

## Part of this middle school curriculum? *Caring, sharing*

One by one, the middle schoolers stood in the “caring circle” and addressed each other: “*I like that you’re always quiet.*” “*I like how you’re always smiling and you’re an awesome swimmer.*” “*I like how you take responsibility for your actions.*” “*I like how we don’t fight.*” “*I think it’s really awesome we get to be at college.*”

“Instead of becoming teacher dependent, we want to make them student independent,” says Decker. “We have teams that are forced to work collaboratively. It’s made students who wouldn’t generally be leaders become leaders. This really builds student engagement. It builds math skills and linear thinking. It builds self-confidence. We have a number of girls and they’re not holding back. They’re on equal footing and that translates to: ‘I can do science. I can do math.’”

And, adds Tim Wintermeyer, a 14-year-old who has had academic challenges at school: “It’s fun. You get to find out how things work. We don’t do this kind of thing in school. It’s only in Horizons.”

Best yet, every student — with the exception of one child who was absent eight days — saw improvements in their reading and math test results. A couple of them raised their reading scores by one and two grade levels, according to Decker.

While Decker had many teaching moments, he had some learning ones as well.

“I learned repeatedly that these children want structure, they need structure, they crave it. And I learned they really count on us as teachers every day. They’ve got some bad stuff in their lives,” he says. “They rely on us to be solid.”

On the last day of Horizons, the middle schoolers “graded” the program.

“One of the things that was so profound to me is one of the students wrote: ‘I learned about caring and respect.’ That’s powerful. Maybe he didn’t improve his vocabulary or math skills as much as he could have but he clearly got it,” says Decker. “If you learn caring and respect you can be successful because people can work with you.”

—Ellen Uzelac

Horizons middle school head teacher Randy Decker believes that social curriculum is as important as academic curriculum. *How* a child learns is as important as *what* a child learns. With its focus on teaching social and emotional wellbeing, the caring circle is a purposeful way to begin the day.

And it was in the safety net of the caring circle that every day of the six-week summer learning program began this summer. “*I like how you’re serious.*” “*I like how we do robotics.*” “*I like that you’re funny.*” “*I like how we get to do free swim at Horizons.*”

As a group, the 15 middle school students made unparalleled strides this year. Decker, a Montgomery County high school science teacher, said the game changer was their new headquarters at Washington College. Previously, students had spent most of the day at Radcliffe Creek School. “They could focus on our work, the things we wanted to do. There were minimal distractions. The classrooms felt like normal classrooms,” he said. “It was very powerful. We were so focused. It helped move all of us in a new direction.”

And the caring and sharing extended beyond the morning circle to actual learning. As an example, take the student project this year: building and programming out of LEGO a robot that moves and speaks and detects color.



Randy Decker preps middle schoolers for Washington College tour.



Ellen Uzelac



## By the Numbers

- 1906** Publication year of first study on summer learning loss.
- 136** Number of Horizons students this summer, a record.
- 25** Number of pre-K and first-grade students wait listed for a space.
- 1995** Local Horizons program founded.

*Horizons kids celebrate the first annual LT Goodall Day to honor the memory of the longtime Horizons board chair. The event, which took place on the Washington College campus, started with pancakes, continued with pizza, and ended with ice cream sundaes.*



*Students at the Gunston campus enjoy a talent show on their last day. Several are wearing hats they got at the U.S. Naval Academy on a field trip.*

## Dear Mom:

*Here's what a few of our middle schoolers wrote when asked to identify a local hero.*

**Dear Mom:**

I am thankful for you adopting me so I could have a family.

**Dear Mom:**

Thank you for always being there for me.

**To Mom:**

You are nice, caring and responsible. You are my hero because you work really hard to get us phones and our clothes. You taught me how to respect others and my elders. Thank you for teaching me good things.

**To Mom:**

When things were really rough you still took care of me and my sister first even when you were sad.

**To Mom:**

You always believe in me, you stand up for me. During softball games, you would stand on the sidelines yelling my name; you make me feel like I can do anything.

## All eyes on Emma

How to describe second-grader Emma Townsend? Precocious, competitive, smart — all that and more. The day we caught up with her, she was a bit glum because she had missed a couple of days at Horizons due to a fever, dashing her hopes for a perfect attendance record. Emma's take on Horizons: "It's educational and fun at the same time. I like education and I like fun. Fun, especially. Fun is awesome. I never had this much fun till I joined Horizons."

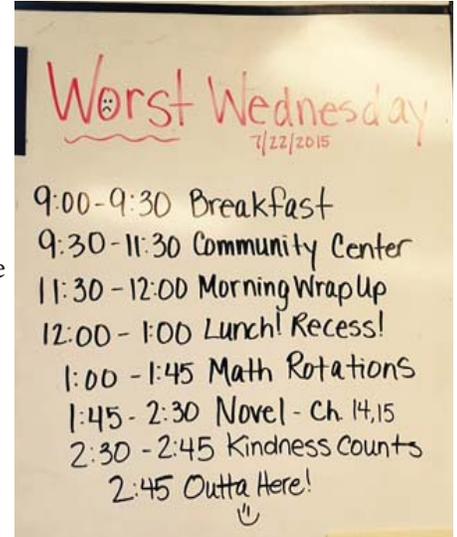


9 a.m.

Emma lives with her father, three brothers and grandmother, Cindy Elburn. "She's learning so much," says Elburn, who drops the 7-year-old off at the Radcliffe Creek School campus every day. "It's helped her a lot. She looks so forward to it."



Kids in class use adjectives to describe each day. Today is Worst Wednesday because Emma, still feeling a little out of it, can't swim this morning. Instead, she'll have to sit by the pool — chillaxin' as she puts it.



12:30 p.m.

After lunch, teacher Cheryl Fracassi talks to her 14 second graders about what it means to be a giving person. Then Emma plays Mouse Trap at indoor recess. Later, with the one o'clock hour looming, Emma shouts: "Guys, we have to clean up. We've only got two more minutes until math rotations."



1:15 p.m.

Not feeling so well.

2 p.m.

Back in the fold, just in time for today's chapters of "Third Grade Angels." Emma likes it that one of the characters shares her name. Just before class lets out for the day, students write letters to each other as part of a "Kindness Counts" exercise. To Dusty, Emma notes: "I like your inspiring mind." And, to Emma, Nijha writes: "Thank you for coming to school today."



2:50 p.m.

Waiting for the buses to arrive, the girls chant: "Girls go to college to get more knowledge!" One day, Emma hopes to be a Horizons teacher's assistant.

Photos: Ellen Uzelac

## 'A year where a good program got better'

Where to start? This was a year of so many firsts. Among them:

- The successful launch of our Horizons program at The Gunston School in Queen Anne's County.
- Our partnership with Washington College, now the official host site for the middle schoolers of Horizons of Kent & Queen Anne's.
- The onboarding of an educational psychologist, who helped teachers and students connect in new and meaningful ways.

By any measure, this was a year where a good program got better.

Our six-week summer learning program served a record 136 low-income, academically promising students. Next year, we will expand by adding a third grade at Gunston so that our second-graders there can continue with Horizons. The idea is to grow organically so that students keep coming back year after year.

The Gunston program, which served pre-K and first and second grades, would not have been the success it was without the talent and tenacity of site director Bibi Schelberg. Bibi arranged several wonderful field trips, including one to the Naval Academy. One-third of those kids had never crossed the Bay Bridge. They lit up that day. Talk about exposure, experience, excitement.

Horizons also officially partnered with Washington College. Middle school head teacher Randy Decker called the move to the college a "game changer" for these older students, saying the "big kid" classrooms and lunch in the dining hall helped them stay focused and motivated. Our younger Kent County kids, pre-K through fifth grade, continue to be headquartered at Radcliffe Creek School.

Many of our children come from troubled homes. Only a dozen of the 100 Horizons students at Radcliffe live with their biological parents. Most are being raised by single parents or grandparents. One child, 8-years-old, had until recently been homeless while her mother was in jail.

This summer, we hired psychologist Janice Newcomen to help deal with some of these tougher issues. In one instance, she worked with a 6-year-old who alarmed his teacher when he said he wanted to go to the angels. Janice helped the boy sort out his feelings, using flash cards that pictured whether he was tired, angry, frustrated, sad. Teacher and child, using the cards, were then able to effectively communicate.

A year of firsts — and a program that keeps getting better.



*Kids play soccer at recess at The Gunston School.*

Katie Hearn