

Rebirth of a community

Mohawk College has helped turn old school into a place to learn and live

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HAMILTON—Equal parts big sister, teacher and friend, Diana Espirat is making a difference.

She serves up healthy snacks such as carrots and cheese, helps with nagging math problems and shares lots of laughs.

But most of all, the Mohawk College student offers support and encouragement to boys and girls in grades 4 to 8 from one of this city's poorest neighbourhoods, those who typically find such things in short supply.

But Espirat, 24, a child and youth worker student, who with classmates developed and runs the Hoops and Homework Club, says while the program helps them get the on-the-job training they require for graduation, it serves a higher purpose.

"The kids get a sense of belonging and a place to expend some energy," she says. "And we get to feel good at the end of the day about what we're doing."

Hoops and Homework, a study and recreation session that began in November, is just one of a growing number of activities involving Mohawk students at a newly reopened community resource centre in a former elementary school. The 48,000-square-foot building closed in 2004, leaving the industrial north Hamilton area with few outreach services.

But a group of community, civic and corporate leaders decided to buy the building from the local school board. Last month, they handed over \$330,000 for the near century-old facility.

Though Mohawk couldn't pony up any cash, college president MaryLynn West-Moynes says, "We offered our best resource – our minds and our hands."

So the former Robert Land School resembles a satellite campus of Mohawk. Engineering technology faculty and students are maintaining the building's old boiler and refurbishing the plumbing. Advertising students are working on marketing and public-relations campaigns to boost its profile as a reborn community centre.

This year, skilled trades and apprenticeship students will begin renovating former classrooms – dubbed "Mohawk makeovers" – while others will conduct a community-needs assessment, and still more from a host of other courses will continue developing and delivering recreational and educational programs in partnership with the YMCA and community groups.

Mohawk's involvement is an initiative of its new active citizenship team. The brainchild of West-Moynes – who came to Mohawk three years ago from Durham College in Oshawa, where she was chief operating officer – it's making community involvement part of the school's curriculum. Each student must take a citizenship course in second year, with many choosing to volunteer at the centre.

But make no mistake, she doesn't see this as a charity case.

"They're the ones giving our students an incredible gift," West-Moynes says of area residents. "And the gift is understanding how we can make a difference.

"In the end, I think that's part of a post-secondary institution's responsibility."

Fiercely proud and still angry at the decision to close the school, residents of this tight-knit community appreciate the return of free programs – for everyone from preschoolers to seniors.

But they say one of the biggest benefits of Mohawk students in the neighbourhood is their interaction with the youngsters, which reinforces that finishing high school and going on to a post-secondary education are key.

"The kids meet them and see how important it is to stay in school," says Barbara Teichmann, 50, a single mother whose four children and one grandchild attended Robert Land School before it closed. "They can let their minds wander beyond the four walls that they live in and see that anything is possible.

"It's a great influence."

Katie Antone, 10, agrees. Admitting she'd be "sitting on the couch, watching TV" if she wasn't at Hoops and Homework, the Grade 5 student says, "They're saying how good college is and that it'll help us get a good job.

"I want to take a cooking class because I want to be a famous chef," Katie says as other kids loudly rhyme off their career goals to a visitor. "Or, I'm going to be a kindergarten teacher because I like kids."

Comments like that bring a lump to the throat of Don MacVicar, 50, chair of the Robert Land Community Association. An employee of steel giant Dofasco who moved to the area 40 years ago, he recalls how the Salvation Army furnished his family home and a principal bought them groceries.

Calling the reopened community centre "a dream come true," MacVicar says by next fall he hopes to see it operating six days a week with a job bank, used clothing and furniture exchanges, a community policing centre, literacy and English-as-a-second-language classes, and more after-school programs.

He's looking to fundraise \$1.5 million to sustain the expanding group of activities.

"People were so kind and generous to us as a family all those years ago and they never asked for anything in return," he says. "This is returning the favour."

And Mohawk students will continue doing their part. Advertising students plan a free membership drive to neighbourhood residents early this year and will launch a buy-a-brick donation program to raise money for centre operations.

"It's putting everything we've learned to good use," says Adam McClare, 22, a third-year advertising student. "And you genuinely feel good giving back."

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