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Teens initiate project to get books

By Sommer Brokaw
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DURHAM - A young group of mostly black males had a simple request for the Durham County Library: put books into their community. The library is listening.

The staff recently delivered the first set of 30 books for young adults to the Lyon Park Community Center, and they agreed to replenish it each month.

Several teens in the West End Community asked for more books in the area since they lacked transportation to get to the Main Library.

"The reason we was trying to do that was to keep young people out of the street," Desmond Bynum, 16, said. "They've started shipping books, and hopefully it might work."

The teens are part of a pilot group that's learning the Teens on Target curriculum, designed to help young adults become proactive in addressing their own needs in the community. Although Skip Auld, director of the library, said it's unfeasible to open a freestanding library branch in the West End, he is working with TNT to open a library room at the Lyon Park Community Center.

"It's clearly, totally allied with our mission," Auld said. "In our strategic plan, our No. 2 goal is to help children prepare for success in school and to help teens prepare for success in life."

The first goal in the strategic plan is to build a customer-centered and welcoming place for the entire Durham community. About 10 years ago, the county embarked upon a regional library system with a full-service library within five miles of every Durham resident.

Auld said it would be too expensive to build another community library considering almost \$30 million might have to be spent on completing the regional libraries and renovations to the main library. But he is looking forward to providing books to TNT.

North Carolinians Against Gun Violence developed the pilot group of TNT during the 2007-08 school year. Gail Neely, assistant director of NCGV, selected about 10 kids who attended the Durham Parks and Recreation project for at-risk youth called Project TEAM (Teach, Achieve, Empower, Motivate) to participate in the curriculum.

Neely said the ones who are regulars are doing much better in school.

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"Gail is great. She's one of the highlights of my program. She's good with the kids. They love her," Akwari Roberson, director of Project TEAM, said. "She's very passionate about what she has done, and she really does care."

The teens met at Lyon Park for bi-weekly discussions on gang violence, gun violence, family and dating violence, the connection between drugs, alcohol and violence, and how youth can prevent violence.

"It lets me know what's going on in our environment (the drugs, the gangs) in our neighborhoods and how I can stay away from it," Bynum said.

Added Neely: "The curriculum was developed by teens for teens. It doesn't just tell the kids what their problems are; they start to understand them; they start to understand what gun violence is and what domestic violence is, and talk about it and work it through. Then it seems to make more sense to them, and they can find solutions to it."

Getting the books in the community center is TNT's first community outreach effort.

"I've never seen a group of young boys so excited about books in my life," Librarian Autumn Winters said. "It means a lot to us that that was the thing they asked for. Our visits out there have been really rewarding because the kids are super receptive to everything we have to offer them."

The TNT program started in Los Angeles in 1989 in response to the large number of children killed by guns. NCGV is a statewide, grassroots organization dedicated to educating and mobilizing North Carolinians to prevent gun violence.

The agency is still seeking more books in addition to the 30 that the library will provide each month. If you're interested in donating, contact Neely at 403-7665.

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