

Harambee Learning Center

as much from year to year about where her funding is coming from. Nonetheless she will continue to seek funding because, she says, "We are in this for the long haul. We really want to make a difference in the life of our kids, especially when it comes to their achievement and avoiding problem behaviors. We want to do the best that we can to help them become productive citizens. Our funders should know that we value integrity, so their funding is handled and used for the purposes it is given. We track our kids and what they do and where the money is spent, and we believe in collaboration with community partners. We want to give our students the kind of support that they need, and we are very committed to developing kids in our area."

Michelle believes that her work with KISRA has given her a sense of purpose, and that it has helped her to figure out what's important in life. "Just to be able to help someone else has made life more meaningful." It has also brought more meaning into the lives of others, from students, to parents, to the staff at Harambee, who come together, push forward, and continue to work for the better good.

Harambee Learning Center

Kanawha Institute for Social Research & Action, Inc. (KISRA)
 (The faith-based and community-serving initiative of Ferguson
 Memorial Baptist Church)
 124 Marshall Avenue
 Dunbar, WV 25064
 304.768.8924 (phone)
 304.768.0376 (fax)
www.kisra.org

KANAWHA INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL
 RESEARCH & ACTION, INC. (KISRA)

A Tree Grows in KISRA

The Harambee Learning Center



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Harambee is a Swahili word that means ‘come together, push forward, and work for the better good.’ When Michelle Foster decided upon the word, she had recently switched careers, from a chemical engineer to a church administrator. Born in Guyana and educated in New York, she was recruited to West Virginia by a chemical corporation near Charleston, where she found a church to attend in nearby Dunbar. Eventually Michelle joined Ferguson Memorial and took a job directing a Vacation Bible School. Then she started a Bible Youth program. After a while she realized she was “dying to get off work” so she could get to her church activities. In time, Michelle left her engineering job to work full-time at the church, a career change she says she has never regretted.



Ferguson Memorial Baptist Church, led by Rt. Reverend E. Alphonso Heyliger, believes you can't preach the word of God to someone if they're hungry or homeless, so they practice a holistic approach to ministry by reaching out to meet the needs of the community. To this end, in 1993 they created the Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action, or

KISRA, a separate non-profit 501(c)3 organization. When Michelle became administrator in 1998, one of her jobs was to develop KISRA. While working with kids in the Bible Youth program, it became evident that some were having a hard time reading, so the Harambee Learning Center, an after-school learning program, was conceived as the first project under the KISRA umbrella. Since money to run the program was imperative, Michelle learned how to write grants and began applying to organizations for funding. Since that time, Harambee has blossomed into a full fledged after-school learning program that serves over 100 children annually, and KISRA has grown to include, among other things, a home ownership program for low to moderate income families, credit counseling, small business classes to help people start a business, and most recently a pre-school child development center that is scheduled to open in the summer of 2004.

When Harambee was getting started, Michelle received a funding award from the Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Communities Program. The money was used to train staff in the Communities that Care Project, which assesses the risks and resources in a commu-

was really hoping for was to make straight A's, and I got straight A's," she said, smiling broadly. "Another goal is to stop being so bossy, but it's still hard, because sometimes things get on your nerves."

Ametrea also enjoys going to court, a mock trial that occurs at Harambee when two people have an argument that needs to be settled. "We have to have a lawyer, a judge, a bailiff, and a jury," she explained. "We get to agree on stuff and on who gets in trouble. If both people are wrong they have to clean the downstairs, or clean the bathrooms. I've never had to do that, but I'm on my last warning," she said, "and you only get one warning." Ashley, the second grade mentor and former student, said that Harambee teaches discipline, but they do it with a loving hand. "You learn how to train yourself and monitor everything that you do." Both Ashley and Anthony, the kindergarten mentor, said that the smaller children look up to them. Anthony talks to his students about drugs and fighting and cheating, and Ashley said her students "trust me so much; they have so many things to share with me every single day." All of the mentors and tutors voiced the same opinion, that Harambee was a well-rounded program and that the atmosphere, while disciplined, felt like family.

The quality of service that Harambee provides requires continued funding, which is an on-going challenge for Michelle, who would like to increase the Center's capacity to serve more students. Thus far the ability to sustain the Center and to see the fruits of her labor in the development of the children and the continued trust of the parents, motivates her to persevere. In addition to developing a program with strong components like mentoring, quality tutors, and prevention, Michelle wants to know that "we'll have our kids reading on grade level and above, and to really be able to track them from the time they start this program all the way to college or wherever they end up in post-secondary education."

As for KISRA as a whole, Michelle envisions more projects that would bring economic development to the community. "The big picture, as I see it, would be to keep doing the things that we do now, but have the projects that bring about economic development help us sustain the projects that are not income earning in any way." This way, Michelle would not have to worry





lic school teachers are rarely afforded. "I really feel for teachers that have to do such a generalization," said Debra. "They just have to get up there and hope somebody catches it, where we have the luxury to pick up the ones that don't catch it and work with them over and over until they do." Donnetta, a kindergarten tutor in her early forties and mother of a

two-year-old daughter, has tutored at the Center for three years. This year, there are seven children in her class. "I really like to work with kids," she said, "but I'm tough. Kids come in and they say, 'I can't do this,' but I don't allow that. They always have to say 'I'll try.' Even if they're special needs, I treat them all the same." Feedback from parents indicates they appreciate Donnetta's firm but loving style. And so do the children. "I'm telling you, they don't want to go home," she laughs. It is often in kindergarten that the mode for students, and parents, is set at Harambee, and as children continue to want to come back, and as grades continue to improve, evidence mounts that the program is effective, both academically and socially.

Mentors, who work separately from tutors, are available to all students. Since family conflict is an established risk factor, students at Harambee have the opportunity to talk privately with an assigned mentor about issues occurring at home, or school, or about anything else that's on their minds. Mrs. Monk, a mentor for grades 3 through 5, is a retired grandmother with a degree in education. Astute and soft-spoken, she works with 12 children regularly, seeing them for at least half an hour each week, or sometimes longer depending on issues. "Some, I have found, come from troubled homes, quite a few. The children carry a lot of baggage with them. If they have a problem, it's usually a problem at home." Still, Mrs. Monk believes that, overall, the children are happy to be at Harambee. "In the first place, it's a very loving environment," she said, "and there's never more than ten or so in a classroom, so they get lots of individual care and love. I think it's an excellent program and environment for children. It's more than just an after-school program." Setting goals and talking about school and life in general is usually the topics of conversation for Mrs. Monk and her students. Ametrea, a fifth grade student who has gone to Harambee for three years, said that setting goals with Mrs. Monk is one of the most important things she learns at the Center. "One of my goals that I

nity in order to develop a suitable drug prevention program. The assessment revealed that academic failure was a risk factor in the area, and there was minimal after-school help available; so Harambee decided to focus on building academic skills for kids who would come to the Center after their regular school day was over. The Communities that Care Project Team continues to collect and analyze risk factor data. Based on their findings, Harambee develops programs and finds different ways to address these risk factors. They have found that significant risks in the community include availability of drugs, economic deprivation, and family conflict; thus, the Center works to address these issues as well. Harambee employs a unique system of small group tutoring to promote academic achievement, while providing mentoring to students, who discuss goals, personal issues or problems and ways to solve them.

When children begin arriving at 2:30 to the Harambee Learning Center, which is housed in the basement of Ferguson Memorial, they are fed a hot meal. In fact, upon entering the church, the smell of food permeates the senses. Although housed in a church, religion is not taught, but, according to one of the staff mentors, the church itself can be a good tool. "We do remind the children every once in a while where they are when they get out of hand."

The Center serves children in kindergarten through grade 12 and is open to anyone, so long as room allows. There is usually a waiting list due to space restrictions and to children already enrolled returning year after year. Dropout rates are extremely low. Parents, happy to have their children in a safe and loving learning environment, for an annual fee of \$50 (if they can afford it), usually want to keep their children registered. One such parent has all four of her children at the Center. "When you're a working mother," she said, "there are only so many hours in an evening. Often there's sporting events, and since the kids have had a meal at the Center and have finished their homework, I can go directly to the events without worrying about feeding them, or about returning home after activities to do homework."





Homework is the number one priority at the Center. After eating, the children go to their classrooms where tutors are waiting to help them with whatever homework they have brought from school. Different tutors work with different grades, and classroom size is generally limited to 12 or less. It is a structured but relaxed atmosphere. Anthony, a former Harambee student, who is

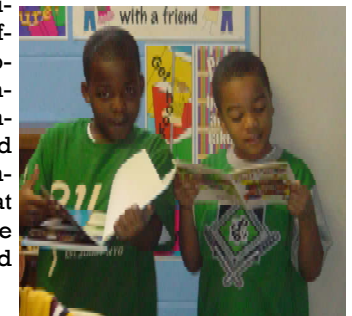
now in the eleventh grade and works at the Center as a kindergarten mentor, said that his Harambee tutors were directly responsible for improving his grades. "Harambee sent a van for us after school, because we didn't have a bus that came down here, and when we got here we ate and started our homework. We basically worked on what was hardest for us. Once we finished our homework, they would bring extra worksheets to make sure we had it down pat. I'm really thankful, because without it my math grade would've been down the drain." Ashley, another former student now working at the Center as a second grade mentor, agrees that Harambee "definitely" improved her grades, and her confidence. Prone to putting off doing her homework, Ashley said that the structure "taught me a lot of good study habits. My work was always done by the time I went home." If students require help that staff tutors cannot address, Spanish homework, for instance, then Harambee brings someone in from the outside. "They'll always find a way to get you the help you need," said Anthony. Kanawha County schools and school teachers are supportive of Harambee's efforts and collaborate with the Center when necessary.

Once homework is completed, students write in journals that they keep throughout the school year. The journals strengthen writing skills, promote self-awareness and self-expression, and help the staff to understand what's going on inside the student's mind. After journal entries are finished, students read from the newspaper daily, even if 'reading,' for the younger students, only entails doing word searches, which not only acquaints them with the newspaper but sharpens their focus and concentration skills as well. "We have set things that students know they will be doing," said Debra, a tutor for second and third graders, and a grandmother of three. "It's consistent, it's repetitive, and they like that; they like security. There's not a lot of surprise; they know what they have to do. They like to come somewhere after school and unwind but still be able to do their homework here; then, when they go

home, it's free time."

After students finish their daily work, Harambee offers a variety of enrichment activities, many of which center around established risk factors. Kindergarten through fourth graders receive instruction in Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), which is a violence-prevention curriculum that builds the problem-solving and other social and emotional competency skills required for positive relationships today -- and throughout students' lives. For older students, fifth through ninth grades, a ten week ALL STARS program is periodically available, which focuses on alcohol and drug prevention, violence, and premature sexual activity, while concentrating on building pro-social ideals and personal commitments to stay away from damaging behaviors. And since family conflict is a risk factor, a family night is held at the Center once every quarter to strengthen families and encourage parental involvement. A meal is provided, different classes give an assortment of presentations, and information is provided to parents on various topics.

Outside these special programs, other activities include vocabulary building through fun games, parts-of-speech Bingo, how to read a map, how to use the dictionary, or how to understand folktales and fables. Prior to SAT-9 or ACT/SAT testing, students take preparation classes and do practice tests. Throughout the year, various professionals come to speak about possible careers in law, dentistry, or banking, and for Science Day, chemistry professors from the local college demonstrate experiments that students help perform. Harambee has a large African-American population, so Black History is taught and celebrated. Students who make the honor roll are recognized on the Wall of Fame and given movie passes or gift certificates to the video store. "It makes a difference," said one parent whose step-daughter was "barely staying afloat" academically when she entered the Harambee program. With the concentrated help of her tutors, the child's grades improved until she made the honor roll, at which point her picture was put on the Wall of Fame, where it has stayed throughout the school year.



Tutors at Harambee have the luxury of one-on-one attention with their students that, due to large classrooms and curriculum directives, pub-