

CHEERS to Charity



Lisa
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STARS Tutoring Promotes Academic and Lasting Success

Step into the program center on Villa Street in Northwest Pasadena on a typical Monday through Thursday night from 5:30-7 p.m. and you'll see STARS — Students and Tutors Achieving Real Success through the Lake Avenue Community Foundation's tutoring and mentoring program.

The room is filled with 40 elementary school children who are discovering the value of the nightly tutoring sessions available through LACF, a nonprofit, faith-based community outreach organization offering support to at-risk youth since 2001.

Students and their families come to the program center for help with homework, reading literacy, technology training and enrichment activities. Many students come earlier for play and snack time in the backyard area from 4-5:15 p.m. as a way to fill the after-school hours when a parent might still be working or when trouble is likely to be found.

In some cases, gang boundaries are crossed to get to the center, according to LACF Development Director Greg Helton. "But it's not just a band-aid after-school day-care program. It's a chance for kids to let their guard down and be kids," he said.

By 5:20 p.m., students and volunteers are milling about the main room and adjacent library, waiting for the session to begin. Program Manager Ben Wong is in charge and waits patiently for the room to quiet in preparation for the opening ritual of "circle time." Wong asks who wants to start the prayer, and before he can finish his sentence, at least a dozen hands shoot up. The rotation starts with a hand squeeze that travels around the circle, stopping as various students or volunteers share thoughts of gratitude.

Once everyone has had a chance to speak, the circle disbands and the students are paired with a designat-



The Lake Avenue Community Foundation Board of Directors includes (front row, from left) Michael Gray, Gerri Edson, Jeff Griffith and Bruce Stone. Back: Bruce Bruinsma, Rich Wilson, Bruce Menser, Albert Tate and Jeff Jones.

ed tutor, typically with a one-to-two ratio of tutors to students.

STARS provides high school level students with the same access to tutoring and mentoring at the nearby Lake Avenue Church, and both programs are seeing similar positive results in terms of academic success, emotional health, economic stability and spiritual growth.

Progress is made through the unwavering support of a network of more than 90 tutors who've made the decision to change a child's life by donating an hour and a half of their time each week. La Cañada Presbyterian Church is a great partner, says Helton, providing roughly 20 of the program's regular tutors.

By showing up week after week, and often for years on end, community volunteers are proving that STARS is not just about tutoring. "We want to go deeper and let students know they could be the next JPL scientist, chief of police or head of the fire department instead of

having to leave school and make money for their family," said Helton. "There's a genuine investment of energy and time in these kids that will last a lifetime."

Parent participation is strongly encouraged, and parents influence the level of success by engaging with their children and attending training classes designed to provide a deeper understanding of student life.

The volunteers vary in age, with teens through senior citizens on hand each night for the homework-based tutoring, guidance and mentoring. Leisa Blalock is one of program's newest volunteers, having started just a month ago with her eighth-grade daughter, Kayley. Both wanted to give back to the community and have found STARS to be a perfect fit. "The children and staff have been great, and we now look forward to going every Monday night," said Blalock.

As with Blalock and daughter,

involvement is multi-generational, with former students returning to give back as well. Diana Garcia, a 10th-grader who came to STARS in third grade, is in charge of providing students with worksheets when they don't bring homework. She keeps track of each student's folder, which logs the work being done each night and houses report cards and other academic information. She also manages the "STAR bucks" rewards points that are given as recognition for good behavior, completion of work and academic milestones, and are exchanged for school supplies and other prizes.

"The program has kept me from doing bad things," said Garcia. "Without the focus and structure, life would be different." STARS steers youth like Garcia toward making positive choices by identifying The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets, which are defined as "common sense, positive experiences and qualities that help influence choices

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young people make and help them become caring, responsible adults."

Some of the assets include a community that values youth, a caring neighborhood, other adult relationships, parental involvement in school, learning outside of school, safety and achievement motivation — all fundamentals of the STARS program.

Amy Cardenas is a student/supporter who has benefited from these assets. "This is more than just an after-school program to me. It's more like a home," explains Cardenas, who's been coming to the center every day for six years and helps run circle time.

The hope is to lead students toward a better future and out of the cycle of poverty. Pasadena Unified School District states that nearly two-thirds of the roughly 22,000 PUSD students live below the federal poverty level. LACF is actively involved with helping approximately 170 of those low-income students and their families but aims to reach a greater number by expanding its service area. Additional tutors could fulfill the needs of the 15-20 currently on the waiting list, while added space would allow for program development such as health and fitness, a computer lab, arts, music and more.

It's a dream with a reality based in knowing that if LACF can build it, the students will come. They all want to reach for the stars, but just need to know how.

One Hour of Tutoring per Week Can Make an Enormous Difference

Lake Avenue Community Foundation Board Chair Bruce Stone was interviewed by Lake Avenue Community Foundation Development Director Greg Helton.

Why does a successful businessman from La Cañada Flintridge give so much of his time and resources to help at-risk youth and families in Northwest Pasadena? "Because I consider Northwest Pasadena part of our community and giving back is what life is all about," says Bruce Stone, principle at StoneTapert, a Pasadena-based financial services and employee benefits firm. As Stone sees it, what better opportunity than to help those in need and to provide them with the hope that tomorrow can and will be better?

Stone, acting as chairman of

the board for the Lake Avenue Community Foundation, has seen firsthand during the past 10 years the impact his and other volunteers' efforts have made in helping children in need. Through LACF's STARS program, Stone's leadership role has helped expand local support for LACF's good works, fostering connections between the foundation and the local business communities of Pasadena and La Cañada Flintridge.

"My heartfelt conviction is that we all need to step back and evaluate our blessings in life," said Stone. "We then need to ask ourselves how we can use those blessings to reach deeper into the community. We need to show how, through the use of our money, time, effort and talents, we can make a greater impact and lasting difference."

Stone considers the STARS

program at 500 E. Villa St. a perfect opportunity to isolate a need and develop programs to address that need. Through STARS, more children will be given a chance to improve their education, which brings hope for the future and better opportunities in life.

Though Stone downplays his many years of support and contribution, he's happy if his example shines a brighter spotlight on LACF. Known for his longevity and dedication, Stone is readily praised by the LACF staff.

"Bruce is a great man of God who puts his words into action, both here at the foundation and at Lake Avenue Church," said Greg Helton, development director of LACF. "Bruce has made a great impact in the lives of the needy men, women and children we serve through the sincerity and the credibility he brings to them. He's

been a true blessing to work with — a great leader as the board chair and a strong advocate for educating children and making a bigger impact in the community."

Under Stone's leadership, the STARS program has evolved, and through individualized tutoring, specific academic goals and objectives are now being set for each child. "Every day we are seeing the kids grow and thrive through the tutoring and mentoring initiatives," said Stone. "But with a waiting list of nearly 20 kids who are in need of a tutor, we need more volunteers to help in this area. Just one hour a week can and will make a significant impact in the life of a child. So why not help make a difference today?"

While financial donations are welcome and essential to the success of any outreach effort, the foundation is in urgent need of lap-

top computers.

"We're looking for 40 laptops that can be put to use immediately at STARS to help the kids further their education," said Stone. "We're also completely packed in our facility and need to focus on how to expand so that not just 100 neighborhood kids can be tutored, but why not 500 or 1,000? "Think of the benefit of giving back to the community and providing valuable services for a greater number of families in Pasadena.

"Giving back a little of your time, resources and love to those in need really reinforces Christian values and worth in life, and isn't that what it is all about? Make an impact in the life of a child and just see how great it makes you feel."

To learn more about the Lake Avenue Community Foundation, visit www.lakeavenuefoundation.org or call (626) 449-4960.