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Summer out of the city

Bronx students blossom in leafy Westchester suburbs

BY **ABBY LUBY**
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IT MAY BE HOME to Bill and Hillary Clinton, but for one month this summer, 20 Bronx teens hung their hats in the tony Westchester town of Chappaqua.

For the last 40 years, students, between 14 and 17 years olds, get the chance to live in the burbs while getting a hit of Shakespeare, computer science, writing, filmmaking, tennis and swimming.

The youth are sought out by the Chappaqua Summer Scholarship Program, a volunteer, non-profit group that pairs the kids in July with a host family. The high schools participating in the program were DeWitt Clinton, Christopher Columbus and Collegiate Institute for Math and Science.

It's free for students but costs CSSP about \$2,500 to house and teach the teens. Horace Greeley High School donates classrooms, and several guidance counselors to guide the teens in applying for college.

The students return three successive summers and generally stay with the same host family, becoming secondary family members and lifelong friends.

"These kids come up from the city and share our residences," said Diane Albert, CSSP chairwoman. "They make friends, build bridges."

Albert said the program started in response to the civil unrest of the late 1960s. Today CSSP includes a melting pot of Bronx kids with backgrounds from different nations including: Mexico, Nigeria, Cambodia, Albania and the Dominican Republic.

High school guidance counselors recommend about 50 high-ranking students to meet and talk to CSSP members who then select the final 20.

Going from the hubbub of the Bronx to the bucolic hills of Westchester takes some getting used to.

"The first year I was here I couldn't sleep because it was too quiet, but after a week or so I got used to it," said CIMS student Stephanie George, 16.

Some students find a new sense of confidence.

"I was extremely shy when I first came here, now I can't stop talking," said Royvivia Ferguson, 17. "You really feel at home."

The teens say learning is different and more stimulating in Chappaqua.

The drudgery of reading a Shakespeare play becomes fun with professional actors from the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival having students assume actual characters from the Bard's "Much Ado About Nothing," and play them out on a mock Oprah Winfrey show. Amid giggles and laughter, characters uncannily come alive, reenacting their roles in an imaginary TV studio.

"In school they teach us the play, but here we learn how to do it. We feel the characters," said Javier Caceres, 16, who attends DeWitt Clinton.

Learning how your iPod can hold 5,000 songs or how to build and program small-scale robots changed CIMS student Qendrin Gjevajakaj, 16, of Williamsbridge Road. "The computer class and robotics made me focused and determined. Now I want to major in computer science."

Morning courses are followed by afternoon sports on school fields or filmmaking classes at the Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville.

The students also cook and deliver meals to needy residents as part of community service. Worked into the mix is a strong message of the importance of college, and the kids are taken to local college campuses and tutored for the SAT's.

Lisa Samnath, 17, got help studying for her SAT's. "I know those extra two hours of tutoring for the SAT got me an extra 500 points on the test."

For the 'Bronx-centric' youth, having a life outside city environs is a new idea.

"I thought I would go to college and live and work in the Bronx before I came to Chappaqua, but there's a whole other world outside the Bronx," said Caceres.



Bronx student Diamond Anderson, 15, shows drive to succeed in gym at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, Westchester County, where she spent time on more rigorous subjects, too. Photo by Viorel Florescu

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