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## Midshipmen help students become scholars

Benjamin Banneker Honors Math and Science Society fosters academic achievement

by Peggy McEwan | Staff Writer – Gazette

Sixth-grader Cydney Ransom, 11, sat in a classroom at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis studying for an upcoming test while her sister, Marshe, 14, was getting help with her homework.

Several other students were positioned throughout the room, some at the board, others working on computers, all busy with school work. Working with them were midshipmen tutors, helping the students with math, science, languages and social studies.

In all, 20 middle and high school students from across Montgomery County met at Benjamin Banneker Middle School in Burtonsville early on the cold morning of Jan. 17 to board a bus for the Naval Academy for a tutoring program linking the two schools.

Marshe, a ninth-grader at Springbrook High School in Silver Spring, has been in the mentoring program for three years, ever since her mother saw an application and signed her up.



Brian Lewis/The Gazette

Cydney Ransom, a sixth-grader gets homework help from Midshipman 3rd Class Ebony Pierre at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis recently. The two are part of the Benjamin Banneker Honors Math and Science Society, which pairs county middle and high school students with midshipmen for academic help and encouragement.

"I was kind of struggling with Banneker's curriculum," she said.

Marshe said the two Saturdays she spends at the Naval Academy each month have been helpful.

"Each year I do better and better with my grades," she said. "You can have a relationship with [the midshipmen]. They can help you with your work and you can chit chat with them if you are sad or mad."

Midshipman 3rd Class (sophomore) Natalie Logan coordinates the program with parent volunteers from the Benjamin Banneker Honors Math and Science Society, the group responsible for the program.

"It is a very good way to reach out to the kids and help them get through high school," Logan said. "We are the Naval Academy and we have the brain power to help."

The Naval Academy experience stresses to the students the values of hard work and leadership.

Joseph Speller founded the Honors Math and Science Society 20 years ago when his son was a student at Banneker.

"My son told him that students were trying to talk him into being part of a gang," said Arlene Speller, widow of Joseph Speller, who now runs the organization.

Speller started a boys group on Saturday mornings but saw the boys needed additional guidance and encouragement. So he created the honors society whose mission is "to improve minority students' academic achievement," according to the group's brochure.

"The kids have excelled 90 percent of the students who graduate from our program go on to college," Arlene Speller said.

Logan added the midshipmen also benefit from the program.

"The midshipmen get a lot out of it," she said. "They like to interact with the kids."

Midshipman 1st Class (senior) Adrien Malone has been tutoring students for three years. He was helping Larry Ferreira, 13, a seventh-grader at High Road Academy in Cheverly, with math problems.

Malone likes helping the children succeed.

"They come back and tell you how they did or tell you, 'I remember how to do that,'" he said.

Four students from the Banneker group have gone on to the Naval Academy. Branden Kerr, 15, a sophomore at Watkins Mill High School in Gaithersburg, hopes to be number five.

"My dad was in the Army for 27 years and my grandfather was in the Navy," Branden said. "It's like a family affair."

He credits the program with helping him get good grades.

"I've learned more here than by going to my teachers at lunchtime," he said. "The midshipmen are so dedicated."

The program is open to all middle and high school students living in Montgomery County. In addition to twice a month tutoring, it offers seminars in basic financial principles and field trips to area museums. In the fall the group went to a Navy football game.

"It's such a great program to help the kids excel," Arlene Speller said. "They just need a little push, it's not a competition."