

Mom says 'Whiz Kids' saved her life

Program tutors, mentors local students and their families.

By Lindsey Hilty

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Rhonda Stretch, left, mentors both Carmen Statzer, right, and her daughter Maddie Statzer, 8.

As the Whiz Kids tutoring and mentoring program expands to more than 15 new sites next year, including the existing six sites in the Lakota Local School District, Regional Director Doug Dunlap said lives are being changed.

From the mentors and volunteers of the church and business community to the students and even their families, he said one hour a week is building lasting

partnerships. According to Dunlap, Whiz Kids has been in Cincinnati four years now, and CityCURE has

a goal to continue its expansion to the five surrounding counties of Cincinnati.

“We just have to have the resources and the people in place to oversee sites,” he said.

Businesses, churches and community civic groups have adopted area schools, and have provided everything from food, materials, volunteer time and even office space.

Area director Rhonda Stretch started out as a volunteer two years ago with her church, and since then has taken on an administrative role with the program.

“The opportunity to work one on one with a child who has difficulty in reading or has an emotional problem ... that hour spent really makes a difference in their life,” she said.

When Stretch began mentoring, Maddie, 8, at Hopewell Elementary School, a story slowly began to unfold of a little girl who lived with her grandmother, but missed her mother. That mother, Carmen Statzer, had been hooked on drugs since age 13 and spent time in and out of jail or on the streets of Middletown.

“My life was out of control, and I wasn’t really being a parent to my daughter,” Stazer said. “I almost convinced myself that she was better off without me.”

But Stretch knew better. When she learned that Statzer was in the hospital trying to detoxify her body of heroin, Statzer suggested a faith-based rehabilitation center through CityCURE.

Two months later, Stazer is clean from drugs. She credits the hearts of area volunteers who took the time to be a part of her daughter’s life and her own.

Since Statzer’s recovery, Maddie has improved in school, gained confidence, curbed her tendency to act out and is working through her feelings of abandonment.

While she isn’t yet ready to leave the program, Statzer said she strives to make her daughter proud. Maddie will continue to spend time with her mentor and plans to attend Whiz Kids summer camp.