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Rescuing Amazing Afternoons: *Scarsdale unites in time of need*

By CARRIE GILPIN

For many years now, there has been an unbreakable bond between 200 families in Scarsdale and hundreds of children at the Edward Williams Elementary School in Mount Vernon. One so strong that Scarsdale families are rushing to rescue the school's Amazing Afternoons program, an after-school recreational and mentoring program now in peril due to state funding cuts.

A state Advantage grant sponsored by Westchester Jewish Community Services has for a decade funded Amazing Afternoons. At least 125 first-fifth-grade students from this severely underserved area of Westchester enroll in Amazing Afternoons. More than 80 percent of the school's students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Many of its children live in one of the three neighborhood shelters serviced by the school. Most of the students come from single parent homes, and the end of Amazing Afternoons would leave families without affordable after-school child care, and in many cases young children without any supervision.

Scarsdale resident Danny Bernstein and Helene Getz are co-chairmen of Edward Williams Fundraising Group, the effort to pull together private donations to fund the \$200,000 program for the coming year, buying time to get additional grants.

"Once a program loses funding and ceases operating, it is next to impossible to get grants," said Getz, who said no amount is too small to give. Residents Judy and Len Corlin, Rita Friedman and Stan Josephson also lead the effort, with help from students Ali Schnitzer and Graham Winston of the Scarsdale High School's Edward Williams Club.

The ties that bind the two communities through the children of the Edward Williams School is what makes this story special, said Bernstein. Scarsdale Middle School and Scarsdale High School students, as well as many of their family members, have brought mentoring and



HELENE GETZ PHOTO

Students in the Amazing Afternoons program stopped in front of this hosta last May on the way to their organic edible garden, and remembered its name because it rhymes with pasta.

professional services to the after-school program, enriching the lives of families in both towns. Emotionally moving stories of values, community building, shared experiences and compassion are as numerous as the participants involved.

The connection began with Westchester Reform Temple, which "adopted" the Amazing Afternoons program years ago under the direction of Rabbi Richard "Rick" Jacobs. Bar and bat mitzvah students volunteered as part of their community service hours' requirement. They, and older Scarsdale students, offered tutoring, homework help, ballet, chess, basketball, chorus, poetry and much more. Something clicked in many of the Scarsdale students, inspiring them to continue working well past their bar and bat mitzvahs, in fact well

into their high school years, and fostering deepening relationships with their growing "little sisters and brothers."

Getz's children David, Carly and Jaclyn have all been involved, for instance.

The Carlin girls began teaching dance to the students in middle school and have continued right through this year, when Carly graduates from SHS. Along the way, Getz, who holds a certificate from the New York Botanical Garden in horticultural therapy, and her children have also taught nutrition and horticulture as well.

"There is something magical about the place. You walk through the door and you don't want to leave," said Getz.

WRT's Rabbi Jonathan Blake currently

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works with the bar and bat mitzvah students during their time in Mount Vernon. Blake said the program benefits the students of Mount Vernon with a safe and enriching program offering tutoring and homework help, a friendly face and some companionship, but that equally noteworthy is the way in which the lives of the volunteers and their families have been enriched.

“This program has dramatically transformed our community,” Blake said. “The students have learned a sense of responsibility to others, a sense of commitment, a sense of being needed by children. They walk into the room being slightly intimidated, and may not know what to expect, and find they are literally embraced by hugs and smiles. They are needed.” Blake said students report back to him that they learn about the students’ lives, their families, and their struggles and challenges, and that parents report to him that their children have grown emotionally from the experience. Blake’s description of the partnership with the school community can be seen on a YouTube video at <http://www.youtube.com/user/rabbiblake#p/a/u/0/TQDGQy-qs7ZE>.

Amazing Afternoons program director Mary Figueroa spoke at the Edward Williams School Thursday evening, June 9 in an event to honor the services of the Scarsdale volunteers and family participants. She thanked all those involved and also credited Bernstein and his Backyard Sports program, saying his tireless work deserves recognition for providing outstanding recreational opportunities for the students, as well as his role in fundraising to save the program.

“Ultimately, the day-to-day success of our program falls on the capable shoulders of our tutors and helpers, who we want to honor tonight. You truly are the pride of the community,” she said.

Figueroa also mentioned another Scarsdale connection with the students. For the last five years, St. James the Less Episcopal Church has sent Edward Williams School children from the Amazing Afternoons program to summer day camp in Chappaqua. The cost of this is borne by church members and other Scarsdale residents, who fund the cost of the six-week camp and bus transportation back and forth from Mount Vernon to Chappaqua for roughly 40 students each summer.



HELENE GETZ PHOTO

Amazing Afternoon dancers celebrated years of lessons with a recital for family and friends.

Figueroa finds ways to increase the numbers of students who go, sending some for just half the time, which spreads the money further, said Dorothy Yewer, who spearheads a classical music fundraising event at the church annually to raise money for the summer scholarships. Yewer said Justin Bischof, St. James the Less’s music director, also worked as music director at WRT for many years. Bischof is also artistic director of the Canadian Chamber Orchestra of New York City, which plays annually at St. James for the benefit concert funding the summer camp scholarships.

Students from the Amazing Afternoons program sang songs at the June 9 event, and some spoke. Sixth-grader Marlon Dixon said the program “had a big impact on my life,” and said he was now able to attend sleep-away camp and do well in school.

Patricia Shattock said, “Without the program, the kids would be running in the streets. My son is involved in so many things here that I could not give him the op-

portunity to get involved in,” she said.

Liz Ramadeo said, “This program has taught them to be team players, it has shown them what giving back means. The after-school program has been a comfort zone for me as a parent because I know they are in a safe environment.”

Edward Williams School first-grade teacher Tamisha Hall said, “Words can’t explain how the program has changed kids’ lives.”

School principal Ernest Gregg said at the event that the partnership is like “a family” and that the after-school program is the best one in the state.

Getz said, “What goes on in the program is infectious. There is a transformation that happens to volunteers that truly is life changing. It’s all about giving. And the more you do it, the more joy that comes into your life as a result. Volunteering makes people feel better. It is its own reward.”

To donate contact David Carlin at dac2@williams.edu or 420-6667.