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<< Back to Schools

Middle schoolers find place in SUN
by: Kelly Moyer-Wade - 07/27/05

Thirteen-year-old Hanna Kiss of Gresham vividly recalls her first year of middle school.

"It was really scary. I was unsocial in the beginning, but now I'm totally different," Kiss says.

In two years, Kiss has gone from shy girl to student leader. On this particular day, she is giving advice on how to make a smooth transition from elementary to middle school.



Photo by Carole Archer

"My advice? Keep your social life on the 'down low' during classes. You'll have time to pass notes and talk but don't do it during classes," she says.

"Some of the kids might try to make fun of you, but you need to just brush it off. If they call you ugly, just say, 'Thanks, I try!'"

A gaggle of girls surrounding Kiss laughs and smiles. Most of them will enter middle school this year, but an innovative summer program, sponsored by the Dexter McCarty Schools Uniting Neighborhoods (SUN) program, is helping their transition.

"This is great for the incoming sixth-graders," says Ami Shannon, a sixth-grade teacher at Dexter McCarty. "Instead of coming in fresh, they get to know the building and make friends. I think it makes them feel more excited about coming to the school."

Shannon volunteered to teach art classes at the four-week summer camp and says a background in graphic design helped a little.

"It's been fun. Charlene (Charlene Conley is the SUN coordinator at Dexter McCarty) said they liked weird things, so we did gargoyles, which they loved," Shannon says.

About 60 students, all entering sixth, seventh or eighth grade, attended the summer program, spending four hours a day at the middle school.

Conley broke the program into four weeklong chunks. The first week concentrated on sports, especially basketball and volleyball. The second was dedicated to culture — the arts and cultural music and dances. Science took precedence the third week, and students made rockets. Then came art camp, complete with gargoyles and god's eyes, Aztec symbols used to decorate sanctuaries.

"It's fun," Owen Murray, 11, says of the four-week summer camp. "I'll go here next year. My parents wanted me to come here to meet new people, so I wouldn't be lonely next year."

Murray made fast friends and says he would recommend the program to others.

"It's awesome. I'd come back," he says.

Christopher Gonzales, 28, of Gresham volunteered for the summer program and said he thinks the blending of different ages and groups helps break barriers between the children.

Conley brought Gonzales on last year to help mentor the Latino boys, and Gonzales, who grew up in Texas but is of Mexican ancestry, says his presence was suspect at first.

"Some of the kids maybe didn't have a male role model at home ... it took a while for them to open up, but I think they liked seeing someone who looked like them ... now I'm very close with many of them," Gonzales says.

Part of the SUN philosophy is that schools should function as community centers for the whole neighborhood and provide safe, positive places for the people of the community.