

Little Lights in the Big City

BY MELANIE SUNUKJIAN

If you walked past the red corner house on Seventh and I streets SE, you may never give it a second look. Its unadorned exterior, slightly unkempt yard, and stone's-throw-from-the-freeway location could make one assume that it's just another diminutive domicile without much to offer. But similar to the kids the Little Lights house serves, if you take the time to look inside and get to know it, you would see it for the amazing potential that it has become.

Little Lights Urban Ministry (LLUM) has been blessing and empowering local kids since 1995. That's when its founder, Steve Park, says he felt God's call to share his love with underserved children and families. He and his wife, Mary, live in Anacostia with their two children and work together to serve the needs of the kids who live in the Potomac Gardens neighborhood.

In the last 15 years LLUM has slowly grown into an effective and well-established ministry. They began as an after-school tutoring program and branched out by offering a specialized one-on-one curriculum for math and reading on designated evenings. They launched a summer camp in 1997 that has grown into the Summer D.I.P. (drop in program), and the spring break camp was developed five years later. In a move to encourage the natural gifts that they saw in the kids, a choir was formed, and the annual talent show followed soon after. The next year, Christian Fellowship Church in Ashburn, Va., generously donated the actual house to the ministry so they could now invest the rent money more directly in their students and programs. In 2006, they initiated a mentoring program, but their most recent crowning achievement has been the Teen Internship Program. It provides part-time jobs for teens who have grown up in LLUM, giving them an opportunity to "pay it forward."



ABOVE: Steve Park (Right), founder of Little Lights, poses with one of the program's many participants. Photo: Melanie Sunukjian.



Over the years, the success and longevity of LLUM has garnered them some respectable accolades. They have received awards from the Family Research Council, the Catalogue of Philanthropy and the Capitol Hill Community Foundation. Popular theologian and author Brian McLaren spoke on their behalf at the 2007 fundraising banquet, and last year, the first lady of South Korea paid them a visit.

The recognition comes from the obvious success of their efforts. According to their 2009 academic statistics, 70 percent of their students mastered at least four of the math objectives identified in their learning plan; 59 percent of their students have improved in reading with 44 percent reading independently at grade level. With that kind of success, I was eager to see a day in the life of the Little Lights program.

My kids and I decided to stop



by after school one Tuesday in late May. As we entered the front room, we joined their circle time to sing songs, do stretches and then go over the house rules. While the different age groups split up into their assigned rooms – Activity, Chill, or Homework – Josie, the fundraising coordinator, gave me a tour of the place. Aesthetically, I loved how "lived in" it felt. The walls were trimmed with a number

of colorful, floor-to-ceiling murals, lots of snapshots of happy kids and scattered displays of artwork and assignments.

I then met two of the current teen interns, Mia and Geizel. Mia started at LLUM as an elementary student, but despite aging out of the program, she figured she could still hang out by mentoring the younger kids. She's been helping the kids with activities

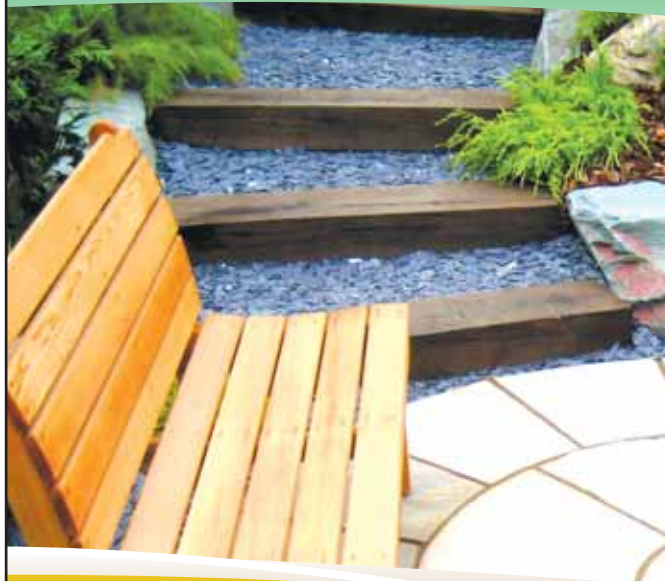
and art for the last two years and feels like her friends and leaders have become like family to her. Geizel became very close to the volunteers when she was a young student in the program, and as a result became one of the first teen mentors. As a student at Cesar Chavez Charter School, she says her administrative responsibilities at LLUM have prepared her very well for a required public policy internship.

I also had the pleasure of meeting Dwaine, an inspiring alum. He was visiting his old stomping grounds after completing his junior year as a broadcast journalism major at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va. When I asked him what he gained from his years at LLUM, he compared how his life had been changed to a firm foundation that you build a house upon. "Because it gave me a more spiritually mature mind-set in life, I know that no matter what happens, the foundation is still there, and there's always a way to recover."

Needless to say, I was quite impressed by the staff, volunteers, interns and students. When I asked Steve about the future of LLUM, he was eager to tell me that they had recently received access to one of the apartments at Potomac Gardens. Their dream is to turn it into an employment and technology center to help students and adults create resumes, find job placement and build up interview and technological skills. They are currently looking for business and church partners to help them with this exciting endeavor.

If you are interested in learning more about Little Lights Urban Ministries, then visit their website www.littlelights.org and watch some of their encouraging videos. Or pay them a visit at the little red house and let them have the pleasure of showing you around. It really is "more than meets the eye." ★

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