



DEKALB EAST LAKE

Fellowship program aims to recruit pre-K teachers

Project helps pay for college, gives hands-on experience.

By H.M. Cauley
For the AJC

Avyion Jackson graduated from high school in May, then immediately returned to her educational roots: Drew Charter School in East Lake. "I went to Drew from kindergarten straight through — almost my whole life," Jackson said. "I even live within walking distance."

What pulled Jackson back was a fellowship program designed to help high school graduates explore a career in early childhood education. While she's getting hands-on classroom experience, Jackson is receiving financial support and qualifying for scholarship funding to earn a college degree.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I liked kids," she said. "So when I got an email about this fellowship, I applied."

Jackson is among the first cohort of fellows who will work for two years with students at Drew as well as Sheltering Arms early education programs and the YMCA's early learning center. Nicole



Avyion Jackson works with preschoolers at Drew Charter School as part of a program to recruit pre-K teachers. She is a former student at Drew and now will attend Georgia State. COURTESY

Tuttle, Drew's pre-K program coordinator, likens the concept to student teaching.

"Our belief is that after two years of intense professional development and support, we'll have someone of quality who knows this is what they want to pursue," she said. "At the same time, we're building a network of early learning providers in the metro area as an opportunity to help other centers that are really

struggling and don't have the resources to provide the level of professional development we can."

Jackson is getting a taste of that profession by working closely with pre-K teacher Julia Watkins to connect with the students, help work on social and emotional learning issues and improve the youngsters' communication skills.

"Avyion comes in and takes the initiative," Wat-

kins said. "I think of myself at 18 years old, and I wasn't as committed as she is. Working with her is also like having a new set of eyes. Avyion gives me much-appreciated feedback that has definitely made me reflect on my own teaching practices so I can be a good role model."

The idea to support pre-K teachers in training solidified two years ago as Drew staffers looked at

their own school's needs.

"We asked why we have been able to attract and retain highly qualified teachers, and one thing that struck us was having professional development that gives teachers the tools to be successful," Tuttle said. "We wanted to create a pipeline of teachers to feed into our and surrounding programs because we also found that bringing in teachers from your own

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community really makes an impact."

This month, Jackson will begin taking classes at Georgia State University. Because she is part of the Drew program, she qualifies for a scholarship from the state's Department of Early Care and Learning that will help pay her college costs.

"This program helps feed the profession with high-quality teachers, but it also provides support to some graduates who don't know what they want to do next," Tuttle said. "Maybe they weren't 100% ready to make a commitment to a university. This way, we can offer them additional support beyond the 12th grade."

Information about Drew's program is online at drewcharterschool.org.

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FULTON BUCKHEAD



Blue Heron Nature Preserve volunteer Beth Nabors (center) and others pitch in to keep the Buckhead site in top condition. COURTESY

Volunteer efforts help beautify nature preserve in Buckhead

Preserve is hidden gem 'right in middle of a busy city.'

By H.M. Cauley
For the AJC

For Beth Nabors, a pre-COVID excursion with Birds Georgia (formerly Georgia Audubon) revealed more than what winged creatures were flitting around Buckhead. It uncovered what many consider a hidden gem: the Blue Heron Nature Preserve off Roswell Road.

"I've lived in Atlanta since 1981 and have probably driven by it a gazillion times," said Nabors, who lives in East Cobb. "I never knew how big it was and what it had — right in the middle of a busy city."

That bird-watching adventure made Nabors want to learn more. She checked out the preserve's website and saw that volunteers were needed to spruce up the 30 acres that are owned by the city but maintained as a non-profit.

"I sent an email and soon got a reply asking if I could come in on Saturdays to pull weeds," Nabors said. "I do like working in the gar-

DOING GOOD

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den, so I signed up."

Since then, on most Saturdays, Nabors and a band of volunteers converge on the preserve to do more than pull weeds. Weather permitting, she works on the property's gravel paths, puts down mulch and cleans up. Her latest efforts have been focused on a plot off Land O' Lakes Drive.

"We're trying to restore it by pulling up non-native plants and planting native ones," she said. "We've put down mulch and slate chips in the muddy parts where there are walking paths. We've cleaned up one of the creeks that flows through it. And we've picked up trash."

But pulling weeds is one of her favorite projects. "It's probably the most rewarding thing I do," she said. "You can step back, see the fruits of your labor and go, 'Wow, this little area is where we're really making some progress.'"

While the work has expanded Nabors' knowledge of gardening in general, it's also inspired her to learn more, especially around native plantings.

"I've been on the internet and listened to what other experts say," she said. "Now it's easy to recognize if an area's been invaded by a weed." What keeps her showing up and ready to roll up her sleeves is still a sense of awe that such a place exists in an urban area.

"Blue Heron is such a hidden gem," she said. "When I tell friends that I'm volunteering there, they say they didn't even know it was there. When we're working, people will walk by and tell us how much they appreciate what we do."

"I just think you can't have too much Mother Nature in a city."

Information about the Blue Heron Nature Preserve is online at bhnp.org.