

SAN
GABRIEL
VALLEY

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Photo by L.J. McALLISTER

DAMION HOBSON, 7, works on homework Thursday at Neighbor Homework House in Azusa's 9th Street neighborhood.

Homework House helps kids erase playground segregation

By **Michelle Rester**
STAFF WRITER

AZUSA — There used to be an unspoken rule among the children in the neighborhood: Latino and African-American kids were to play on opposite sides of the street.

But that's changed for the children of the 9th Street community. It started three years ago, when the Neighborhood Homework House began offer-

ing free after-school tutoring inside a two-bedroom apartment at the end of a cul-de-sac.

"A woman across the street told us that before we came into the neighborhood, there was segregation among the kids playing outside," said Homework House co-founder Janet MacDonald. "Now they all play together, and I couldn't be more thrilled."

MacDonald and Kerry Freeman created the program so neighborhood children could

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Photo by L.J. McALLISTER

MICHAEL COOKSEY, 10, works on homework at Azusa's Neighborhood Homework House, an afterschool center.

AZUSA Homework House brings kids together

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have a safe, homey atmosphere in which to study and get help with school work, have a snack, play a few games or just hang out after school.

"When it started, you wouldn't see a lot of mingling among the children," said Stella Egan, program coordinator for the Azusa Unified School District, which donates snacks for the group, "but now it's very clear none of the children see a difference in skin

color. It's just amazing to see them playing together and working together, as it should be."

In the living room, Latino and African-American children share a sofa to work with volunteer tutors from Azusa Pacific University. Upstairs, younger children from both ethnic groups gather in small groups to have stories read to them. Outside on the patio, children eat snacks together.

"What we have done is raised awareness and tolerance of cultural differences within the families and educated our tutors in cross-cultural communication skills to better serve these kids," Freeman said. "Those invisible boundaries have been

erased ... and the whole neighborhood is able to act as a whole in peace."

"Programs like Homework House are colorblind and bring kids from all backgrounds together," City Manager Rick Cole said. "It's not about solving racial tension, but bringing kids and their parents together to get help and help each other, and that's the best way I can figure out to tackle these issues.

"If you can build common bonds, that's what's going to have the biggest impact," Cole said.

The days 7-year-old Luis Villa can visit the house are his favorites.

"They help us here," said Villa, one of as many as 75 chil-

dren in kindergarten through eighth grade who come to the site after school.

"I like it here because they're nice to us and we get to play," Villa said.

Third-grader Anthony Lomelin likes the snacks and games the best.

"Everybody's nice, and I get to draw," Lomelin said.

A second Homework House in another area of town has already started in a condominium the organization is renting.

"The kids in Azusa need a safe place in the neighborhood where they can go after school, just to hang out if nothing else," MacDonald said. "Our vision is to put one of these in every neighborhood."