

Busy summer of teaching for Fox Lane volunteer

By DON HEPPNER

The Mount Kisco Elementary School is alive this summer with young people learning from teachers, and volunteers working through Neighbors Link. One such volunteer is Stephanie Ingraldi, a graduate of Pound Ridge Elementary School and Fox Lane Middle School, who is about to start her senior year at Fox Lane High School.

"I love it here working with the kids," Stephanie said Thursday.

Stephanie is one of 40 volunteers selected to participate in Summer Links, an academic enrichment program that helps children from kindergarten through fifth grade. Although the programs are teacher-led, there is a reliance on area students as assistants.

Many of the assistants had a choice as to how they spent their summers, and they chose to do volunteer work.

"We have many who apply to volunteer," said Carola Bracco, executive director of Neighbors Link. "But we can only take 40, and that is after an extensive interview process."

For Stephanie, who lives in Pound Ridge, the reward of teaching at Summer Links goes beyond the basics of sharing knowledge. "I love not only helping the kids discover how smart they really are, but also talking to them and getting to know them as people," said the rising Fox Lane senior.

"They are all so fun and give me such a broader perspective on life. I hope that the students realize how important learning over the summer is, and that they continue to read and practice their math facts as it will benefit them in the long run."

This is Stephanie's second year in the program. As she prepares her college applications this fall to top schools including Brown and Columbia Universities, she is open about an eventual career path. Teaching could be a career choice.

Stephanie volunteers 15 hours a week at the school, and said she learns with the students. Although her family is of Puerto Rican descent, she does not speak Spanish at home. "I know a



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Volunteer Stephanie Ingraldi and Carola Bracco, Neighbors Link executive director, at the summer academic enrichment program held at Mount Kisco Elementary School.

little Spanish," she said.

She recounted an experience when she and her assigned Summer Links student visited the library and found two books of the same title — one in Spanish and the other in English. The student was afraid to pick up the book in English. Stephanie worked out a way to bridge the two: she asked the child to read the Spanish book, and Stephanie read the English version. The two then compared the words. "It was great," Stephanie said.

The Summer Links program is sponsored by Neighbors Link, and is funded through grants from Westchester County, residents and a foundation.

"We get no money from the school district," Ms. Bracco said. "We do work closely with the schools to see where students need help and we provide that help."

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The Summer Links enrichment program currently serves more than 110 children. "We work mainly with literacy and math," Ms. Bracco said.

Local high school volunteers like Stephanie are a bonus for the program, adding teaching support for each class.

The program, which operates mornings, five days a week in July and August, is designed to prevent the "summer slide," a syndrome that causes students to lose their learning edge. The program reinforces subject matter that the students were exposed to during the school year. According to Neighbors Link, the summer program is structured to close the achievement gap, as the children who participate would otherwise not have access to academic instruction or enrichment activities over the summer vacation.

In addition, many of the parents of the children enrolled in Summer Link have less than a middle school level of education and struggle with literacy, the organization explained.

Most of the children in the Summer Links kindergarten program did not attend preschool. The summer program not only teaches them subject matter that would have been taught in preschool, it also introduces them to the elementary school they will be attending in September.

Headquartered in Mount Kisco, Neighbors Link provides programs to strengthen immigrant families and support their development. Offerings include ESL, adult education, workforce development and legal support services.

For more information, visit neighborslink.org.