

Helping Hands

My Sister's Circle, whose long-term mentors work with young girls, sends its first class off to college

BY SARA NEUFELD
[SUN REPORTER]

They come from families that have battled the likes of drug addiction, incarceration and unemployment. One lived in a home without electricity or enough food. Another was left without a family after her grandmother died.

Yet in a few weeks, all three will graduate from high school. In a few months, all three will enroll in college, with tuition all or mostly funded by scholarships.

These girls — Rickell, Antoinella and Shaniqua — are the first to complete a mentoring program for Baltimore students called My Sister's Circle. For the past seven years, the program has paired them with caring adults to help navigate adolescence in the inner city and make good choices when it would have been all too easy to give up.

"Ladies, you have beaten the odds," the program's dynamic executive director, Heather Harvison, told them at a ceremony Tuesday night before 150 people, many of them dabbing at their eyes with tissues.

My Sister's Circle is unusual because of the extended time commitment it demands from volunteer mentors, who must sign on for a minimum of three years. Girls with difficult life circumstances are identified at the beginning of fifth grade and, after attending a yearlong after-school program, are paired with a mentor for middle and high school.

As the Baltimore school system and other urban districts around the nation struggle to address a dropout crisis, My Sister's Circle demonstrates the potential impact that an adult can make when involved in a child's life for a prolonged period of time.

Research shows that the longer a mentorship is in place, the better the results. On the other hand, experts caution that students can be negatively affected if a mentor quickly backs out of a commitment.

"A lot of folks get mad at me because they'll do something for six months and say 'We're mentoring,' and I'll say, 'No, you're not,'" said

Jeannette Simon, manager of community partnerships for the Maryland Mentoring Partnership. "Mentoring is a long-term relationship. By long-term, we mean minimum a year, and to be honest, that's really not long enough. It's long enough to get started."

William E. Milliken, author of *The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic*, said in a speech to Baltimore educators last week that lasting relationships are the key to keeping kids in school.

"I've been at this for 48 years now ... and I still haven't seen one program change one kid's life. It's relationships that change people, not a program," said Milliken, a nationally known youth advocate who founded the nonprofit Communities In Schools. "If you can't use the word *love*, if you can't talk about relationships, then forget it. Because we have to be willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of adolescence with kids and love them."

The purpose of a program, Milliken added, is to create an environment "where healthy relationships are happening between adults and children."

My Sister's Circle grew out of a conversation in 2000 between Irma Johnson, then the principal of Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary School, and Harvison, the daughter of one of Johnson's friends. Harvison, in her late 20s at the time, was visiting the school and asked what she could do to help.

Johnson said she needed a program for



Circle co-founder Heather Harvison (back to camera) hugs Rickell Sheppard Briggs after Briggs' graduation speech.

PHOTOS BY ELIZABETH MALBY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]



Above, from left, new My Sister's Circle members Shabria Alston, Maya Muriel and Lexie Jefferon watch the Baltimore program's first graduation ceremony.

girls leaving Dallas Nicholas, located at Calvert and 21st streets, a block from city school system headquarters. She could get

them through elementary school, but then, in a turbulent middle school environment, they were getting lost.

Harvison was working a full-time job in marketing, but she and a few friends started a weekly after-school club for five girls in fifth grade. Three would later drop out of school, and two got pregnant, just as Johnson had feared. Two, Rickell Sheppard Briggs and Antoinella Peterkin, stuck with the program despite their initial reservations to trust — as Antoinella put it — the “chipper Caucasian women.” Johnson required Rickell to join the club when she took her back at Dallas Nicholas following a suspension for bad behavior.

By the second year, Harvison quit her job, established a nonprofit and accepted 17 fifth-grade girls from three city schools into My Sister's Circle. Fifteen of the 17 are still with the program and are juniors in high school, except Shaniqua Warfield, who skipped a grade at Barclay Elementary/Middle and is graduating, along with Rickell and Antoinella.

My Sister's Circle admits a new class of fifth-graders each year. Today, 75 women are mentoring 75 girls. The mentors are an economically and racially diverse group, ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s.

Getting the girls through high school requires far more than the occasional activity or phone call. Harvison, 36, has dedicated her life to them. A petite and freckled single mother with a 4-year-old son, she has raised \$460,000 in scholarship money to send many of the girls to private schools, plus \$150,000 in summer camp scholarships. She has solicited thousands of dollars' worth of tickets to concerts and plays. She carefully screens each prospective mentor.

Mentors keep in close touch with the students' teachers and guidance counselors. They work with the girls on high school and college applications.

Robyn Ringgold, who went to high school with Harvison at Maryvale Prep in Brooklandville, says her two young daughters view her mentee like an older sister. They bring the girl on family vacations and drive three hours each way to bring her to camp in Pennsylvania during the summer. Though Ringgold lives in Ellicott City and works as a business analyst in Rockville, she drove up to Baltimore one afternoon last week to attend her mentee's track meet.

When Candace Handy's brother was murdered, her mentor, Hunter Haines, was the first person to arrive with food and a shoulder for her family to cry on. Candace, a 17-year-



My sister's Circle co-founder Heather Harvison applauds at the graduation of (from left) Shaniqua Warfield, Antoinella Peterkin and Rickell Sheppard Briggs from the eight-year mentoring program.

ELIZABETH MALBY (SUN PHOTOGRAPHER)

old junior at Roland Park Country School, and Haines, a 44-year-old training specialist for CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, are planning a road trip to visit colleges together this summer. Haines is also teaching the girl how to drive.

When Shaniqua's grandmother died, Harvison helped her financially and offered her a place to sleep and eat. “She considered me to be family, even when my own family didn't,” Shaniqua, 17, said at Tuesday's ceremony, held at the Calvert School. She was accepted into seven colleges and will attend Villa Julie.

When Rickell's home life became too much to bear, Harvison's parents, Alex and Sharon Smith, became her legal guardians. So now, mentor and mentee really consider themselves sisters.

Because Rickell and Shaniqua had such difficult home lives, Harvison got them scholarships to boarding schools: Garrison Forest for Rickell and Oldfields for Shaniqua. For the first few weeks, the girls hated their new environments as they were exposed to peers from far wealthier families.

“They have so much stuff,” said Rickell, 18, who wants to be a lawyer and will attend the University of Baltimore. “I didn't know how people live. I didn't know people rode horses and played lacrosse and field hockey.”

Antoinella, 16, attended a public school,

Baltimore City College, enduring many challenges at home along the way. Earlier this month, she was devastated to learn that she hadn't gotten enough financial aid to make it possible for her to attend her dream school, Albright College in Reading, Pa. But last week, she bounced back with the news that she is the recipient of a scholarship that will give her nearly a full ride to the College of Notre Dame.

At Tuesday's ceremony in their honor, called “Dream a Little Dream” on the invitation and program, the girls mingled at a reception in a tent with fancy cheese, strawberries and crab dip. Rickell, who didn't attend her fifth-grade graduation because she didn't have anything nice to wear, had just been shopping with Sharon Smith and was wearing a red eyelet dress bought at Macy's.

At 7 p.m., the crowd of program participants, families and community supporters filed into the atrium. Photos of Rickell, Antoinella and Shaniqua as fifth-graders were projected on a screen as the girls spoke about their experiences in My Sister's Circle.

“I'm a poor black girl from the inner city who is college-bound,” Shaniqua said as she began her speech. “It actually is possible to achieve something from nothing.”

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