kids to say, ‘Something happened at TLC that made a big impact on my life.’”