

# 4-H Reaches Out to Urban Neighbors

By Heather Zimar

For five weeks this summer, some 45 members of SIFE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education, mostly Burmese refugees) and West Village after-school programs have joined together for Cornell Cooperative Extension's 4-H Urban Outreach program. Supported by an Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) Community Collaboration Grant, the program focuses on literacy, multiculturalism and special-interest activities.

"We're really helping students to avoid that learning loss that happens over the summer," 4-H Urban Outreach coordinator Suzie Schlough says.

The enrichment program is an extension of the 4-H Urban Outreach after-school program at Belle Sherman Elementary School and West Village Apartments during the academic year. The summer activities are based downtown in donated space at the First Presbyterian Church and follow morning classes at Beverly J. Martin Elementary School. Participating students attend kindergarten through fifth grade at Belle Sherman and Cayuga Heights elementary schools.

"The cultural immersion is wonderful," says Urban Outreach program manager Jamila Simon. "It's a wonderful socialization opportunity for both our programs. It's great for the kids to get downtown. Families who participate emphasize their desire for their kids to get out of the isolated West Village."

A key component of the program is literacy education because many



Photo provided

Urban Outreach Program participants practice yoga in DeWitt Park in downtown Ithaca.

of the participants are students of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Each day begins with an hour of reading and writing, followed by a themed activity. During the week dedicated to emotional intelligence, for example, students practiced yoga with a volunteer instructor in DeWitt Park and made stress balls out of balloons and dried beans. As students pushed beans into rubber balloons, Simon asked them, "When can you use your stress balls?"

The students responded: "When you're mad; when you're sad; and when you're angry." "You can also use them when you are trying to listen and focus on someone talking," Simon says.

Other weekly themes include friendship, multiculturalism, science and technology, and perform-

ing arts. The program meets New York State 4-H mission mandates, which promote Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), healthy living, and civic engagement. Academic support and social and life skills are emphasized during each activity. One day, for example, a group of students played bingo, a game that Simon used to reinforce listening skills before an outside relay race. "We listen carefully to avoid getting hurt," Simon told the near-silent students as they placed game chips softly on their number cards.

"Everything we do is connected to life skill," says Schlough. "We offer a safe place to be with really positive adults." Simon adds: "The rules apply to expectations for how students interact here, at home and at school."

Students also participate in "clubs" created by the program's four senior counselors, who design and plan the curriculum and activities, with input from students. This summer's clubs are focused on acting, science and adventure, health and wellness, and music and culture. Participants gain hands-on experience in a range of subjects, from Latin American dancing and volcano making to theater performance and fire safety.

"Our program emanates from the needs of our youth," Simon says. "We use a life-skills development model so we always provide options. Students get a choice of activities. They get the opportunity to engage in activities and the responsibility to see them through."

David Li, a Cornell engineering student and senior counselor, directs the health and wellness club, in which students learn how to play Frisbee and baseball and run obstacle courses. He teaches the benefits of healthy eating, exercising and hydration. "I didn't know that teaching could be this rewarding or fun," Li says. "I like how we enhance the learning of the kids. It's helping other people succeed, and my work makes a difference. I'm also gaining a lot of planning experience."

"This program is a great way for counselors to develop their own leadership skills," Schlough says, noting that each attends a week-long training in program expectations, culture competency, planning and teamwork. "They're not just winging it."

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