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Multifaceted Youth Center Seeks to Raise \$10 Million

By Keith L. Alexander
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Taniya Hilton wants to be either a mushroom or a bumblebee for the November run of Washington Ballet's "The Nutcracker."

Wearing a leotard and with her braids pulled into a ponytail, the 6-year-old is the tiniest member of the class of 15 girls rehearsing the ballet steps and African dance moves in the studio. "I just want to be onstage," Taniya says.

Meanwhile, downstairs in the computer lab run by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington, Joshua Carter, a 16-year-old junior at Archbishop Carroll High School, does his social justice homework while other teenagers huddle around a bank of 60 computers with flat-screen monitors. "I'd rather come here than go home after school because there's nobody there. This gives us something to do," Joshua says.

Giving young people something to do is the charge of the Town Hall Education Arts and Recreation Campus, known as THEARC, a \$26.5 million learning center for low-income children of Ward 8 and nearby areas.

Yesterday, supporters launched a 14-month, \$10 million fundraising campaign to help offset operating costs for the year-old nonprofit center. The opening ceremony was co-hosted by Alma J. Powell, head of America's Promise -- the Alliance for Youth and wife of former secretary of state Colin L. Powell, and Donald E. Graham, chairman and chief executive of The Washington Post Co.

"You can't help but feel a sense of hope and excitement for the children served here," Alma Powell said. "This provides a safe place for our children after school that provides health care and education."

The 110,000-square-foot split-level glass and masonry-block building, at 1901 Mississippi Ave. SE, could pass as the newest museum on the Mall with its high ceilings, hardwood floors and recessed and track lighting. It sits in a wooded area of 16.5 acres of national parkland just blocks from the Southern Avenue Metro station.

The center, visited by 2,000 children and their guardians since it opened, is bustling six days a week. Some nights, the Boys & Girls Club sponsors midnight basketball games in the arena-style gym. Community organizations and churches also rent the center's rooms, including the 365-seat theater, the only theater east of the Anacostia River.

In addition to the Boys & Girls Club and Washington Ballet, the center has seven tenants that educate and care for young people.

Children's Hospital operates a clinic in the southeast side of the building, with five exam rooms, three doctors, a dentist and five nurses who care for uninsured children. It also has two mobile units to provide health care for children who cannot make it to the center. On the center's second level, Corcoran Gallery of Art instructors teach children in grades 4 to 9 to express their emotions by painting.

The center even houses a school. Some 50 girls in uniforms attend classes at the Washington Middle School for Girls, which subsidizes tuition for most of its students. The Levine School of Music and Trinity University also offer discount classes. And Covenant House Washington, for troubled youths and runaways ages 16 to 21, operates in the northernmost part of the wing. There is also Parklands Community Center, which offers parenting and job-preparation classes for adults.

The campus was built primarily through donations. None of the occupants pays rent, just utilities and maintenance, which is about \$500,000 a year.

The campaign's goal is to raise enough money to offset the operations costs and allow the organizations to spend more of their funds on programs, said W. Christopher Smith Jr., developer of the center and chief executive of the District-based William C. Smith & Co. real estate firm. Fundraising organizers are targeting residents, businesses, churches, universities and grade and high schools.

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