



9th Gear Winter Reunion Draws a Happy Crowd — and Santa!

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- Felicia Sample**

Laughter and joyous energy dominated our first annual holiday reunion party for [9th Gear](#) participants Saturday, December 3rd. Students, parents, mentors, siblings, and friends joined us at Windy City Fieldhouse for food, crafts, and games, with Santa coming by for a visit as well.

The new freshmen, now ending their first high school semester, greeted each other and their mentors as if they were long lost friends, with everyone reporting that the summer program had helped them tremendously in the transition from 8th grade.

Danny Fair of Muchin College Prep said that the program “helped me prepare for the stress of work [in high school]. 9th Gear activities helped me to cope and manage.” He said one of the best things was learning the stress relief skills that help him before big tests.

His 9th Gear friend Leah Sample echoed Danny’s enthusiasm. She now attends Chicago Arts H.S., where she enjoys acting. She recommended 9th Gear as a program that “changed me to be ready for high school. You build friendships and a family.”

Parents and relatives raved about 9th Gear. Leah’s mother, Felicia, said that her daughter had felt bullied at her old school and “9th Gear was a good opportunity to interact with good kids” who shared the goal of doing well in high school. She said the program gave them many good memories.

Mentee A’vonni’s mother was equally enthusiastic. She said A’vonni had been in a “shell” before the program, but that her self-confidence and self-esteem had grown tremendously since the summer. Because she’s also a good student, she is now a great example for her sisters and brothers. She also thought the 9th Gear parent programs were great. “We were able to vent and ask questions. They allowed us to express ourselves.” That really made a difference for them.

Mentor Bill Buhr, a JPA Associate Board member, was excited to see his mentees again and looks forward to participating again next summer. He thought the exercises they did to build community really helped everyone build bonds and trust. “The kids didn’t believe I knew anything about high school at first,” he laughed. “But after we got to know each other, they realized I could be helpful!” Activities like creating a vision board and sharing their favorite songs helped drive conversations enabling students and mentors to really work together. “It couldn’t have turned out any better,” he said.

As all the guests were doing crafts, like making Ball jar snow globes and small gift packages for everyone, an unexpected guest — a Mr. S. Claus — came by to wish everyone a Merry Christmas. Students and their siblings eagerly posed with him for Christmas photos before heading off to play volleyball in the Fieldhouse. Along with copious amounts of pasta, salad, and dessert the party had plenty of good cheer and good news. A great way to start off the holiday season!

If you’d like more information about 9th Gear and how to be a mentor or supporter, please contact **Erin Vanden Brook** at evbrook@ipachicago.org.