

## Apartment renovations boost residents

Neighbors look for opportunities to advance, better quality of life

by Natalie McGill | Staff Writer  
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Ronald Butler remembers exiting Ballou High School's doors as quickly as he entered them on regular school days during the 1970s.

Today Butler, 57, regrets dropping out of the Washington, D.C., school, but wastes no time feeling sorry for himself. As a resident of Seat Pleasant's Eastern Avenue Apartments, he signed up in August for a GED class run with help from nonprofit Volunteers of America Chesapeake.



Leah L. Jones/the Gazette  
(From left) JaVon Melton, 2; his sister Jadi Melton, 6; and Aiden Wilson-Hope, 21 months, play Sept. 24 in the newly renovated recreation room of the Eastern Avenue Apartments.

Like Butler, the apartment complex — managed through Volunteers of America and geared toward low-income families — needed a helping hand of its own.

Residents received help from 65 employees from financial company BB&T between Sept. 13 and Sept. 15 who painted playground equipment and donated children's books, a flat screen TV for a community room and new computers. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held Sept. 20.

BB&T allocated \$10,000 in improvements for the complex at 506 62nd Place as part of the Lighthouse Project, the company's community service program, said Heath Campbell, a BB&T senior vice president and area executive for Prince George's County. The renovations were the result of BB&T's previous financial partnership with the Volunteers of America, an Alexandria, Va.-based nonprofit that offers social service, rehabilitation and housing assistance.

Eastern Avenue Program Director Nancy Staten said getting the new computers and printers will be a big help for the adults who are seeking their GED and those who want to become savvier with technology. Eight-week-long job-readiness classes and computer classes are scheduled to begin in October, Staten said.

"That's a major focus for those people now because it will help them in getting jobs," Staten said. "Most companies want you to apply online now."

In addition to the GED program, Eastern Avenue residents can sign up for computer and financial management classes. There is also an afterschool and mentoring program for the apartment youth and residents can receive case management and crisis intervention services.

There are 88 units and approximately 205 residents at the complex, which offers housing to people who qualify for Section 8 rental assistance through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Staten said. Rent is based on income and can range from \$0 to market value, which could be a little more than \$1,000 a month for a two-bedroom apartment, she said.

Campbell said the project at Eastern Avenue Apartments was the "perfect size and scope" where he felt BB&T could make a difference.

"We were extremely impressed with the organization set up for the complex," Campbell said. "It seemed very neat, organized, well maintained. [The residents] were already taking good care of themselves. They could probably use a little helping hand."

Butler moved to Eastern Avenue Apartments eight years ago, first staying with his daughter before moving into his own unit. Since dropping out of high school he has volunteered with the American Red Cross and worked at the now defunct D.C. Village, a homeless shelter in the District.

Butler said the fresh coat of paint in the community room and new books and games, including a Nintendo Wii, could serve as a launching point to bring the complex youth closer together. After finishing his GED, Butler wants to become a nursing home assistant who runs errands for elderly residents, such as taking them to the grocery store, and also wants to be able to help out children with homework during afterschool tutoring at the community center.

"If you want the help, they're here for you," Butler said. "I feel at home over here. I think God got me 20 or 30 more years where I can do something. I can change young kids' lives."

JiYea Melton, 8, said she is happy there are new books to read. JiYea is also looking forward to playing on the playground's monkey bars, which she likes to climb to get a bird's-eye view of the other playing kids

"I like the new playground because there were bad words on there," JiYea said. "I'm happy they painted over the words."