

Reality Ministries offers fun for all

By Leslie Ann Blake
The Durham VOICE

Symoni Patel looks forward to her weekly dose of Reality.

Yes, it's Reality with a capital 'R'.

One of Reality Ministries' newest programs, Daytime at the RC, is a part of Real Friends, the ministry for people with developmental disabilities. Daytime at the RC offers a range of activities, including yoga, bingo at a local nursing home, cooking, dancing and visiting a nearby park. Patel, a 25-year-old resident of Chapel Hill, says she loves it all.

"My hobbies are writing and singing. And dancing and yoga. And jogging," Patel says.

Every Thursday for 10 weeks, participants and volunteers spend all morning and afternoon at the Reality Center, the home of Reality Ministries, in downtown Durham.

Reality Ministries is a non-profit Christian organization funded by private donations. According to its website, Reality Ministries strives for a "holistic education and collective transformation" for at-risk youth and for teens and adults with developmental disabilities.

Out of the "black hole"

Director of Special Needs Ministry Susan McSwain says most of the program's 15 participants are residents of the area who have finished high school. The idea for the program sprang from a need for these adults to have a productive way to spend their days.

"For people with developmental disabilities, when they leave high school it's sort of a black hole," McSwain says. "We realized they were sitting at home all day doing nothing. We wanted to offer fun opportunities with their peers to share their gifts and talents."

There are no qualifications that must be met to register for the program, which costs \$75. Since spring of 2011, the program has been hosted once each spring, fall and winter.

Among the program's volunteers is Blaire Benson, a graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill. She started volunteering after graduation, but says she wishes she had started much sooner.

"When I first started, I got upset with myself," she says. "I thought, 'why have



Photo by Leslie Ann Blake

David Sittser (guitar) leads participants Page Crow and Tommy Preston in a music lesson and worship songs.

I not been coming here for a long time? I feel like if more people knew about the RC, they would want to volunteer here."

Benson says she admires the atmosphere created by the program's participants and volunteers.

"It's a unique, needed environment," she says. "We're all really different people with really different life experiences, and we just come here and play together. It works so well."

Their own style

During the second week of the spring Daytime at the RC, Benson teaches participants the Macarena and then starts an "interpretive dance party."

"I love to dance because it's fun, anyone can do it and you can put your own style to it," Benson tells the participants.

Patel and another participant, Drew McKenna, do the salsa during one of the songs. They did the same dance together during the Real Friends Talent Show on March 16.

Patel and McKenna aren't the only ones to find a dance partner.

Shaquana Green dances with Sloan Meek, pushing him around in his wheelchair during a hip-hop song. The two rapped and sang, respectively, during

the talent show.

"I like the music. I like to dance," says Green, who moved to Durham from New York.

More than fun

The day ends with a trip to Grace Healthcare of Durham, where the participants play bingo with the residents.

"While we play bingo, we're going to learn sign language, just to spice it up a bit," McSwain announces to the room.

As she calls out the letters, she teaches them how to sign each one, and the participants follow.

After a few rounds, participant Tommy Preston volunteers to call out the numbers. Preston, 31, won a Spirit Award at the 2012 North Carolina Special Olympics basketball tournament on March 17.

Asked to sum up the Daytime at the RC program, Preston says, "We have pizza, games, music, talk to each other and have fun."

David Sittser, a graduate of Duke Divinity School who works at the Reality Center, gives music lessons as he leads the participants through songs. He says that the program is educational, like a class, in addition to being fun.

"It's a really joyful place," he says.