

Program puts students on post-high school path

By David A. Markiewicz

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ATLANTA - To some of Larry Lee's acquaintances, the thought of doing anything more than the bare minimum at school is craziness.

Staying late — say, two or three hours a day, every day — to get tutorial help with homework, advice about college and maybe a little life or career counseling, well, no way.

"You talk to them about education outside 8:15 to 3:15, they say, 'What? I gotta be out on the streets,' " he said.

Not Lee. He was among a group of about 200 high school students from the East Lake area in Atlanta who participated this year in CREW (Creating Responsible Educated & Working) Teens, a 3-year-old, four-days-a-week, after-school academic support program sponsored by the East Lake Foundation.

Sessions are held at Charles R. Drew Charter School, which opened in 2000 in East Lake as Atlanta's first charter school. The CREW program is for Drew graduates and other high schoolers from the East Lake community.

From 3:30 to 7 p.m., Monday through Thursday, ninth- to 12th-graders come for help from a mix of full-time staffers and part-time volunteers.

Drew Charter, which serves more than 800 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, is a key piece in the rebirth of a once-woebegone neighborhood. Since 1995, the community has been redeveloped by the East Lake Foundation, the organization started by Atlanta developer Tom Cousins and public and private partners. The residential, commercial, recreational and educational project has been recognized nationally.

Drew Charter has led a dramatic academic revival. At one time, only 5 percent of fifth-graders in the neighborhood elementary school met or exceeded state standards for math. Among Drew students, 74 percent meet or exceed standards for math, and 88 percent do for reading.

The CREW Teens program has shown impressive results as well. Participants already have earned college scholarships worth more than \$700,000 and have been accepted to schools including Georgia Tech, Michigan State, the University of Florida, Hampton and Morehouse.

The program paid off for Lee. The 18-year-old Southside High graduate will be attending Valdosta State University this fall. That's in large part, he said, because of the program and its director, Chris Bennett, who says CREW Teens is designed to help keep students on track.

"Drew is such a nurturing environment and gives such a good education, and there was the fear that when these students graduated and went off to high school they might lose that foundation, that groundwork," Bennett explained.

"We're a safe haven for them to come back to," he said. "We remind them that they're Drew alumni and that we're here to provide whatever support we can."

Of the 88 graduates of the Drew Charter class of 2004, CREW Teens was able to track the high school progress of 77. Of those, about 65 participated in CREW Teens last year. And, of those, roughly 40 already have been accepted to college.

That's a noteworthy success rate, particularly, Bennett noted, because 95 percent of CREW Teens participants would be the first generation of their family to attend college.

Still, the thrust of the program is not university-or-bust.

"We don't just focus on college," Bennett said. "We want the students to get out of high school and to have a plan to either go to college, to enter the work force or go to a trade school. We want them to have a plan for post-secondary education or careers."

Except during football season, Lee was a regular at CREW Teens, heading back to Drew from about 4 to 6:30 p.m. daily after a long day at Southside High, located south of I-20 near Grant Park. He doesn't regret the time and effort spent.

"Oh, man, just having someone there to help me through school," Lee said when asked about the benefits of the program. "It helped me stay off the streets. It was a safe place for me to go."

Lee did his homework, got tutoring, worked on computers and researched colleges. His grades went up and he became familiar with the world of college and how to apply to schools.

Among its services, CREW Teens takes participants on tours of universities to help students unfamiliar with college get a feel for campus life. Lee took advantage of the exposure, visiting the University of Florida and Albany State as well as Valdosta State.

Lee's mother, Lillian Milhouse, said the program kept her son "focused on his goal of attending college."

"The people there gave him insight about what schools to apply to," Milhouse said. "It also kept him from getting into things most teenagers get into. They take a lot of time with the children and get close and personal with them."

Jessica Stillwell, like Lee a Drew and Southside High graduate, said being involved in the CREW Teens program was so valuable to her that for a time, "I enjoyed after school more than school."

She said the program offered "a teen chill-out area," with "mentors on the spot. Whatever help you needed," she said, "they were there."

One thing Stillwell got was assistance in preparing for her SAT exam. Ultimately, she received scholarships that will cover her costs to attend the University of Georgia.

Lee said he isn't getting a scholarship; he'll rely on grants and work study when he heads to Valdosta State in the fall. But he's sold on the CREW Teens program.

Without it, he said, "I don't think I'd be on this path to college."