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Program brings adults, young people together

Mentors making a difference

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JOHNSTOWN — Nassar Rozier's fingers floated above the chess pieces as he mapped out his next move.

Attack with the queen?

Play defense with the rook?

Set up another move with the bishop?

But this was more than a game of chess with a friend from the neighborhood.

Rozier is among some 40-50 youngsters who gather each Monday evening at Christ Centered Community Church on Somerset Street in Kernville to share a meal, interact with adult volunteers and take part in an assortment of activities – including chess, choir, dance, basketball, gardening and nutrition, and even lessons in the basics of personal finance.

The Monday sessions are among the first fruits of a city-wide mentoring program launched last fall by retired businessman Steve Purich and Mike Kane, executive director of the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies.

And Rozier, a ninth-grader at Greater Johnstown High School, sees deeper meaning in both the gatherings and the movement of the pieces on the chess boards at the church.

“It’s a really good program here,” said Rozier, 15, who lives in the city’s 8th Ward. “Meeting with people who have been around can help you understand what you need to do.

“And we get to play a lot of chess, which helps with your focus, helps with school.

“In chess, you’re trying to understand what your opponent is going to do, trying to find an opportunity. So it’s like everything you do. If you can find a good opportunity, you have a good chance of winning.

“And you can’t lose your concentration, because if you do that, you’ll lose the game.”

‘We all come together’

Giving these youngsters the best chance to win – at chess and at life – is the mission of the Rev. Sylvia King and her many partners in Kernville.

“You can touch kids with your compassion and with your time,” King said. “This mentorship program is the best way to do that. We all come together under one roof to help the children and bless the children.

“And it really is making a difference. I know it is.”

Brandon King, the pastor’s son, added: “We’re doing what is necessary to keep the kids off the street. That way, they’re not statistics. We can help them become future musicians, future dancers, future leaders.”

Partners in the program include:

- New Day Inc., on nearby South Street, whose counselors helped launch the effort.

The agency serves many of the same families with a similar faith-based mission.

- Greater Johnstown School District, which is often represented by teachers or administrators who work with the children.
- Goodwill Industries of the Conemaugh Valley, which coordinates the recruitment, clearance and training of adult volunteers through its Youth Mentoring Program.
- Penn’s Woods Council of the Boy Scouts, which operates a Scouting program at the church.
- Both the YWCA across the street and the YMCA a few blocks away, which offer activities.
- Professionals from AmeriServ Financial Corp. The Rev. King works as manager of the Windber bank branch.
- Some 15-20 trained adult volunteers from across the community, and others who provide financial support.

Representatives of those organizations will meet at 7:30 p.m. today at the church to consider the future of the mentoring effort in Kernville.

“Sometimes in life, things just lift right up and fit right in,” Sylvia King said. “I am blessed. Usually when you start something, you have to show people what you’re doing. But people have just responded to this. That shows me that everyone realizes that there is a need. People are willing to roll up their sleeves and get involved.”

‘We’re doing something’

The Monday night gatherings began about two months ago with about five children, and the number attending has grown steadily, said Lauren “Sis” Link of New Day.

She said she sees the partnership of the church and her organization as a natural fit.

“There is a big need,” Link said. “So many children just don’t have positive things in their lives.”

New Day’s Tracey Rhodes said: “I’ve been working down here for six years, and I’ve never seen so many agencies working together. It’s really exciting to see God move.”

One of the adult volunteers at the church Monday was Daniel Gates, who helped with activities and traded jokes with the young people while other adults prepared the meal.

“Instead of people doing nothing, we’re doing something,” Gates said. “It’s been a blast, and it’s getting bigger.

“I worked with inner-city missions in Philadelphia for a number of years,” he added. “It just takes off when people get involved.”

The Rev. King said she's convinced that some of the youngsters in the program get one hot meal a week – on Mondays at her church.

“The meal we're serving, people are digging into their pockets to pay for it,” she said. “Let's face it, the bottom line is that it takes funding to make something happen.

“Right now, people are doing this out of the goodness of their hearts.”

Calvin McCray – who calls himself “a semi-retired pastor” – said his friends and colleagues in larger communities such as Philadelphia have seen mentoring programs, including those involving chess, succeed and change lives.

“So many young people aren't thinking, they're just going through the process,” McCray said. “Chess is a great tool. It's teaching these kids self-discipline.

“We want them to say, ‘I can't go to that party because I have to study for a math test.’ The math test will take them farther than the party. The party will be over in a few hours.”

He sees projects such as the mentoring/outreach effort in Kernville as crucial to the future of the Johnstown region.

“Johnstown is not the city we used to know – too many drugs and gangs, all that negativity,” McCray said. “I was in a local neighborhood a couple of weeks ago and you had guns going off outside. That never used to happen.

“People are saying we've got to stop this cancer before it spreads. We can't act like it's not there.”

'Spread the word'

Sometimes, it's as simple as giving kids a positive outlet for a few hours, organizers in Kernville said.

Akil Hardrick, a 13-year-old Greater Johnstown Middle School student, said he was at the church Monday to have some fun with his friends.

“I'm trying to spread the word around the school,” he said, “and a couple of people said they would come and check it out.”

Purich said the seeds of the city mentoring initiative are beginning to sprout in other neighborhoods.

Programs are starting up in the West End, in Prospect, in Moxham and in Roxbury.

“I know the spirit that exists in Kernville exists in all of the communities across Johnstown,” Sylvia King said.

“This city may be distressed, but I believe there's a revival coming. I truly believe it.”