

Girl Power: Academy holds the ladder for climb to success

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NEW HAVEN — Hillhouse High School junior Amber Moye has always been smart, but after five years in the Delta Academy/Delta GEMS program, Moye has the confidence to let it show and even take public pride in her accomplishments.

“Smart is good,” Moye said, a sentence some teens wouldn’t dare to utter for fear they’ll be considered uncool.

Instead of being quiet about a good grade, she’ll now let others know, “I got an A on a paper.”

Although her mom, a college-educated social worker, is a role model, Moye, 17, has two other accomplished women helping her navigate the course: Superior Court Judge Robin L. Wilson and adult probation officer Kami McKnight.

Wilson and McKnight are advisers to the Dr. Betty Shabazz Delta Academy, a program named after Betty Shabazz, widow of slain civil rights leader Malcolm X. The academy aims to “catch the dreams” of African-

American girls ages 11-14 by helping them achieve academic success and expand their thinking about careers in the science, math and technology fields.

The continuation of that program, Delta GEMS, which stands for Growing and Empowering Myself Successfully, is for those from ages 14-18 or in ninth through 12th grades, and expands those lessons to include looking at colleges and careers. Shabazz was a registered nurse and earned a master’s degree in public health education and administration and a doctorate in education.

The academy in this part of the state is run by the New Haven Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. and has about 60 active members. Karen DuBois-Walton is the sorority chapter president.

“It’s good that the girls get to see all of us, particularly women of color, to see fulfillment of dreams is possible,” Wilson said.



Superior Court Judge Robin L. Wilson, left, and adult probation officer Kami McKnight, center standing, advises the Delta Academy, which includes members Tatiana Gay, 12, sitting, and Amber Moye, 17, right. (Peter Hvizdak/Register)

Wilson said she was raised to give back to the community and that there were no limits to what she could accomplish.

When girls ask her how she became a judge, she never gets tired of telling them she got good grades in school, worked hard and, once working as a lawyer, showed up on time and continued to act responsibly.

“As a judge, it’s just refreshing to give back to the community,” said Wilson, who was raised in New Haven.

McKnight also grew up in a home where helping the community was a given. She has fond childhood memories of volunteering in a soup kitchen with her parents and later as a college student, involvement with the NAACP and other groups. When people at work who know what a busy schedule she has ask McKnight, “How do you do it?” her response is, “I don’t know how to not do it.”

A big goal of the Delta program is to instill in the girls a sense of giving back to the community as adults.

Girls in the program meet on the second Saturday of the month for workshops featuring experts on topics such as etiquette, sexually transmitted diseases, peer pressure, parent relationships and financial aid. They also hold a yearly retreat and field trips that are paid for by the program. Funding comes from a city of New Haven mini-grant and sorority chapter funds.

DuBois-Walton said the program is a great way to open the girls’ minds to career paths, help them make choices and explore topics that are sometimes difficult. She remembers a session where a discussion led to the discovery that some of the girls were being sexually harrassed and as a result the proper steps were taken to correct the situations. She also remembers how after a talk by Planned Parenthood representatives, one mother commented how she had been really nervous about talking to her daughter about sex, but the talk had opened a “discussion pathway.”

Delta Academy member Tatiana Gay, 12, a sixth-grader at Conte Westhills Magnet School, who recently won a first place trophy in a district-wide science fair, already believes she has the makings of a lawyer.

“I like to argue with people,” she said.

And why does Tatiana like to argue?

“Because I win,” she said.

Her mom, Sonya Gay, said she loves the comraderie among the girls and how it strengthens their values. She said Tatiana, an only child, gets a lot out of being around the other girls.

Moye, the Hillhouse student, said it’s made her feel good to know the younger girls like Tatiana are looking up to her and the other older girls, much in the same way she and the older girls look up to Wilson and McKnight.

“I feel obligated to be someone I’d look up to,” she said.

Moye said a lot of the girls growing up in less than ideal environments realize through the program they “they don’t have to be a product of their environment.”

Amber’s mom, Sharon Jones, said she’s seen the program help her daughter “blossom” into a leader at school and church and part of the reason is because Wilson and McKnight are role models.

“I have really seen her mature,” she said. “As a parent I think it’s a godsend.”