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Around Annapolis: Eastport Girls Club has space to call its own

By DIANE M. REY, For The Capital
 Published 08/21/09

Living in public housing can be a drab experience. The Eastport Girls Club leaders are hoping a colorful new meeting space will lead to a brighter future for their young members.



Courtesy photo

Naechyl Surgeon, 14, a resident of Harbour House, helps paint the new meeting room for the Eastport Girls Club to kick off the start of the club's second year. The club is ramping up its program focusing on academic and personal achievement for girls ages 11 to 16 who live in Annapolis' public housing communities.

Club members kicked off the start of their second year earlier this month by picking up paint brushes to help spruce up their new meeting room at the Eastport Community Center on President Street. Supported by a \$15,000 grant from the City of Annapolis, they're getting set for a ramped-up program for the new school year emphasizing academic and personal achievement.

They're calling their new room "the zone" and it will serve as home base for club members to do homework, meet with tutors, and hold regular meetings and special events.

The girls joined with club mentors and community volunteers, including about a dozen agents from the Annapolis-Eastport office of Long and Foster, to jazz up the walls in tropical tones of lime green

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and cool blue.

The real estate office adopted the club for their annual community service program this year. Maryland Paint and Decorating donated the supplies.

"They've got this beautiful room that's different from the rest of the

building," said Patsy Oertli, the realty firm's office manager. "The idea is to create a place they want to be."

The club was started last summer by a handful of local women who wanted to help break the cycle of poverty and violence in Annapolis public housing. Initial funding came from the Eastport Civic Association. It received nonprofit status by partnering with the Box of Rain Foundation. Members range in age from 11 to 16 and come from all of Annapolis' public housing communities.

Increasing interaction between the girls and the greater community is a goal for the program this year, according to organizers.

The recent city grant enabled the club to hire three part-time staff members, including a counselor and tutoring coordinator, to serve as links between the club and local schools, particularly Eastport Elementary, Tyler Heights Elementary and Annapolis Middle schools.

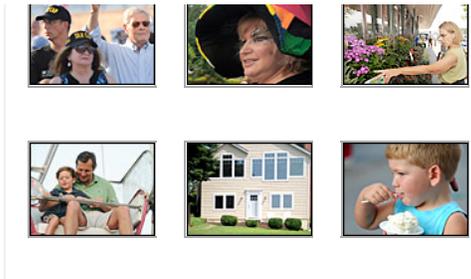
"When you (link) home, school and community, amazing things can happen," said Jessica Snell-Johns, a clinical-community psychologist who serves as the club's grants manager. She said the club wants to do more to connect girls and their families to community resources that already exist.

There's also a desire among club leaders to help each girl find her own path to a successful future. One of the girls in the club, Naechyl Surgeon, 14, wants to be a dancer. Leaders worked with The Art Space Center for Performing Arts in West Annapolis to obtain a scholarship for her to take classes there this summer. The arts center is helping her continue her classes in the fall.

"We're trying to set positive expectations for the girls and give them the means to achieve," Jessica said.

The program especially targets girls in the tricky transition period from fifth grade to middle school, with the ultimate goal being graduation from high school and a clear direction beyond it.

"Research shows in the task of moving from childhood to adolescence, we find kids are really struggling, even the ones who have everything going for



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them," Jessica said.

To kick off the new school year, the club is holding a launch event from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, where current and prospective members and their parents are invited to see the new meeting room, meet with club leaders and learn about plans for the coming year.

Regular girls' club meetings will be held on Wednesdays throughout the school year from 3:30 to 6 p.m. beginning Sept. 16. The first hour is devoted to individual homework and tutoring sessions followed by activities which include speakers, snacks and special projects.

The club is seeking four women who represent the racial diversity of Annapolis to lead the Wednesday night sessions. They're also looking for high school seniors and adult volunteers to serve as tutors and soliciting donations to purchase desks, rugs, comfortable chairs and other supplies for the club's meeting room.

For more information on how to donate or volunteer, visit www.eastportgirlsclub.wordpress.com or call co-founder Karen Feldman at 410-295-7002.

Looking to squeeze in more summer fun before school starts? The Truxton Park pool is holding another family movie night on the pool deck at 8 p.m. tomorrow.

Swim from 6 to 7:45 p.m., then towel off to enjoy the fantasy flick, "Hook," starring Robin Williams as a grown-up Peter Pan. Regular pool fees apply: \$2 for children ages 4 to 17 and \$3 for adults. Children under four are admitted free with a paying adult.

Truxton Park is located off Hilltop Lane. For more information, call 410-263-7928.

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