

Popsicles in the Pines

By Wendy Smith

Each Tuesday during the summer, kids who live in The Pines Apartments, just north of Bearden Middle School, seek out Nelson the tree frog – a giant stuffed frog that sits in a tree overlooking the picnic area.

The children gather at the picnic tables each weekday for box lunches provided to kids in subsidized housing by the Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee. But Nelson's presence means the kids will also sing songs, pray, hear a Bible story, play games and make crafts. If they stick around long enough, they'll also get a Popsicle.

The kids enjoy the activities and jockey for position in line for the Popsicles. But it's the adult attention they really crave, says Mitch Townley, director of the children's ministries at West Hills Presbyterian Church, 7600 Bennington Drive.

"It's not a big flashy thing," he says of the weekly program, aptly named Popsicles in the Pines. "It's people and relationships."

The church's relationship with kids from the apartment complex goes back a decade. That's how long members have been involved with the After School Good News Club at West Hills Elementary School. The club, which meets at several Knox County Schools, is an outreach of Child Evangelism Fellowship of Knoxville. Townley is a board member.

Several kids from the apartments attended the club, and Townley thought of them when he was driving home with a car full of games from a Chattanooga church camp four summers ago. After getting permission from apartment management, he stopped by to play games with the kids. During a two-week span, he visited the apartments four times.

The following summer, he began a more structured program. The Tuesday event begins after the children eat their lunch, and those who stay through the Bible story and the game or craft are rewarded with a Popsicle.



West Hills Presbyterian Church member Ken Overton and Director of Children's Ministries Mitch Townley pass out Popsicles to children at The Pines Apartments. Photo by Wendy Smith

The summer program is part of an overall effort to reach out to the neighborhood, which is basically in the church's backyard, Townley says. During the school year, a van picks up kids from The Pines and takes them to church on Wednesday nights, and an annual Fall Festival is well attended by residents.

Some of the middle and high school students who ride the van to West Hills Presbyterian have been involved since their days in the After School Good News Club, Townley says.

Approximately 25 kids stuck around for the Popsicle at this summer's first event. They listened to the story of Noah and were quiet and focused during the

craft – a bookmark decorated with animals. They were patient in line, even when Townley explained that they couldn't choose the flavor of their Popsicles.

Kaye Freels, director of children's ministry at Apostles Anglican Church, 1540 Robinson Road, also

helps out with Popsicles in the Park. She's amazed at how open and honest the kids are with their prayer requests. They're an indication of what the kids want, even more than Popsicles – adult attention.

"In a lot of these kids' lives, that's a rare commodity."