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Mentoring program makes perfect match

Y of Maryland program helps youth reach goals



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Shytira Everett, 9, her sister Shyrell Everett, 12, and their mentors Kim Strassner and Sara Milstein (glasses.) The four are shown at the rock wall, which the kids climb, at the YMCA on 33rd Street. (Gene Sweeney Jr., Baltimore Sun / January 8, 2013)

By Karen Nitkin, For The Baltimore Sun

4:10 p.m. EST, January 13, 2013

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Every Wednesday, from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., sisters Shytira and Shyrell Everett arrive at the Weinberg Family Center Y for two hours of charades, rock climbing, homework help, arts and crafts, picnics and other activities with mentors Sara Milstein and Kim Strassner.

"My favorite activity is when we go to the art room to make arts and crafts," said Shytira, a third-grader at Harford Heights Elementary School in Baltimore, who is 9 and talkative and ties her hair in ponytails decorated with pink and blue beads. "Her older sister Shyrell, 12, who is in seventh grade at the Baltimore Design School, is partial to scrap-booking and outdoor picnics.

The two have been in the mentoring program since May, when their mom, Tanya Chester, heard about it through a relative and signed them up.

"I like that they're always doing different things," said Chester, adding that the two hours of kid-free time is also a plus.

Four years ago, the Y of Central Maryland, with 11 locations including the Weinberg Y, was one of six Y associations in the U.S. to receive a Department of Justice grant supporting mentoring

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programs. Since then more than 450 matches have been made, including those of Shytira to Strassner and Shyrell to Milstein.

The mentors take a 16-hour class that helps them understand their role and guides them through situations they might face. The social workers who provide the training check in frequently and remain available for help, said Milstein, who began mentoring in May and also works at the Y of Central Maryland as chief marketing officer.

Mentors and mentees can sign up anytime, though the demand for male mentors is particularly high.

"There is a waiting list of about 300 boys waiting for a male mentor match," said Milstein. "The wait can be as long as a year. We desperately need more men to volunteer."

Each pairing lasts a year, though it can be extended if that's what both the mentor and mentee want.

Milstein and Strassner are friends who signed on to the mentoring program at the same time and were fortunate to be assigned mentees who are sisters. That means the four of them can do things together.

"It's been fun," said Strassner. "It's been better than I expected."

The affection between the four is easy to see.

"We are not teachers and we are not substitute parents," said

Milstein. "We are responsible, caring adults. I would also add to that the word 'consistent.'"

Milstein noted that many children in the mentoring program are referred because of poor grades or family problems such as an incarcerated parent.

She said the mentoring program succeeds because participants give just two hours a week, yet reap immense rewards. And since the program takes place at the Y, there are always things to do in a safe, structured environment. Mentors and mentees get free Y membership, and mentees set goals at the beginning of the program. Shytira and Shyrell both said they wanted to be more physically active.

During their recent visit, the sisters tried their hand at the rock-climbing wall in the Y. They were put in a harness by Katrina Williams, the fitness floor instructor, who helped them navigate the wall.

Chester, who normally does not stay for the mentoring session, watched, praised her daughters, then announced she would leave and return at 6:30.

"Come at 6:32," said Shytira, hoping to extend the experience for couple of extra minutes.

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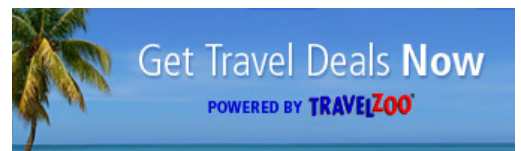


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