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FEATURED

Teen tutoring program popular amid pandemic

Local students offering free lessons to help in challenging time

By Austin Walsh Daily Journal staff

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Dominica Masarova is one of the nearly 40 tutors who has worked with more than 60 students since the program began in March.

Teens turned their free time into free tutoring and established an education service growing exceedingly popular with students and families during quarantine.

“This is so much better than I had ever hoped for. It totally exceeded my expectations,” said Nicole Masarova, who launched Our Shared Learning with a few friends once health officers issued the shelter-in-place order.

The Hillsdale High School student who will begin her senior year this fall started the virtual tutoring program with a handful of others who were looking to do something constructive with their spare time.

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A word-of-mouth campaign spread awareness about the free tutoring sessions hosted through Zoom, and the original group quickly found demand outpaced their ability to accommodate demand.

In the effort to pair learning interests with suitable tutors, Masarova launched a website and the response has been overwhelming as teacher volunteers lined up to serve the mounting list of applicants. Late last month, the program grew to nearly 40 tutors working with more than 60 students. In all, the program offered about 1,400 hours of free tutoring since March.

Most of the tutors are high schoolers with expertise ranging from foreign languages and history to math and science. And the students varied in age from kindergartners building their foundation for learning to retirees taking French lessons.

The sessions span from 30 minutes to one hour and are held entirely online, as Masarova remains wary of face-to-face meetings amid the pandemic. And she's found appointments are easier to arrange remotely.

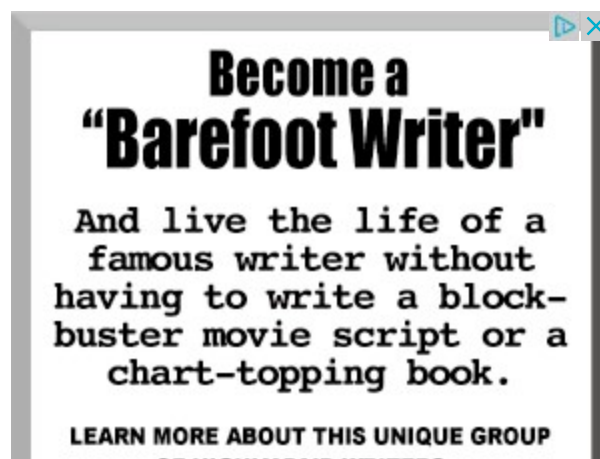
And while many students and tutors are meeting for the first time online, Masarova said tight social bonds have been established through the learning connection.

"It's become relaxed and very productive," said Masarova.

Masarova's classmate Eva Montgomery, who also tutors for the program, agreed.

"I like it a lot. It's really fun getting to know the kids. They are super excited to learn. They are all adorable and so sweet," said Montgomery, who is helping a kindergartner and second grader learn Spanish.

Montgomery joined the tutoring program alongside her sister in the interest of sharing the lessons they received at a Spanish immersion school with families who do not have the same background.



Through the more than two months Montgomery has worked as a tutor, she has admired the dedication shown by the students who attend regularly and appreciated the kindness from their parents.

Montgomery said another perk of the program is granting some relief to parents who are challenged by the unconventional arrangement of suddenly overseeing their children's education from home.

"It's nice for parents to get a bit of a break," she said.

Additionally, Montgomery said she is willing to continue working for free because she would not want families who need additional educational assistance to be priced out of the program.

"It's super rewarding knowing that we are helping families that may not have been able to afford tutors," she said.

Masarova agreed, and said such an effort is key reason why she plans to keep the program free. Additionally, she noted there is no overhead costs outside of a small website licensing fee.

"We don't want to charge anyone," she said.

The program has been a gift for Kimberly Lasso, a South San Francisco parent of two students who regularly receive Spanish tutoring and art lessons through the program.

"It's been really great," said Lasso, who noted the sessions offer her children both a chance to learn and be social.

Furthermore, Lasso found that the time one child spends in tutoring grants her the opportunity be alone with the other, which can make a full day in the house together more manageable.

“It takes a lot of stress off of me,” she said.

The program also builds her confidence in the younger generation, said Lasso, who shared her admiration for a group of students volunteering to improve their community during a uniquely challenging time.

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“It shows me how responsible and how selfless they really are to be dedicating their free time to teaching children,” she said.

Visit oursharedlearning.org to find out more about the program.

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