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Life skills program benefits senior citizens, students

BY SARAH HOFIUS HALL / PUBLISHED: MARCH 31, 2017

Kiara Diehl and her new friends waited for the next numbers.

B-3. G-51. O-64.

For Kiara, a sophomore in Riverside's life skills program, and the senior citizens who attend the West Side Active Older Adult Community Center in Scranton, a new program is a winning combination.

Through the Wilkes-Barre-based nonprofit Community Options, Kiara and several of her life skills classmates spend a couple of hours each school day at the senior center. There, the students make copies, coffee and friends.

"It's fun," Kiara, 17, said as she played bingo. "You get to know people. You become more mature."

Help from all over

With grant funding, Community Options places life skills and emotional support students in environments to learn job skills, such as computer data entry and customer service, and how to interact with others. Placements include groceries, hospitals and senior centers.

In partnership with the United Neighborhood Centers of Northeastern Pennsylvania, Riverside students worked in West Scranton, and students from Lackawanna Trail and Old Forge spent time at the senior center in South Scranton.

The program benefits the adults as much as the students, said Laurie Fleming, United Neighborhood Centers' director of active older adult programs.

"For this community, socialization is one of the best medicines," she said. "For some, it's like a grandchild. It gives them something to look forward to. This is just a win-win for both."

Along with learning basic office skills, the students play card games like Uno and chat with the seniors.

Spending time with the students better's Jim Freethy's day.

"It's been really helpful for me," said Freethy, 64, a Jackson Heights resident. "They keep me young. They're eager. It's like a cherry on a sundae when they're here."

Community Options officials hope for additional grant funding to keep the program available.

Sitting at the bingo table, Kiara and her friends ate cups of red gelatin and whipped topping. She wants to return to the center this summer.

"I love it here," she said.

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MICHAEL J. MULLEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Riverside School District life skills students Kristy Keister and Michael A. Emel use a computer to track activities of clients at United Neighborhood Centers' West Side Senior Center in Scranton. Kaitlyn McCourt of Community Options Inc., right, supervises.



MICHAEL J. MULLEN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Riverside School District life skills student Kiara Diehl plays bingo with clients

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