

Thursday, November 24, 2005

Giving back to kids

Tutoring youngsters as part of Frontier College's outreach program proves rewarding for volunteers

Become a volunteer

Volunteers are asked to donate one hour of tutoring time per week and then another hour preparing for tutoring; Prospective candidates are first interviewed. The next step is five hours of training. A love for reading and an eagerness to share this love is a prime requirement; To volunteer, call 1-800-555-6523.

By Lara Bradley

The Sudbury Star

Frontier College's Tuesday afternoon homework club at Lansdowne Public School is crackling with youthful excitement.

The kids have just pulled New Year's Eve crackers and are wearing their paper crowns as they work on their crafts.

The children, who have already finished their homework, are finally on to the fun portion of the program, which is based on a winter carnival theme.

A good portion of the 21 students enrolled in the program have shown up and are chatting away with their friends as they work.

Sara Bellekes, a tutor volunteering time to the program, tidies up the remains of spent crackers. The ratio of kids to tutors is about two to one.

During her first year of university, Bellekes decided to volunteer with Frontier College as a literacy tutor.

Now, in her fourth year in the English program at Laurentian University and with an eye on either going to Teachers' College or graduate school, it's a decision she's glad she made.

"If I do go to grad school, I'm hoping to do a placement with Frontier College," she said.

Bellekes started as a one-on-one tutor of a girl in Grade 6 at Princess Anne Public School.

"It was nice. The girl I was tutoring hadn't found an EA (education assistant) yet. She was reading at a Grade 3-4 level," Bellekes said. "She didn't have anyone at home read with her."

Since the girl was exceptional at math and really enjoyed it, they did a lot of math word problems.

They also went to the library and looked at books that Bellekes had loved as a child.

Over the course of the year, there was slow, but substantial improvement.

"She became more confident. That's all that matters," Bellekes said. "And it was nice to get to know her on a personal level."

Bellekes is one of about 150 volunteers, literacy tutors and mentors with Frontier College in Sudbury, said Lorna Corzine, who looks after the Sudbury and North Bay district for the college.

Frontier College is Canada's only literacy organization, working in both official languages.

It runs three programs in Sudbury: One-to-one tutoring, homework clubs at a couple of elementary schools and a weekly reading circle with YWCA Geneva House.

"The reading circle tends to be a younger crowd, four to 10 year olds, while the homework clubs are for nine to 13 years olds," Corzine said. "Volunteers have a love of learning and want to pass

that on." Volunteers receive five hours of training during which they pick up various tips on how to get engage children to read.

"One tip is to really find a book the child likes. If they want to read it 50 times, that's OK," Corzine said.

While many of its volunteers tend to be university students, tutors as young as 14 are welcome to participate in its programs.

"It's awesome, so fulfilling," said Bellekes.

She does have some advice for anyone considering volunteering with the college: "Be prepared for the struggles," she said. "A lot of these kids do need help."