

A celebration of smarts

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In a Hawaiian-themed banquet hall last week, 36 students from around the area were honored for academic excellence despite many difficult circumstances.

Crowded into the New City Fellowship Church in Fredericksburg, families and friends watched as members of Brain Builders, an after-school program that helps kids with challenging circumstances, received certificates for their achievements.

Among the honorees was Alex, the busy bee. And Carmen, the one who would not give up.

The program is run by the Stafford Junction, a nonprofit organization, formerly known as Old Forge Junction.

Through contributions from businesses, churches and volunteers, the program is offered to the families at no charge.

Snacks, tutoring and activities are provided to students, ranging from first grade to middle school.

The Brain Builders group meets at Drew Middle School, Rocky Run Elementary School and Berea Baptist Church in Stafford.

Transportation to those sites is free for students enrolled in the Brain Builders program.

"I see young people who may be beating some odds," said the night's speaker Xavier Richardson, executive vice president of community affairs at Mary Washington Health Care.

Richardson told his own story growing up in Fredericksburg with an alcoholic father.

"But I didn't let that stop me," he said. "In fact, that encouraged me to do better."

All students received a certificate of achievement and a goody bag. Greg Minor, a volunteer for Brain Builders, gave each middle-school student member a hand-drawn portrait of the group.

About 13 partners of the program were also recognized for their contributions, including the T. Benton Gayle Middle School Honor Roll Students who helped tutor.



Students who have thrived academically, thanks to the Brain Builders program, are honored during a ceremony last week in Fredericksburg.



Members of Brain Builders, which boosts academic performance, partied during a Hawaiian-themed awards ceremony last week.

Theresie Houghton, Stafford Junction program director, reminded the group that it's the community that has made the program such a big success.

Viviana and Kiara Morales have been in the program for four years since moving to the Fredericksburg area.

People familiar with the program approached their mother, who speaks little English, about Brain Builders.

Kiara, who has just finished fourth grade, won the T-shirt design contest and \$25.

Wearing Hawaiian leis, the sisters said Brain Builders has been an opportunity to learn new things.

Middle-schooler Viviana said the program has given her a lot to be grateful for.

"I've never had a lot of people who cared about us, who want to teach us," she said.

As the students received an award and gifts, they were photographed with their age group's volunteers.

In the background was a banner that read "Stafford Junction: Where lives connect."

Houghton said the ceremony was a chance for all grade levels to come together at the end of the year.

"We came from different walks of life but we're all connected."

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