

PROGRAM DIRECTOR Abigail Gaines helps Edwin Serna, left, and Steven Escobedo, both 9, of Azusa with their math homework at Our Neighborhood Homework House in Azusa. Photo by ANGELICA CHONG

Homework house helps students

BY RICHARD IRWIN
Staff Writer

Students studied quietly at a couple tables in the living room. Others sat in groups on the patio outside the kitchen, while still others filled the upstairs bedrooms.

All the students from the Azusa Unified School District were sharply focused on their homework. Tutors sat nearby, encouraging their charges to complete their assignments, offering advice and explanations whenever the students seemed stumped.

The scene is a typical one at Our Neighborhood Homework House, a nonprofit group dedicated to helping at-risk children in Azusa. These days, the organization tutors 90 students in kindergarten through the 12th grade.

"When I moved here from New Hampshire, I saw the kids making drug deals in the open and it broke my heart," said teacher Kerry Freeman. She and fellow teacher Janet MacDonald founded the homework house in 1997 to help the local students.

The instructors began

tutoring a handful of students living on Ninth Street after school. They decided to focus their efforts on that low-income, ethnically diverse neighborhood in Azusa.

"At first, we carried all our school supplies in Tupperware containers in our vans," Freeman recalled. "The students' mothers would let us use their apartments to tutor the children."

Grateful mothers and grandmothers watched as their children received the homework help they needed to do well in school, Freeman

said. As the teachers became accepted in the community, the number of students grew from a handful to 30 in only a year-and-a-half.

Freeman said Azusa Unified School District offered the teachers the use of Dalton Elementary School on 10th Street. But the teachers thought a lot of their success was a result of them tutoring the children in their own apartment complexes.

"We had been relying on donations from my church,

Please see Homework / 10

Homework

Continued from page 10

House most of their lives. Ashley Martinez, 12, said she has been coming there since she was in kindergarten.

"They help you a lot. In the third grade, they spent three hours helping me with my problem with vowels," said the Foothill Middle School student, who now writes poetry.

Fellow Foothill student Denise Gutierrez received a gold star from Gaines for coming to the center on Monday, despite the school holiday.

"We give gold tickets for good character and good personal treatment toward each other," Gaines told the students. "Some of you amaze me, and it's part of my job to encourage the great person I see in many of you."

Gaines said Homework House also passes out house bucks that are redeemable for school supplies at a house store. Students get \$1 for completing their homework, \$1 for extra reading, another for practicing math and a buck for an excellent attitude.

"Is the house store going to be open today?" one of the students asked. Gaines opened a large closet full of pencils, pens, notebooks and snacks.

The APU students say they are rewarded by the experi-



Photo by ANGELICA CHONG
ASHLEY MORA peeks inside from the patio of Our Neighborhood Homework House during an afternoon tutoring session.

ence of working with the children.

"I like to work one-on-one with the children. I worked with the same kids last year, and it's like helping my little brother," said Kim Seitz, 19, an APU sophomore from Sacramento.

Jonathan Maia said he has been tutoring at Homework House for only two weeks, but

"it has been great so far." The 19-year-old APU student bought his students slurpies as "positive reinforcement for a job well done."

Freeman said the group will hold a fund-raising event on March 11 to support Homework House. The auction will be held 7 p.m. in the Heritage Cafe at Azusa Pacific University.

Tickets are \$25 per person, and reservations may be made with Jan Wickersham at (626) 355-2666 or e-mail her at jan-wickersham@verizon.net.

The event is titled "Children ... the Seeds of Our Future."

Regarding any future plans for Homework House, Freeman said she wished they could rent a separate apartment just for the high school students.

"That way we could work with all the students every day instead of twice a week," Freeman said.

The executive director didn't say if she was going to call it "Homework High."

For more information about Our Neighborhood Homework House, call (626) 969-7051 or check its Web site at neighborhoodhomework-house.org.

Richard Irwin can be reached at (626) 962-8811, Ext. 2801, or e-mail him at richard.irwin@sgvn.com.

Homework

Continued from page 1

Christian Family Center in Azusa, to run our program," said Freeman.

In 1999, the church agreed to help the teachers rent a small two-bedroom apartment in the complex where many of the tutored students actually lived. The unit became the home of Azusa's first Homework House.

In January 2004, the group opened a second Homework House on Sixth Street in Azusa. This site began serving 25 students in the neighbor-

hood near Lee Elementary School.

Visitors to the Ninth Street Homework House will find a warm, inviting center. The walls are adorned with some of the student's works, as well as the ABCs of the homework haven.

A — Always bring your homework assignments and books.

B — Be respectful of others and yourself.

C — Carefully put away everything you use.

"The children feel safe here because they know we care about them," said Freeman, who is now the executive director of Homework House.

Homework House couldn't function without the support of students from Azusa Pacific University. Most of the 60 adult volunteers are students from the city's own university.

Karen Sorensen of Glendora was very proud of the two young men she tutors twice a week — 11-year-old Daniel Salinas and 14-year-old Sigi Cabala.

"I've gone to Daniel's soccer games and he has been selected as first chair for clarinet," Sorensen said. She teaches journalism at APU, but was busy showing Salinas how to multiply fractions, while Cabala worked quietly on his social studies.

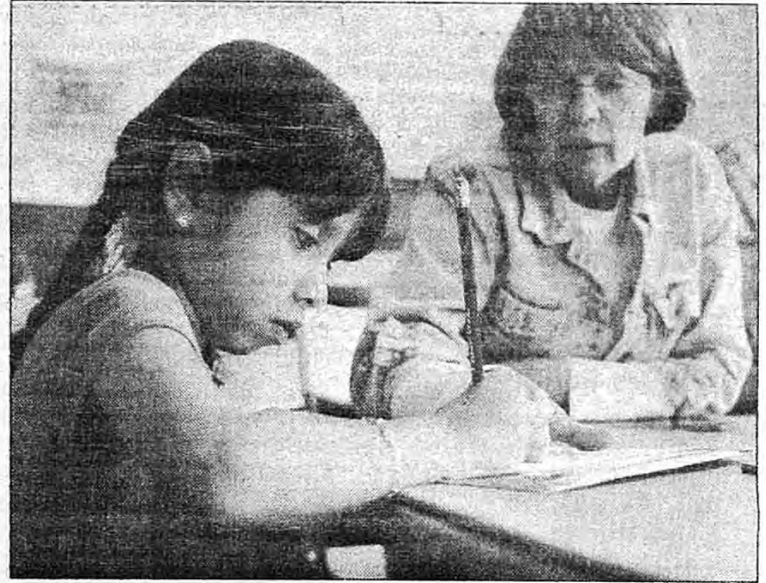


Photo by ANGELICA CHONG

DIOCELINA ROBLES attends a tutoring session with Diana Dawson at Our Neighborhood Homework House in Azusa.

"She helps me get better grades," Cabala responded when asked about Homework House. Salinas said coming there after school was "fun."

Students come twice a week for the tutoring sessions that last a little more than an hour. Junior and senior high students come Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Children in grades K-five attend Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

But all work and no play makes for dull students, so Homework House holds a game day on Fridays, when

students can relax and play.

Abigail Gaines has been the program director for the past five years. The 26-year-old began working at Homework House after graduating from Azusa Pacific University.

"I feel very blessed with what it has become," said the enthusiastic director, standing under a big sign declaring "Dare to Dream Big Dreams."

Gaines pointed out that some of the children have been coming to Homework

Please see **Homework** / 11