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Doing it by the book

In Regent Park, kids are joining a homework club, not gangs members By HOLLY BACCHUS

It is 7 p.m. in Regent Park. It's dark, and the wind finds a way to snake under even the thickest layers of clothing.

One block south of the mounds of dirt that mark the Regent Park revitalization construction site is Regent Park/Duke of York Public School.

Inside the school, the halls are empty. But on the second floor, the lights are on and something's happening.

In a classroom papered with vibrant coloured posters and bright construction paper draped across the walls, young students sit at desks poring over their homework. At each cluster of desks, a tutor sits with the students, guiding them when they need help.

In the heart of Toronto, the Newcomers Homework Club gets together every Monday and Wednesday night during the school year.

It was formed in 1996 when members of Regent Park's Somali community sought a place where their children could receive help with their homework.

Back then it was called the Somali Homework Club, but as the surrounding community has changed, so has the name.

"Education had different faces," says Ambaro Guled, an organizer who assisted with the creation of the club.

"There is a diversity of cultures. Everyone wishes each other Happy New Year, Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah and Happy Eid."

Established by the Regent Park Community Health Centre and Frontier College Literacy at University of Toronto, and later joined by Ve'ahavta, a Jewish humanitarian and relief committee, the tutors, organizers and students of the club come from a variety of educational and cultural backgrounds.

Abdullah Kamurdeen started attending when he was in Grade 3. Now in Grade 7, he's a veteran of the club.

"In Grade 3, I didn't know a lot about spelling," he says. "When I came here, they told me to sound out the words. Now spelling is my favourite."

For Abdullah, the club is very different from school. "Here they help you," he explains. "In school you've got to do it on your own."

But for both the tutors and the students, the club is more than just homework, school and grades.

"We talk about sports and (comedian) Russell Peters," tutor Jason Hawkins, 21, says with a laugh.

He learned about the club through a student group at U of T. He loves to come out and help, and says he has fun doing it.

"These kids are really smart," Hawkins says. "I think the biggest thing is giving them a little confidence."

Ironically, he admits, this is exactly what the students have done for him. "They've helped ease my fear of going into teaching," he says.

After two years, Majeed Muselem, 11, agrees that the club has not only boosted his grades, but his self-esteem as well. "It makes me proud of myself," he says.

The Newcomers Homework Club has seen a host of its former students find success, including some who have been accepted to Ryerson University, York University and the University of Windsor. Another student graduated as a pharmacist and others come back to the club to tutor new students.

Majeed talks about his future -- about having a job, a house and a family. He's not quite sure whether he'll be a soccer player, police officer, mechanic or engineer. With three A's on his report card this semester, any of those career choices are possible.

And he isn't shy to attribute part of his success to the club he says helped him to work faster and on his own.

"(The tutors) help to accomplish stuff you wouldn't otherwise accomplish," he says with a smile.

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