

Preteen girls find life skills at Northwest Jacksonville center

Reed Educational Campus teaches cooking and gardening in addition to math and reading

By Deirdre Conner

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Five years ago, Gertrude Peele thought she was starting a tutoring program for pre-teen girls.

Sparked to action after reading about low-achieving high schools in Northwest Jacksonville, she decided to use a donated house on Lentie Road to offer math and reading help to girls ages 9 to 12 to give them a fighting chance before they got to high school.

It wasn't long before a revelation hit.

The girls would get excited about getting to stay in the cool, air-conditioned living room.

"Then you would find them at the gate before time," Peele said. "They would say, 'Are we going to eat today?'"

They were thrilled to get snacks, but their eating habits were often poor. For some, violence and poverty seemed inescapable.

Tutoring alone wasn't up to the task.

"We knew we had to take a holistic approach," Peele said.

It wasn't long before the Reed Educational Campus — where math, science and reading lessons take place with certified teachers — added cooking and art classes, gardening, computer training, Spanish classes, health instruction, physical activities and a mental-health counselor the girls call "The Listener." They learn to set a table, speak in public, meet new people and volunteer, cooking for the Clara White Mission or making cookies for soldiers in Afghanistan.

The house itself, open every day after school and all day in the summer, is a safe, comfortable place for girls of an age where everything is in flux.

Takyra Fowler said it all helped her be ready for the hour and a half bus ride to James Weldon Johnson Middle, a magnet school.

And, said Takyra, 12, they have a lot of fun.

“You don’t have to worry about a lot of drama,” she said. “You can do girl things, girl talk.”

Myeisha Dixon, 11, doesn’t hesitate when she thinks of her favorite moment at the center: the day a science teacher brought in microscopes. The girls examined a leaf, a tissue, a wrapper.

Where she once was shy, she now looks at new people directly in the eye and volunteers to answer questions.

“Personally, they changed my life,” she said.

The 13 girls call the Lentie Road house their home away from home. And it works: Since its inception and five years of “graduating” girls, Peele said, not a single one has failed the FCAT or a grade level.

It’s all funded with the private grants Peele has cobbled together from the Women’s Giving Alliance, the Jacksonville Jaguars Foundation, the Second Harvest Food Bank and the National Council of Negro Women’s Child Watch Partnership of Jacksonville, among others.

Now, it’s set to expand. A donation from AT&T gave the center a vacant lot next door. Peele hopes to one day raise \$300,000 — enough money to buy up the houses on the small cul-de-sac.

“Instead of being a dead-end street,” Peele said, “it should be a way out.”

The ’tween years are a precarious time for girls: Their bodies are changing and their childhood is evaporating. Test scores show that student achievement tends to decline in middle school and never recover. The teenage years loom.

There is no doubt in Peele’s mind about the need for more attention to the age group. Without guidance, “you can lose them,” she said. And later on, it’s harder to develop good habits, like eating healthily and doing homework before free time.

As the girls gathered in the home’s kitchen last week they learned to cook healthy chicken, quinoa and lettuce wraps.

The woman who once lived and cooked there, Allene Reed, deeded her home to the National Council of Negro Women. She begged Peele to make sure that after she died (in 2004, at 92), the house would be used to help people in the community.

Mary Swan said she's seen the benefits of Reed's generosity and Peele's dedication lead to a change in her daughter. Destiny Nixon, 12, needed help with school work and, later, coping with the violent death of her brother.

"Anything she [Peele] finds out that a girl needs, she does it," Swan said.

Destiny agrees: Peele makes sure you do your homework and bring up your grades, and gives you a chance to do science experiments and doles out plenty of hugs.

She has a nickname for her: "Mama."

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