



For her International Baccalaureate personal project, Tia Lathon, 15, provides free English lessons to Spanish-speaking residents.
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Students leave mark on projects

A school program challenges them to think big

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Tia Lathon spends her Saturday afternoons working as a one-woman campaign to teach English to Spanish-speaking immigrants.

She had only a few years of Spanish under her belt. She had no teacher training. But she posted fliers, created worksheets and set up shop at a public library in South Richmond.

And at 15, she's younger than most of her students. "I wouldn't say it was intimidating," said Lathon, who attends Richmond's

Thomas Jefferson High School, "but I took it as a challenge."

Lathon is one of dozens of local students who -- as sophomores in the International Baccalaureate Program offered by several area schools face a daunting school assignment to create a project of personal importance.

Since April, Lathon says, she has had the opportunity to work with about 25 students in her English-as-second-language classes.

"I want them to feel welcome," Lathon said. "I believe it will bring unity and peace instead of this unintentional segregation."

Each student's personal project is a culminating body of work completed in the 10th grade. The objective is to show an understanding of instruction while focusing on a topic that interests the student.

IB students complete the project at the end of the Middle Years Program, which runs from sixth through 10th grade. School systems that offer the full range of IB instruction start with the Primary Years Program, for students 3 to 12 years old and finish with the Diploma Program for high school juniors and seniors.

The International Baccalaureate Program focuses on intercultural and global awareness and offers students an internationally recognized diploma.

The personal projects vary widely, each having a distinctive mark of the student's character.

Zach Kewer, now a junior in the IB program at Henrico High School, undertook an intensely personal project. Selecting a topic came naturally for the athletic young man whose life was significantly marked by his father's battle with brain cancer.

"I wanted to do something on what affected my family in such a dramatic way," he said.

So, during Labor Day of 2004, Kewer mounted a bicycle and rode 160 miles. That's the distance from VCU Medical Center to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore -- the places where his father received treatment.

Kewer, then 15, followed Rails to Trails Conservancy paths in Washington and raised roughly \$20,000

for brain-cancer research. His father has since died, but Kewer still has the memories of how honored his dad was by the concept.

"[The project is] important for IB, but we take it personal around here," Kewer said. "It's something you really put your heart and soul into."

And because students take such individual approaches, projects range from inventions to special events, works of art to science experiments.

Projects are judged locally by a panel of teachers and program administrators. Then, in order to ensure that projects around the world are subject to similar standards, a school sends a sample of eight projects to an International Baccalaureate panel in Wales for evaluation.

Henrico County was the first public school system in the U.S. to offer a Middle Years Program partnership. Sharon Pope, Henrico's IB programs specialist, said the projects show five years worth of invested work and students "do something that touches their hearts."

Andrew Diakun said he doesn't consider himself a great student and has never really been excited by school work. When it came time for the Henrico teen, now a junior, to choose a personal project, he found himself dreading the prospect. But the dread was trumped by determination.

Diakun aimed high. He had hoped to have a nationally recognized band with Richmond roots play a fundraiser, but he was unable to bring in the big-time band.

His plan B was still impressive. Diakun organized a 12-band Rock for Relief concert at Innsbrook Pavilion. He secured sponsors, auditioned local bands, hired security and rented portable toilets, a sound system, tables, fencing, tents and stands. He said he raised \$1,400 for the Red Cross.

Pope recalled watching Diakun's project come together. She remembers sitting in the auditorium one night as "bands came from all over the state to audition for this 10th-grader," she said.

Diakun's resolve to take on such an event taught him something about himself as well. "I'm not really an amazing student, I just got really excited about this project," he said. "It did get me a little motivated that maybe I can do stuff well and have a shot at getting into a good college."

The Richmond school system offers a Middle Years Program and next year will start a Diploma Program. Chesterfield and Hanover counties offer pre-Diploma Programs for freshmen and sophomores and Diploma Programs that call for a project and accompanying essay.

Other projects that have been undertaken by local students in the Middle Years Program include teaching baton twirling to inner-city children, writing a children's book of Vietnamese folk tales, organizing a walk-a-thon to highlight obesity issues and making a documentary of personal stories from World War II.

Henrico sophomore Jason Sreedhar held an Indian classical dance concert a few weeks ago at Henrico High School and raised about \$2,000 for the Borgen Project, whose mission is to make poverty in this country and others the main priority of U.S. political leaders.

Henrico student Vinoo Gowda learned Kannada, an Indian dialect that her parents speak, for her personal project last year. She said the assignments bring out each student's personality and interests.

"It shows the real themes of IB," she said, "the differences in people."