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Summer program for teens teaches life skills

By Kim Grizzard
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Too old for camp and too young for jobs, students like 13-year-old Greta Lee can face a summer with too much time on their hands.

But Lee hasn't spent her summer sitting on the couch, watching TV and playing video games. Instead, she's been part of a construction project of sorts.

Lee is among about two dozen participants in Teens Building Character, a program for ages 12 to 15 offered by Pitt County Community Schools and Recreation. The program focuses on keeping teens busy physically and socially while introducing them to life skills they need to build on as they grow older.

"The idea behind TBC is to offer a program for teens that can introduce them to community-service or community-outreach programs and get them involved in their communities," said Sherry Williams, recreation coordinator for Pitt County Community Schools and Recreation. "This age group, 12 to 15, is hard to reach. I'm trying to introduce them to character building, life skills, things they're going to need when they grow up."

TBC, which just completed its six-week schedule, pieced together a variety of experiences, from visits to the campus of East Carolina University and the local library to working on a quilting project.

"There are kids out there that need something constructive to do in the summer," Williams said. "If you can involve kids in hands-on stuff and have them see a finished product, then they feel like they've accomplished something, and that's a source of achievement for them. In doing that, they have to use some academics and social skills. (We're) just trying to keep them involved, socially active in the summer instead of just sitting home."

That is exactly what 12-year-old Corey Roberts said he would be doing this summer if it weren't for TBC. Instead, Roberts has spent his days swimming, bowling, taking field trips and hearing from community leaders, including officials from Pitt County Memorial Hospital and the Winterville Police Department.

Roberts, a rising seventh-grader at A.G. Cox Middle School, normally spends most of his free time playing basketball. This summer, he tried his hand at volunteering. As part of their community-service projects, TBC participants planned an afternoon of activities for children at the Grifton Day Camp, leading children in games and arts-and-crafts activities.

"I learned that you can always be a good citizen," Roberts said. "It's fun. I enjoy it."

The idea of getting involved in the community was what drew Lee, 13, a rising eighth-grader at Cox, to TBC. She knows many colleges expect applicants to have been involved in community service during their teen years, so learning about volunteering through TBC has given her a jump on many of her peers.

"We helped the Food Bank; we made quilts," Lee said. "Helping people really feels good. It's a lot better than staying home."

While many TBC participants are mature enough to be home alone, Williams said having too much unstructured and unsupervised time can cause trouble for young teens.



"Some parents feel like if they can put them in a situation where they can participate, where they know they will be taken care of, where they can be socially interactive with other kids their age and physically active, it's not a bad deal," Williams said. "If it were me, my teenager, I'd find something for my child to do in the summertime. I've seen too many situations where kids don't get involved."

Some TBC participants, like CJ Mahoney, a rising eighth-grader at Chicod, are students Williams remembers from Community Schools and Recreation camps in previous summers. Mahoney, 13, is too old for many other programs offered by Community Schools and Recreation.

"They age out at 12, so there's nothing to do after 12 and 13," Williams said. "That's why I offer this program; it's just another way to keep them involved in something."

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