

COVER STORY

Event lets kids dance the winter blues away

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the park often. Each had to pay \$2 for entry; those from out-of-county would have had to pay \$3.

High school volunteers would get community service hours for school, McNeil said. Other events that cater to teens include "Xtreme Teen" events like bumper cars on ice and a spring break "boot camp" where children aged 12 to 17 do volunteer work and physical activity.

"I've been affiliated with the center for two years," said volunteer and college art student Tirrell Coleman, who served as a disc jockey Saturday. "It's a great facility, great people, it's nice for kids."

Beyond games like musical chairs and dance twister, the kids could win blue, plastic sleds, which were part of the party's décor.

The center tries to discourage a strictly sedentary life in front of computers and video games, McNeil said. Part of the regular programming for

children includes hiking around the Shenandoah in Virginia, Casino Canal in Las Vegas, and more locally at Lake Artemesia in Greenbelt.

The children are also assigned animal names and take care of the center's animals including reptiles, amphibians, and the official mascot, a bunny named Griz.

Norlanda Williams, 9, also known as "NoNo Nyad," said she likes "to learn about the animals."

McNeil, or "Miss Paula Peregrine," agreed, saying that "some kids come every day after school to hang out... [and] take care of the animals."

But when it comes to a sleepy Saturday in February, 8-year-old Akiya Briggs looked out at the crowd of her friends laughing and playing games and listening to a variety of music from R&B to swing and Cajun, and said she came to "have fun."

"We work while others play, and work to make others play," McNeil said.

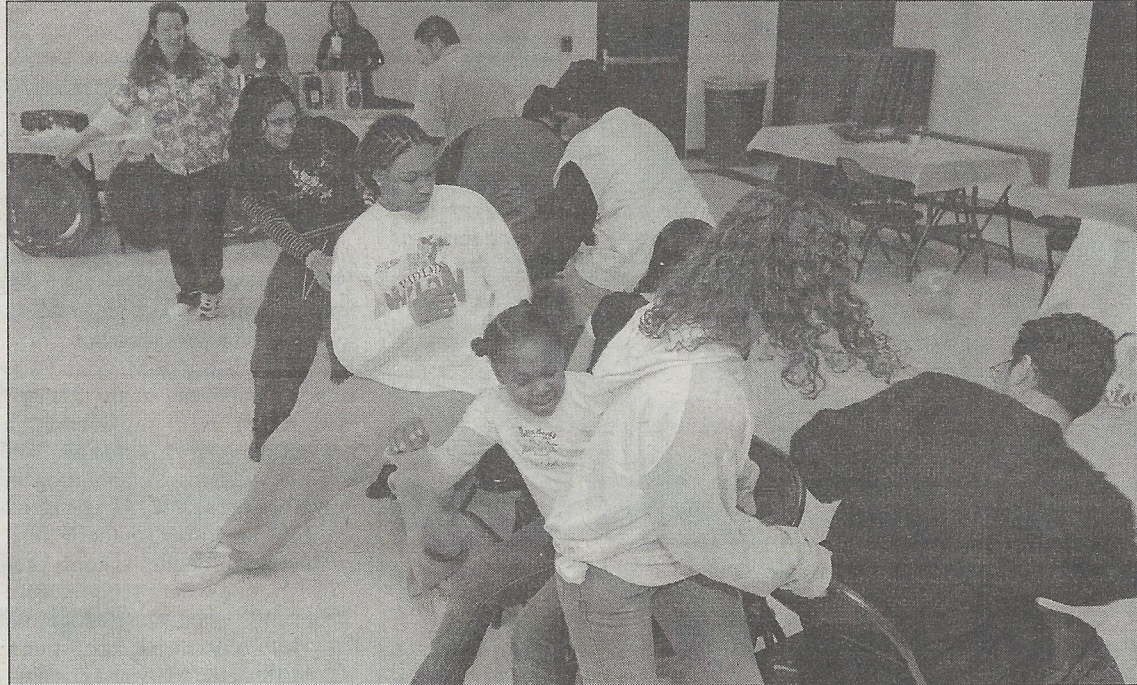


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Children and teens attending Saturday's Winter Meltdown Dance party at Mt. Rainier Nature/Recreation Center play musical chairs.