
LEARNING PLACE ; ONE HOUSE OF ENLIGHTENMENT DRAWS EAGER KIDS FROM STREETS; [City Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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The atmosphere at the Stricklands', naturally, has a warm, homey feel, and [Percy Strickland] and [Angie Strickland] believe that's why the students keep coming back.

Despite their occasional penchant for unruliness, the kids are polite and quick to say "thank you" and "excuse me" and are not averse to shaking an adult's hand. The Stricklands seldom have to send a child home for misbehavior, although that threat always hangs in the air. The kids apparently figure there's too much to miss, and they're right. Besides the tutoring sessions, the Stricklands and the other tutors have taken the kids to Kings Dominion and on camping trips and, in one of their earliest interactions with the kids, invited two to spend Easter with Percy's family on their farm in North Carolina.

Full Text (1943 words)

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On the darkened city street, the lights shining from the windows of the two-story gray house glow like a beacon in the gathering dusk.

The old house with the white columns and porch swing has a distinctively tranquil look in a neighborhood that is often distinctly untranquil. A number of nearby houses are boarded up. Drug dealers are no strangers to the area. Gunshots occasionally echo through the night.

These streets are not particularly kind.

"I basically keep my kids in the house," said Tina Johnson, a mother of five who lives on 33rd Street in the East End.

Which brings us back to the two-story gray house on Chimborazo Boulevard, the next cobblestone street over from Johnson. It is a refuge for children in this neighborhood as two evenings a week it glows not only with bright lights in the windows but with the electricity that 15 or 20 kids can generate.

"This is a hot spot," smiled homeowner Percy Strickland.

He and his wife, Angie, moved into the neighborhood more than a year and a half ago. Warm and friendly - as well as young and white in a community populated mostly by blacks - the Stricklands were a curiosity to kids on their block.

When the children stopped by to visit, the Stricklands talked to them and invited them in to play checkers and chess and Nintendo. They even threw parties for them on holidays.

After a Valentine's Day party last year, the Stricklands decided they could do more to help the children than simply offering fun and games. Sort of half-joking, the Stricklands wondered if any of the kids would be interested in a little tutoring. We'll start Monday after school, the Stricklands said, having absolutely no idea how many - if any - kids would actually show up to do homework at their kitchen table.

When the Stricklands arrived home that Monday afternoon, their porch was full of kids waiting for them.

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Percy, 27, is a campus chaplain at the University of Richmond; Angie, 26, a first-year medical student at Virginia Commonwealth University's Medical College of Virginia. They met at Duke University, where both earned their undergraduate degrees. They have no children of their own.

Angie grew up in Cleveland; her mom taught school and her father, a physician, ran a drug-treatment center. Percy was raised on a farm in North Carolina.

"I'm a recovering redneck," he said with a smile.

They moved to Richmond and lived in an apartment in the West End, but decided to buy a home elsewhere in the area.

"We wanted where we lived to have purpose," Percy said.

They sought a community where they could make a difference. At first, they didn't know what that difference might be or how they might achieve it, but they assumed they would figure it out once they got there.

They settled on the house on Chimborazo Boulevard smack-dab in the middle of a neighborhood in transition. It was - and is - a place where purpose could flourish. But it was not altogether welcoming. In some cases, the Stricklands encountered skepticism and outright hostility.

"When we first got here, I was cussed out on a regular basis just for being white," Percy said, noting it was people he assumed to be drug dealers who made such comments. "In some ways it was bad and in some ways it was grounding. This wasn't our community when we arrived, but now it is our community."

It is a community where kids often roam the streets unsupervised, so when some of them started hanging out with the Stricklands, the young couple didn't mind. The purpose they were seeking began to take shape.

"There are so many things going on in the city that are easy to ignore unless you see them on a daily basis," said Angie. "You just can't ignore a neighbor in need."

The notion of transforming their home into a makeshift schoolhouse two evenings a week was one that did not strike them immediately but evolved as it became clear some of the kids could use a jump-start on their academics. The porch full of kids waiting for them on the Monday after Valentine's Day in 2002 helped it evolve quickly.

The Stricklands were, at once, gratified and overwhelmed. They determined they couldn't adequately offer assistance to all of the kids who wanted it, so they started inviting their friends from MCV and UR and their church, Third Presbyterian, to help as tutors. The result is an intriguing mix of professionals, academic high-achievers and children eager to learn.

A year later, the grass-roots operation even has a name - CHAT, short for Church Hill Activities and Tutoring - and a wider purpose: to serve as an example to others who have the inclination to do good.

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The entry foyer of the Stricklands' home indicates this is not just another house. True, there is a shiny chandelier and a fine, old marble table, but next to the table is a supply cart laden with pencils and scissors and an electric pencil sharpener. Under the table are stacks of phonics workbooks and boxes of math flashcards.

The kids are in the kitchen.

Good tutoring cannot take place on empty stomachs, so every session begins with a snack. The Stricklands put out a spread that includes things such as popcorn, Goldfish, apple slices and baby carrots. The kids inhale the food, then head to a large back room where everyone gathers before studying begins.

Percy shows off the prizes - items such as Silly Putty and McDonald's gift certificates - that will be given to the day's hardest and most well-mannered workers. They recite a Bible verse together and say a prayer, but there is no proselytizing, only a reminder to follow the rules of being attentive, respectful and kind to one another.

Then they hand out the kids' individualized folders of past work, and everyone hits the books.

The tutors and kids - who attend elementary, middle and high school - break into groups and fan out throughout the house, using almost every square inch of the space.

A pair of tutors and students sit at the island in the kitchen sounding out phonics. Behind them, at the kitchen table, another tutor works on math with her student. In the dining room, two groups gathered at the table are figuring fractions. In the back room where an open trunk is brimming with children's books, a tutor and his students are having a geography lesson, spinning a globe looking for states, continents and the equator. Other groups gather in the living room, the bedrooms, and even the upstairs hallway where a tutor and her student are sprawled on a rug reading a book.

The sound of multiplication tables and other lessons float through the open transoms. "Good job!" and other praises also drift over the various doorways.

At the end of the evening, the tutors walk the students home to make sure they get there safely.

The atmosphere at the Stricklands', naturally, has a warm, homey feel, and Percy and Angie believe that's why the students keep coming back.

That, and the fact the students seem to be doing better in school.

Percy said it's gratifying "to see them proud to bring their report cards home and say, 'Look what I did!'"

"Hopefully, we'll bring them all up to a level where they can succeed," he said.

Tina Johnson, the mother of five, said she's seen an improvement in her children's schoolwork.

"My kids love it over there," she said. "They would go every day if they could."

Marquetta Vaughan, an 8-year-old second-grader whose favorite subjects are math and science, said she likes visiting the Stricklands on Monday and Tuesday evenings "because it's a great place to help us learn. This is helping us."

It doesn't appear to be doing any harm to the tutors, either.

"I can make time for this," said tutor Sally Hanson, like Angie Strickland, a busy first-year student at MCV. "The first year of medical school is so much about books and dry stuff. This is what I'm going to med school for. It's so much fun."

Alexandra Vogel, a math teacher at Tucker High School who knows the Stricklands from church, comes straight from school to the tutoring sessions. "I've gotten to know these kids, and the more you work with them, the more you love them."

"This is small," said MCV student Kristina Royster, another tutor, "but if you've been encouraging to one life, that's significant."

There are upward of 30 children in the program, with 15 or 20 coming on any given day. The Stricklands would like to take in more kids, but there isn't sufficient space. Their primary goal is to encourage others to open their homes for such programs.

Their efforts already have encouraged Tina Johnson, the neighbor who sends her children to CHAT. She has seen how the Stricklands' home has become a safe gathering spot for neighborhood children, and she is now trying to drum up interest in opening a community center that would be staffed by volunteers.

"We could get a lot of these kids off the streets and have something to do with their time," Johnson said.

She joked the Stricklands and other tutors have "the patience of saints" to work with so many kids, some of whom, as she put it, "can be really outrageous."

Despite their occasional penchant for unruliness, the kids are polite and quick to say "thank you" and "excuse me" and are not averse to shaking an adult's hand. The Stricklands seldom have to send a child home for misbehavior, although that threat always hangs in the air. The kids apparently figure there's too much to miss, and they're right. Besides the tutoring sessions, the Stricklands and the other tutors have taken the kids to Kings Dominion and on camping trips and, in one of their earliest interactions with the kids, invited two to spend Easter with Percy's family on their farm in North Carolina.

"When we got back home, one of the kids just said, 'Thanks,'" recalled Percy. "He said it in a way that you could tell that no one had ever really treated him that nicely before. That is when Angie and I started to realize that doing simple things for these kids could make a big difference."

It seems the Stricklands and their friends have taught the kids a lot.

And vice versa.

"We've probably gotten more from the kids than we could ever hope to give them," Angie said. "They teach us a lot about community and soul and spirit and survival."

She made that comment on the same afternoon a glass jar became an accidental casualty when it fell off the kitchen island during the tutoring session. She and Percy cleaned it up and shrugged it off. It prompted a wider question about sharing her house with the world.

"What's the point of having stuff," she asked, "unless you're going to use it."

TO FIND OUT MORE

CHURCH HILL ACTIVITIES AND TUTORING

Contact Percy or Angie Strickland at percy@alumni.duke.edu or angies@alumni.duke.edu, or visit the group's Web site at: <http://members.aol.com/cnv48/C.H.A.T./index.htm>

BENEFIT RACE

MCV 5K

Proceeds from the race, sponsored by the Medical College of Virginia Student Government Association, will benefit CHAT

RACE DETAILS

March 22, 9 a.m., Byrd Park, near the Vitacourse. Fee: \$15 in advance, \$18 the day of the race. For more details, e-mail: mclungkl@vcu.edu; for a race application, visit: <http://www.geocities.com/vcumcvga/5kapp.pdf>

[Illustration]

Photo

Credit: Times-Dispatch Staff Contact Bill Lohmann at (804) 649-6639

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