

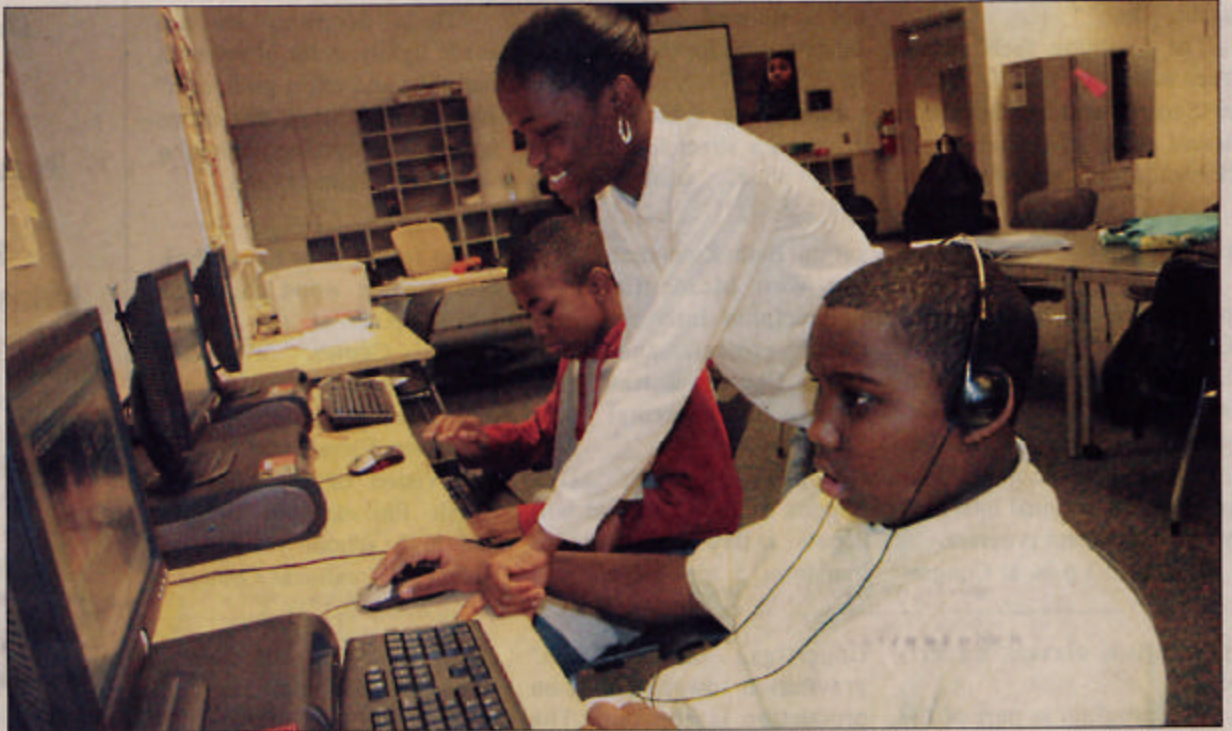
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Section

Friday, January 14, 2005

City & Region

The Philadelphia Tribune

MAKING THEIR MARK

Alfred Thomas, 13, of South Philadelphia, far left, joins Latifah Keys, 12, and Malik Johnson, 13, both of North Philadelphia, at the Honickman Learning Center on Tuesday. The Honickman Center hosts a local student-run newspaper published by Project H.O.M.E. called the North Philly Metropolis where students meet after school taking digital and web, creative writing and journalism classes. — MARISSA J. WEEKES/TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tenacious teens run own newspaper

By Janae Hoffer
Tribune Staff Writer

At 4 p.m. on Tuesday afternoons, 15-year-old Dominique Johnson goes to the third floor of the Honickman Learning Center and Comcast Technology Labs ready to work.

The soft-spoken teen, who everyone knows as "Peak," has a position bigger than he realizes. He is the student editor of the "North Philly Metropolis," a community newspaper written by teens in 7th through 12th grades.

Right now, the young writer does this as a hobby, he said, because he likes to write. He enjoys writing fiction, and is

See H.O.M.E. — Page 2B



A student approaches the Honickman Learning Center in North Philadelphia.

City & Region

The Philadelphia Tribune

Page 2-B

Friday, January 14, 2005

H.O.M.E.

From Page 1B

proud of a story called "The Book" which was published in two issues of the paper. The "Metropolis" includes community stories, video game and music reviews, poetry and fiction – all written by teens.

"North Philly Metropolis" began as a mini-magazine called "North Philly Teens" in the fall of 2002, after former editor-in-chief Benjamin Harris created the concept of a student paper. Peak and a small group of teens were on Harris' original staff. Now, as the paper shifts focus to becoming exclusively student-produced, Peak has the responsibility of recruiting more staff writers, in addition to writing and doing layout for the paper.

"Peak has been involved at the paper since the very beginning. We joke about it all the time that the paper is his baby for the most part. So if there's been any one person in the program that's fully committed to seeing this happen over and over again, it's him," said Stephanie Renee. She teaches digital video Monday through Wednesday, creative writing on Thursdays, and

journalism classes on Fridays.

The program is part of the Project H.O.M.E. Teen Program, an open enrollment after school program. Upon admittance, students are given an Individual Reading Inventory (IRI) assessment. Students who score below grade level are placed in Youth Education for Tomorrow (YET) Literacy classes. Those who score at or above reading level can participate in the newspaper program, said teen coordinator April Alcaraz. The program is designed to improve reading skills and give the students writing and technology skills to prepare them for careers.

In addition to writing for the paper, teens solicit local businesses for advertising to pay printing costs. It is daunting for them, Renee said, and she is working with Project H.O.M.E. to secure grants and other funding to lessen the students' burden. Most of the students are different from Peak, and are apprehensive about writing, she said. "It's hard enough getting the kids to write; it's a whole other ballpark to go out and get somebody to buy an ad."

With top-rate computer, digital music, and video production technology at their

fingertips, the students' gravitation toward hands-on production is apparent. The program was formerly housed at St. Elizabeth's Community Center and moved in January 2004 to the Honickman Learning Center on the 1900 block of Judson Street near Diamond Street in North Philadelphia.

"Moving into this building shifted the focus a little bit. When you have videos, animation and digital design, writing, compared to that, is just hard," Renee said. "All I do is try to take kids that are actually interested in writing for the paper and keep them focused on turning out good articles, and support them," she said.

But Peak remembers being short-staffed, which hindered publication in the past. The goal is to produce an edition at the end of every quarter, but funding setbacks delay printing. A shortage of student writers has also been an obstacle; the program is now at full capacity with 50 teens. "We got a bigger class, and once we had a bigger class we had more articles and advertisements in the paper," Peak said.

As Renee put finishing touches on the final layout for the upcoming edition of the paper, which will include a pullout with a feature

story, she spoke of aspirations for radio broadcast and other media to distribute the kids' work.

"Sometimes it's arm-twisting, but they do a really great job," she said.