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Teenstretch

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A safe space is something that any teen could benefit from. At Homestretch, this space is offered for teenagers of the program in the form of Teenstretch (<http://homestretchva.org/programs/teenstretch/>).

Teenstretch is a weekly after school program provided by Homestretch for children in seventh to twelfth grade. The program runs every Wednesday from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. The four hours are broken into four different sections: recreation time, academic time, dinner and life skills.

Recreation time is a time for the kids to relax and have fun. Teens spend time playing foosball, air hockey, video games or just hanging out with one another. Once a month, this time is spent volunteering. In the past, the teens would spend time at the local retirement home. Since the start of Kidstretch (<http://homestretchva.org/kidstretch/>), another program a part of Homestretch, the teens volunteer with children in that program. They plan the activity, usually a craft or game, and carry it out with the children.

Academic time is spent helping the teens with schoolwork. Tutors come and help the teenagers one-on-one with whatever their academic needs are at the time. From homework help to organizing binders, this time is spent helping set up the teenagers for academic success.

Dinner time is a special time during Teenstretch. This may be the only time the teenagers have to sit down together for a communal meal. The teens take this time to talk with each other, share about their day, and tell jokes and riddles. The volunteers that provide the meal each week are asked to make healthy meals. Often, the meals include a new food for the teens to try.

After dinner is life skills time. Each week this session is different than the last. Sometimes, sessions will have themes like "How to Get a Job," or "TedTalk-based Lessons." A few of the standout sessions include lessons on managing money and budgeting, healthy eating, friendships and communication with parents. One that received great feedback was when a representative from George Mason University talked the teens through how to get into college. He included aspects like grades and outside participation that are important to know for any college application process. Parents and teens were involved in this lesson.

Another great life skills session was a field trip the teens took to one of Homestretch's partners, Excella Consulting (<https://www.excella.com/>). Excella set up an entire day that replicated what the process would be like if the teens were clients of theirs. Together, they created a website from beginning to end. The teens showed great interest in the day and the C.E.O. commented on the intelligence and maturity of the teens.

How does this program function? For the past five years (just about as long as the program has been in place) Jaclyn Merrills has been in charge of Teenstretch. Jaclyn is the Youth and Family Program Manager at Homestretch. She runs all the special programming and events that take place. From the Thanksgiving and holiday adoptions to the summer picnic and clothing and backpack drive Jaclyn says she gets to do a lot of the fun parts of the program.

"I get to make sure the families have opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise," says Jaclyn.

As far as Teenstretch goes, Jaclyn pretty much runs the program from start to finish. She plans the evening, organizes the activities, leads the life skills sessions and gets feedback in the form of surveys after each session. She organizes and takes the teens on field trips (Kings Dominion is their favorite.) Jaclyn is also the one who helps encourage Homestretch teens to participate in the program; she even picks them up to come to the program every Wednesday.

Jaclyn says the program is a social time for the teens, but also emphasizes the academic parts of the program. She has seen incredible success in many teens as a result of Teenstretch. Jaclyn tells the story of two separate girls whose lives have really turned around since starting the program.

When the first girl started the program, she was not doing well in school. There was a push for her to transfer and a lot of tension between her and her mom. When she joined Teenstretch, she jumped in and participated in everything. She became very involved as a result. Jaclyn says she is amazing, "she baffles me in everything she does now." This girl now works part-time, is heavily involved in school and also works a second job she was able to get as a result of a Teenstretch program. Jaclyn says this girl's entire personality changed.

A second girl had a similar success story. She started off as a "moody, brooding" teenager. Her grades were not her priority and it showed as a result. Now, she is working with her high school in a program that aims to get her scholarships for college. She also participates in leadership classes and helps her mom a lot too.

This is what Jaclyn loves about the program, "just the teens; there's challenges but they're funny, sarcastic and good-humored. They surprise you and shock you with insightful things they say."

Jaclyn also has witnessed many friendships being made through Teenstretch. She says a lot of the kids who have graduated from the program still keep in touch with one another.

"They make friends with people who understand them on a different level than others ever could," Jaclyn says.

In addition to new friendships and resources, Jaclyn says Teenstretch results in a trickle-down effect: "when the kids participate in Teenstretch, their families become more active in Homestretch as a whole. It helps with participation in general."

As far as the future of Teenstretch, Jaclyn has a few things in mind. She would love to see the program continue to grow and keep high numbers. Right now, Teenstretch will have anywhere from four to sixteen teens each evening. If it does continue to grow, Jaclyn would like to see the program run more than once a week.

Another aspect that could become even better is the mentorship program. This is a program where a volunteer comes in and consistently work with the same teen every week. Jaclyn says it would be great for every teen to have a mentor. Right now, there is not enough volunteer commitment. Also, there is a slight misrepresentation. It would be beneficial to see mentors that the teenagers could identify with, whether it be male mentors or mentors of color.

By Guest Author Ashley Alexander

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