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Kids from Boys & Girls Homes get taste of bright future
Rotary Club sponsors summer mentorship programs that help young people from abusive or neglectful homes get a leg up.

BY ANNE WOODMAN, CORRESPONDENT

Victoria Rangel might have spent the past month sitting on the couch at her brother's house, watching TV.

Instead, Rangel, 18, spent a recent morning in the law offices of Ward and Campbell in Cary, and visited both the Wake County Courthouse and downtown jail.

Before she leaves for UNC-Wilmington in the fall, Rangel and eight other girls from the Rotary Cottage at the Boys & Girls Homes of North Carolina took part in a four-week summer program, sponsored by Cary-area Rotary Club members. The program allowed the girls, ages 16 to 18, to live in Cary and network, learn about future careers and get a taste of the world beyond their Cottage at Lake Waccamaw.

The program was the mission of Cary-MacGregor Rotary Club member Owen Robinson, dreamed up about a year and a half ago. Since the 1950s, various civic organizations have supported the Cottages at the Boys & Girls Homes, a residential community for children who have been neglected or abused which has an active foster care and adoption program.

"I heard a lot about the [Rotary] Cottage, but I didn't hear much about the kids in the cottage — what happens to them when they leave?" said Robinson. "We need to build a support base for them."

For this summer's program, Rotary Club members raised about \$13,000 to arrange public speaking training, business and dining etiquette training and mock interviews. The students met with the mayor, lawyers, judges, nurses, cosmetologists and bankers, among others.

At night and on the weekends, the girls attended socials at Rotary Club members' homes, picnicked at Jordan Lake, caught the fireworks at Regency Park and went ice skating.

"The program took a lot of hard work and a lot of Rotarians helping, both in and out of Cary," said Linda Ward, a family law attorney and Rotary Club member.

For Rangel, who has a heart condition and plans to become a cardiologist, the program has netted her a job-shadowing opportunity with a local nurse.

For fellow program member Adrian Womble, 16, who said she likes to argue her point, meeting with a lawyer and seeing a judge in action may inspire her to keep her grades up.

"I'm thinking about criminal law. And I know that if I graduate from [the Boys & Girls Homes], they will pay for college," said Womble.

While the summer program expands their minds and opens up opportunities for the future, Robinson hopes the Rotary contacts the girls have made will continue to benefit them long

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after the program is over. At least once a month, Rotary Club members either visit the program graduates or arrange for them to come to Cary.

And as Rotary member Dave Weiss said, students now have an adult to call when they need help.

This past year, one student ran into financial difficulty and could not afford to attend prom. The Rotary Club stepped in and helped. One student's glasses were broken, and the Rotary Club found an eye doctor for her, along with new glasses. When a graduate from last year's summer program got a job and moved away from the Boys & Girls Homes, Rotary Club members got donations of furniture for his apartment and helped pay the electricity deposit.

"Everyone is on the same page — we want better for them," said Robinson. "We subscribe to the belief that this is not a hand out — it's a hand up."

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