

Seeds 4 Success program to receive Fannie Lou Hamer honor



Teaching artists Liza Skinner (center) and Lynne Childress (extreme right) lead a Seeds 4 Success class to mimic poses made by each of them in a get-to-know session at Compass Rose Studio Theater. (Karl Merton Ferron, Baltimore Sun)

By **Andrea F. Siegel, The Baltimore Sun**

OCTOBER 4, 2012, 7:24 PM

Speaking softly as she sat hunched over a small table, tutor Melissa Parker explained to a ninth-grader how to finish a one-page essay on the standard of living for 19th-century immigrants to the United States.

"You want to summarize it. You've made your points already," Parker told Knayya Dew-Douglas, a participant in the small Seeds 4 Success program in the community center at Eastport Terrace.

Knayya, 15, continued writing her closing sentence, capturing key points from the earlier paragraphs on income, workplace inequality and other issues. She earned praise from her tutor as she described immigrants' lives as "difficult" and "uncomfortable."

The Annapolis High School freshman was given a score of 14 of out of 15 possible points by her tutor. "I don't want you checking your cellphone during tutoring," Parker said, and Knayya broke their eye contact.

Seeds 4 Success offers each student a tutor as well as a mentor. Their families take part in a "challenge" that gives them incentives, often gift cards, for involvement in their children's education and in related sessions, said Helena Hunter, president of the nonprofit organization.

"When I first came, I had a lot of attitude and anger problems, and it's made it a lot better," said Knayya, grinning as she said her grades have been on the rise and that her mentor, with whom she speaks at least once a week, will be taking her roller skating for their October meeting.

On Sunday, Seeds 4 Success will receive a Fannie Lou Hamer award from the **Martin Luther King Jr.** Dinner Committee in Anne Arundel County. It is the first organization to be recognized in the 17-year history of the award, and it is one of seven award winners this year.

The awards are named for the late African-American civil rights leader who worked to obtain voting rights and educational opportunities for minorities. The awards are given to women who carry on her ideals in their communities.

Founded as the Eastport Girls Club in 2008 in response to violence in Eastport's low-income areas, Seeds 4 Success is helping the girls, all of whom are minorities who live in public and subsidized housing, to do better in school, improve their behavior and develop confidence.

The program operates on a shoe-string with four part-time paid professionals and 45 volunteers. And it has broadened the girls' horizons with trips to museums and outdoor activities, gotten their families involved with schoolwork, and assisted the girls in obtaining scholarships, Hunter said.

Seeds 4 Success, which now has 18 girls in grades five through nine, is reaching milestones.

The program was also named the best community-based mentoring program of the year by the Volunteer Center for Anne Arundel County.

"This year, for the very first time, all our girls hit the proficient mark in reading level," Hunter said, referring to state standardized exams.

Nearly all had entered the program reading below grade level, which left them struggling with increasingly difficult subjects.

Every girl in the program has seen her grades rise. Some who started out with D's two years ago saw their names on the honor roll in the spring.

Executive Director Jessica Snell-Johns attributed the gains to building relationships. The program helped parents who weren't involved in their children's education get to school meetings and create study spaces at home.

On Monday, the organization will start I Am a Reader, a similar program for boys in grades one through three who need help learning to read. They'll have male tutors.

Last week, the older girls began a fall program at Compass Rose Studio Theater in Eastport that teaches the girls a little Shakespeare. The aim is to help them learn to present themselves with self-assurance.

During a team-building memory game that gained speed as it shifted attention from one girl to the next, they erupted in laughter each time one of them was caught off-guard.

"Do you guys feel the difference in the concentration?" teaching artist Lynne Childress asked to nods and shouts of "uh-huh."

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Other Fannie Lou Hamer awards

Ann Marie Remillard, who at 80 has volunteered thousands of hours to help Democratic candidates; **Bobbi Lyn Coffman**, a teacher assistant at Meade High School who with her daughter created a program to help homeless people in the county and Baltimore City; **Linda Hicks Boyd**, a retired educator working to increase voter participation among African Americans; **Sandra Durant**, a longtime teacher who started a program to provide backpacks for needy students; **Sugar Stallings**, who encourages young people to register to vote and ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the District 2 County Council seat; and **Juanita Cage Lewis**, who has long worked for state housing programs.

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