

Education That Creates a Way

How one inner-city church provides structure and support for kids to keep learning all the way through college

On Wednesday nights in Zion, Ill., children ages 5-12 can step into a world of colorful, giant cartoon characters that includes an oversized spin-the-wheel game boasting cash prizes and an opportunity to receive a snack pack of food.

“For some kids, this is all they have had to eat that night,” says Luis Reyes, founder and senior pastor of Church of Joy and its Sidewalk Sunday School ministry.

And if the kids keep coming back, they get even more. Through the church, they gain access to tutoring, a food pantry and clothing.

“We noticed that some of the kids didn’t know how to read the Bible,” Reyes says of the tutoring effort. “Then we realized they didn’t know how to read at all. So we started the Success Center to provide tutoring services.”

The Success Center is an 8,000-square-foot facility with a computer lab, project room, cafeteria and classrooms where more than 50 first- through sixth-graders receive group tutoring in reading, language arts, writing, math, science and social studies.

Kids who receive these services have a high probability of being inducted into the church’s teen leadership program at 12 years of age. Teen leaders help out in every aspect of the church’s ministry, from cleaning, cooking and taking care of younger children to working in the office. A teen leader receives a T-shirt that indicates their leadership status and is worn like a badge of honor.

“The cool thing for kids is to come on a Friday night revival

service, go to college days, join the dance and step team, and become a young adult here,” says associate pastor Jordan Jones. “The kids are sitting there, saying, ‘I want to be like Demetrius or like Sierra,’ instead of wanting to be like Beyoncé or Chris Brown. We’re giving them examples of young adults to look up to.”

Teen leaders adhere to a strict code of conduct, and if they show exceptional academic excellence, they may qualify for a scholarship to a private Christian school.

“I wanted to earn that scholarship when I was in the eighth grade,” says Demetrius Hollins, one of the church’s young adult leaders. “I barely passed eighth grade, but I stepped it up in teen leadership by helping to set up the services, cleaning and helping with the kids.”

Hollins made honor roll during his freshman year in high school, and when he needed surgery for his legs, Reyes found a surgeon who would perform the surgery for free. The surgery cost Hollins a month of his sophomore year, but he caught up the following year and became the first high school graduate in his family with a 3.0 GPA.

After high school, Hollins enrolled in Church of Joy’s Bible college, a four-year program with free tuition for students who grew up in the Sidewalk Sunday School program.

“Our students couldn’t afford to pay for tuition,” says Reyes, who founded the college. “The school is only for kids who have stayed with us throughout the years from Sidewalk Sunday School. Right now, it’s closed to outsiders. Students who go through the college must commit to staying here to help with the ministry.”

Bible college students receive free housing and a stipend for working at the church. They receive three years of training with a practicum apprenticeship in the fourth year and can receive training in the creative arts, multimedia, education

and pastoral care as well as a ministerial certificate.

For most students in the Bible college, they become the first person in their family to finish a college education.