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Capitol Heights youth recognized for excelling in reading, math

by Natalie McGill | Staff Writer
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Stacey Tyson knew her truck-driving job with Pepsi was crucial to supporting her three daughters, but the exhausting, all-day task of lifting bottle-filled cartons and stocking vending machines left little time to address her daughter Anasia Harris' slipping grades.

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So when Robert R. Gray Elementary School, where Anasia attended, sent home a letter in 2006 about a new evening tutoring program for students eligible for free and reduced lunch, Tyson jumped at the chance to enroll Anasia and her younger sister, Arjanae, 8.

Now, Anasia's progress has both the attention of her mother and the rest of the nation. The White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives recognized Anasia's academic achievement, as well as the program she attended, the Berwyn Heights-based Mrs. Dowd's Teaching Service, and gave both the Maryland Honor of Hope award. A student from each state is given an Honor of Hope award based on his or her personal story of achievement and the service which provided aid. Anasia was the only student in Maryland to receive the award.

Anasia, 12, achieved advanced scores in reading and math on the Maryland School Assessment for the 2007-2008 school year, improving on the proficient scores she received the prior school year. The MSA is a standardized test measuring proficiency in reading and math that students take to meet requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. Anasia said she had difficulties with double-digit multiplying and multiplying and dividing fractions prior to being tutored.

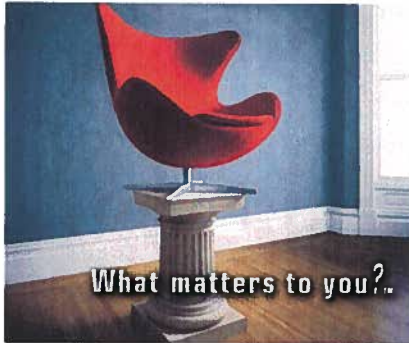
"I think I know math more than reading now," Anasia said.

Harris received a certificate of recognition during a small ceremony held in June at The Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C. She received a white chocolate White House filled with berries and had tea with a White House representative, Tyson, and Eileen Dowd, founder of Mrs. Dowd's Teaching Service.

Dowd said the U.S. Department of Education's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives contacted hers and similar programs asking them to submit stories of how their work has influenced a child. Dowd was floored when Anasia and her program were selected.



Raphael Talieman/The Gazette
 Robert R. Gray Elementary School student Anasia Harris, 12, of Capitol Heights was recently honored for her achievement in math. Harris is a rising seventh-grader and will attend James Gholson Middle School in Landover.



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“We were busy screaming and hooting and hollering,” Dowd said. “We acted like anyone else who won the lottery.”

Before this school year ended, Anasia, who will attend Landover’s G. James Gholson Middle School this fall, said her teachers asked her to assist other students with their math skills. Anasia also helped her younger sister with her homework troubles.

“My teacher said you can tell when they don’t understand because they’ll look stuck and then they’ll act like they know it,” Anasia said of the students.

Dowd said her company, an approved provider of Supplemental Education Services in Maryland, teaches reading and math for students from kindergarten through the eighth grade with a ratio of one teacher to three students. Previously her program taught students at Bladensburg Elementary and Adelphi’s Cool Spring Elementary until both schools made Adequate Yearly Progress, state Department of Education benchmarks for measuring proficiency in math and reading.

“When someone is struggling in a subject and they make progress, as a teacher, it’s a moment for us,” Dowd said. “It’s like, ‘OK we’re doing what we’re supposed to be doing and everyone is well served.’”

Tyson, who has since switched to an administrative position with Pepsi, said without tutoring, Anasia’s grades would have continued to be borderline. Tyson said she was “hitting and missing” making the school’s honor roll from quarter to quarter.

“She could’ve gotten it in class but when you have other students, you tend to wander a bit,” Tyson said. “Ms. Dowd played a big role in playing catch-up.”

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