

Help Yourself Academy grows small college students



Jennifer Grooms addresses students and their families and friends while their college mentors look on at the Help Yourself graduation on April 20.

“It’s big college students working with smaller college students” is how Marilyn Lojo explained the Help Yourself Academy to parents and family members gathered April 20 to see their grade school students graduate from this year’s Academy.

Lojo is an aide who meets the third through fifth grade students — who were nominated by their teachers to participate in the program — at a bus stop once a week for a ride to the intensive but fun science and math program in its second year at Casper College.

The Help Yourself Academy is an effort to encourage and help children who might be at risk of not pursuing a college pathway, due to any of many factors, to believe in their ability to become successful college students through mentoring and a curriculum that supports skills and knowledge needed to become successful students. Help Yourself was started last year through the generosity of local businessman John Wold in cooperation with Casper College, the Natrona County School District and Jennifer Grooms, who signed on to organize the Help Yourself Academy.

And it’s working. Emily Wynn said her son,

Taidje, started Help Yourself this year as a fifth grader. “The program proved to be a wonderful fit for Taidje,” she said. “He learned something new every week without even knowing he was.

“They cooked hotdogs with nails, lit Christmas bulbs by building circuits and shot rockets with candy.” And Wynn said Taidje was always eager to share about the day’s project, “which is something quite rare.” Wynn said generally, when asked about his day, he keeps his answers

short, something like “fine” or “boring,” “so his eagerness to talk about the experiments was a great bonus for me. Plus, he’s now confidently looking forward to his future as a college student.”

Each grade school student is assigned a college student mentor. Gretchen Wheeler, Director of the Center for Learning through Service at Casper College, said the project has been most rewarding and every one of last year’s college-age mentors signed up again this year.

Grooms said she’s happy with the progress the program has made. Help Yourself started last year with third and fourth graders; there were 17 participants. If funding is available, each year a higher lever will be added to accommodate the students who are ready to move up a grade. So this year a fifth grade class was added; and participation jumped to 51.

“The program has been making a difference in the lives of the children, their families and the college mentors who work with them,” Grooms said.

Parent Elizabeth Shoupe agreed with Grooms. Shoupe said Help Yourself helped her daughter, Kayla, take an interest in science. “But the biggest thing is she now says ‘I get to go to college and be a college student after school.’”