

My Sister's Circle offers support to city girls



NANINE HARTZENBUSCH : SUN STAFF PHOTOS

“Older students mentor 50 middle-schoolers”

By LINDA LINLEY
SUN STAFF

On Wednesday afternoons, Bryn Mawr School sophomore Lindsay Hamilton can be found in the Roland Park branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library helping Masuma Islam with her homework.

Sitting at a small table in the basement, Lindsay goes over Latin, math and other assign-

Lindsay Hamilton (left) tutors Masuma Islamat the Enoch Pratt Free Library's Roland Park branch. The two are part of My Sister's Circle.

ments with Masuma, who attends Roland Park Middle School. Lindsay also teaches her organizational skills and memory tricks.

“I'm more comfortable asking Lindsay questions,” said Masuma, 11, a sixth-grader from the city's Remington neighborhood who has been working with Lindsay since October. “We can relate to each other, and we can joke around.”

Lindsay, 15, of Reisterstown, is

among dozens of upper-school students from Bryn Mawr, Roland Park Country School, Garrison Forest School and Maryvale Preparatory School who volunteer to tutor city middle school girls as part of a mentoring program called My Sister's Circle.

My Sister's Circle was started four years ago by Heather Harvison, the former owner of a learning center, after a discussion

with Irma Johnson, principal at the Dallas F. Nicholas Senior Elementary School in the city's Barclay neighborhood.

Harvison, 32, said Johnson believed a program was needed to help fifth-grade girls make the transition to middle school. Too many bright, young pupils were at risk of being lost to the streets.

The program started in 2000 with six girls and has grown to 50 pupils who come from three city elementary schools: Barclay, Abbottston and Margaret Brent. Fifteen girls are added to the program each year, largely on recommendations from their principals.

The nonprofit program includes an upper-school tutor for each of the girls, an adult mentor for each girl, and social and cultural events about once a month.

"Many of these girls need a support system" because they have no parents around and are being raised by grandparents or other relatives in poor neighborhoods, Harvison said.

When she interviews women to act as mentors, Harvison asks for a commitment to see the girls through sixth, seventh and eighth grade.

"I felt one year wasn't enough if we wanted to make a difference," she said. "We want to challenge the girls to get them to finish high school and go on to college."

Harvison said that the program is working but that it's a long-

term effort.

She learned that matching the middle-school pupils with private school tutors formed a bond between the two groups and kept the younger girls motivated academically.

"Our relationships have a large impact on the middle school students," said Sarah Devine, 17, of Hunt Valley, a senior at Roland Park Country School and president of My Sister's Circle there. "It helps the girls' outlook on what they can do and pushes them toward thinking about college and understanding their potential."

Each upper-school student sends a monthly report to Harvison that includes the number of hours devoted to tutoring, what the students worked on and any problems or concerns.

Roland Park senior Katharine Fox, 17, is spending her second year as a tutor for Nakia Brown, a seventh-grader at Hamilton Middle School.

They meet every Sunday for about two hours in a fast-food restaurant, where they work on math homework, then get something to eat and just talk or listen to music together.

"We are really close and learn from each other," Katharine said. "A lot of [tutors] come from privileged backgrounds. Nakia's lifestyle is so dramatically different from mine. But she's a com-

passionate, loving person who doesn't let things stop her."

Katharine said that her friendship with Nakia has become such a "huge part of my life" that the upper-school senior wants to pick a tutor for Nakia next year when Katharine goes to college.

Rickell Briggs was one of the original six girls that Johnson recommended for Harvison's program. Rickell, 13, is an eighth-grader and a boarder at Garrison Forest School in Owings Mills.

"Heather was my mentor," Rickell said. "We met every other Wednesday and did homework, discussed books, and she helped me with grammar. We also talked about life in general. She was there any time I needed her."

Harvison helped Rickell find a place to live when life at home became difficult. Harvison's parents, Sharon and Alex Smith of Timonium, became Rickell's legal guardians last year.

Harvison also inquires about scholarship money that may be available to the girls in her program at the private schools. She helped Rickell obtain a scholarship to Garrison Forest after Rickell spent two years at St. Pius X School in Anneslie in Baltimore County's.

"I never thought I would wind up at Garrison Forest," Rickell said. "Now I will get to go to college where I can study law and help other people."