



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Harvison and mentee:
From book club to scholarships.

Nicholas Elementary, is in her first year with My Sister's Circle. Jalisa, a sixth-grader who attends Robert Poole Middle, is in her second year. Her mom has already seen a big change in Jalisa.

"She's more independent. She's gotten over her shyness," Oliver said. "I love the program."

More recently, My Sister's Circle has helped half a dozen girls obtain full scholarships to area private schools, and many also attend summer camp on scholarship. Since registering My Sister's Circle as a 501C3 nonprofit and beginning to draw a salary last fall, Harvison, 31, has begun to assemble a board of directors and plan a series of fund-raising activities.

Some of the girls in My Sister's Circle have difficult lives, Harvison said. Several don't live with either parent, others have a parent in jail, and one girl passes her drug-addicted mother hustling on the street corner on her way to school. The mentors work closely with the schools and families to get the girls the support services they need.

Because of this strong involvement, the mentors are asked for a three-year commitment to the program. They are recruited and trained partly through the Maryland Mentoring Partnership, an organization whose mission is to increase the number of youth in mentoring relationships with caring adults.

Mentors are not counselors or financiers, or even surrogate parents. Linda Stewart, executive director of the Maryland Mentoring Partnership says their role is to provide "consistent time, guidance, and friendship" to a child to enrich that young person's life.

"Our young people need the support," she said, "and everybody's got to get involved with it."

A small circle of friends

BY CHRISTINE STUTZ

I rma Johnson sees a bright future for some of her fifth-grade girls at Dallas F. Nicholas Elementary School in the Barclay-Midway section of northeast Baltimore. But the school principal knows that without careful guidance and support, many of those girls will squander their potential as they move into middle school, where the temptations and torments of adolescence prove a formidable distraction.

About three years ago, Johnson happened to mention her concern to an energetic young woman named Heather Harvison, who co-owned The Tutoring Connection, a learning center. Harvison visited the school and met some of the academically talented girls of whom Johnson spoke.

"I thought they were amazing, absolutely amazing," Harvison said. She and some friends started an "Oprah-style" book club for the girls, which quickly evolved into a mentoring program called My Sister's Circle. The girls and their mentors go on trips, do arts and crafts, talk about books and watch movies together.

"These girls seem to get lost in the shuffle in middle school," said Johnson, and as they drift they are at risk for early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. Her wish, she said, was for these young women "to have someone to follow them to see that they continue on a path that would get them to college."

Since beginning with six girls in the fall of 2000, the program has grown to 30 girls and some 50 mentors, who work with the girls on a volunteer basis. The fifth-graders come from Dallas Nicholas, Barclay, and Abbotston elementary schools, and their mentors follow them as they go on to middle school. Once in sixth grade, they also link up with one of 30 volunteer tutors from Roland Park Country School's Upper School for help with their studies.

Johnson said that while the city has many important remediation programs for kids who are performing below expectations, brighter students crave cultural and social enrichment. Through My Sister's Circle, Johnson said, these economically disadvantaged inner-city girls are attending the opera, going on hayrides, and visiting museums. "They're being exposed to so many different activities they would never have a chance to do otherwise," she said.

Shaniqua Warfield, a sixth grader at The Barclay School, says she enjoys her Saturday visits with her mentor, Ava Sewell, who is "like a friend" to her. They go to parks and playgrounds, or go to Sewell's house, bake and talk.

"It helps me sometimes to get out of the house and have fun," says Shaniqua, who lives with her grandparents, one of whom is disabled. "She listens to me. She doesn't boss me around."

Judy Oliver has two daughters in the program. LaTasha, a fifth-grader at Dallas