

## Forging new friendships

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BY AMY FLOWERS UMBLE

Two women sit on plastic chairs in a Stafford County park, creating a friendship bracelet from multicolored yarns.

Their fingers fly as they weave the yellow, purple, green and orange strands in a pattern of repeated diamonds.

Then another pair of hands takes over. The fingers are not as swift, not as sure. They are learning the craft for the first time.

Without words, the group of women creates a bracelet together. They can't speak because they don't share a language.

Two speak Spanish, the other Kirundi--a tribal language used in the central African country of Burundi.

Just behind the crafting lesson at Duff Green Park, black letters on a whiteboard proclaim, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Olde Forge Junction staff chose the Scripture to represent the women's struggle to learn English.

But it also symbolizes the staff's efforts to create community in a very diverse southern Stafford neighborhood.

Olde Forge Junction, a nonprofit serving the people in the townhouse development off U.S 17, works to bring together the residents, many of whom are newcomers.

Olde Forge Junction staffers have held neighborhood mixers, an after-school program and field trips.

And for the second year, the nonprofit offered Helping Us Grow Strong--a Mommy and Me model of preschool for Olde Forge caregivers and preschoolers.

The HUGS program graduated its second class Sunday.

HUGS started after the staff noticed that many preschoolers remained in the neighborhood when the school buses pulled away, said coordinator Michelle Carroll.

Most of these children are on waiting lists for Stafford County's Head Start program.



Preschoolers and caregivers from Olde Forge gather Sunday for graduation from programs that help the diverse neighborhood.



Izabel Reyes proudly holds her diploma from the Olde Forge Junction preschool program at the ceremony at Stafford's Duff Green Park.



Burundian women who live in Olde Forge in Falmouth sing a Scripture they learned in English, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,' at the graduation ceremony for programs that help the diverse, low-income community.

Teena Brown said her daughter, LaTavia Baylor, has waited for two years. But thanks to HUGS, LaTavia knows how to write her name and tie her shoes.

And her mom has learned about cake decorating, parenting, domestic violence, makeup and crafts.

The caregivers attended the class in one room of Evergreen Church in Spotsylvania County, while preschoolers learned alphabets, numbers and social skills in other rooms.

Brown and the other English-speaking moms attended Fridays for eight weeks. The non-English-speakers went to school Mondays.

"Our Friday group was very open, they let us know what they thought," Carroll said. "Our Monday group, we could tell by body language and expression."

Mondays tended to be chaotic, with two interpreters speaking while teachers and guest lecturers taught the moms a variety of topics.

Organizers hoped to integrate the neighbors who often live in uneasy tension in Olde Forge.

The Burundian refugees and the Hispanic moms didn't become fast friends, Elasa Niyokwizigira said through an interpreter. Language remains a barrier, she said.

At Sunday's graduation, the three different groups sat divided among tables at the park. But the Burundians and the Latinas stood together and sang, in English, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

The Rev. Theresie Hough-ton, Olde Forge Junction's director, prayed that each person present would recognize her unique gifts.

"And let us follow Jesus, who modeled servanthood and community," she prayed.

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The Fredericksburg Area Baptist Association started an Olde Forge ministry in May 2003. The group was responding to a Stafford County Sheriff's Office report finding unsupervised children, poverty and drug abuse. The nonprofit, based in Falmouth, serves the residents of 229 townhouses in Olde Forge, a neighborhood off U.S. 17. The group became a nonprofit in 2005 and offers after-school tutoring, summer activities, family help, Bible study and more. The goal isn't to go in and save the residents, said the Rev. Theresie Houghton, the group's director. Instead, she said, the role is to listen to the residents' hopes and dreams and then find ways to enable them to accomplish them.

--Amy Flowers Umble

The Helping Us Grow Strong program was created for preschoolers and their adult caregivers. A \$10,000 grant from the PNC Foundation allowed students attend classes for free. Volunteer teachers and interpreters helped lead classes for 40 preschoolers and caregivers. The group went on field trips to the Children's Museum of Richmond, the Riverside Dinner Theater, the YMCA and the regional library.