

# Opening children's eyes



Photos by BOB HALLINEN / Anchorage Daily News

Golf pro Brandon Kaiser offers instructions to Rae'Jeen King at Anchorage Golf Course on Thursday. Shirley Mae Springer Staten has been running the after-school program Home Base for the last four years. One facet of the experience is golf, along with areas such as science, math and technology.

## Community stalwart Staten raises awareness, fun in Fairview



Shirley Mae Springer Staten works with children of single parents and those being raised by grandparents in the Home Base program, which helps youths with homework and teaches music and other skills.

**S**hirley Mae Springer Staten was halfway through the Whittier Tunnel, at the wheel of a 16-passenger van full of children, when she started to sweat.

All at once it became too much: the darkness, the still air, the walls closing in — a whole mountain's weight hanging over her. Tight spaces had set her on edge since childhood, but she wasn't expecting it just then. Her heart beat fast and loud.

**JULIA  
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She couldn't stop or turn back. She kept her foot on the gas and sang to herself to stay calm. When they finally emerged into the light, relief poured over her. She pulled over. She could breathe again. She looked at the kids in the back, almost all elementary school students

from Fairview.

"I told them about my own fear. I told them about moving through it," she said. "I told them, if it's gonna make you feel better, step into it."

Staten is 64 years old, a character in Anchorage education circles for the last 30. I remember her from my days at Susitna Elementary School. She's one of those people who seem to look exactly the same when you're grown up as when you were in third grade. She's part no-nonsense mother figure, part inspirational speaker, with close-cropped hair, a penchant for dangling jewel tone earrings and a vibrato singing voice I can still hear in my head.

Her latest project is Home Base, a small, independent after-school program. She's been at it for five years. Most of the children are poor, living in precarious home situations — fresh out of foster care, or with a parent widowed or gone. Most are being raised by a single parent or grandparents. Staten tries to keep the kids in the program for several years to give them a sense of stability. Funding comes from Kappa Alpha Psi, an African-

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# O'MALLEY: *Expanding youth horizons in Fairview*

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American fraternity, Brotherhood Inc., a community service organization, and Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church.

Home Base teaches children science, math and technology. It's also set up to expose them to things outside their usual world. They have studied sign language and learned music composition with computers. Two years ago, they raised money and went to Ghana. This year they are putting on an orchestra concert and selling CDs to raise money to build a house in Haiti. Thursday, they were at Anchorage Golf Course, getting some golf instruction and further diversifying the Home Base experience.

Staten told me that if the students can take one thing from the program, she hopes it will be the courage to explore life's possibilities.

"There are so many choices they can make," she said. But sometimes they don't know it.

In the daylight basement off

**CONCERT:** Home Base program "We can change the world" will be at 5 p.m., today at the Fourth Avenue Market Place, 333 West Fourth Ave.

Karluk Street that serves as Home Base headquarters, it was "pancake Friday" at the end of last week. Soteria Fa'aaliga, 11, was camped at one of the tables, chewing a mouthful. She has three sisters and two brothers; she is the eldest. Her father, she said, had passed away. Her mother made her go to Home Base.

"I was way behind in my homework," she said.

Since she started the program, she'd raised her grades from C's to B's, she said. I asked what she thought of Staten, who the kids call "Ms. Shirley." Antwanai Seay-Moreland, 11, sitting next to her, broke in. She cares about them like a mother or a grandmother, Antwanai said.

"She's so strict about going to college and going to school," she

said.

Staten grew up "on the wrong side of the tracks," raised by her grandparents in Moultrie, Ga. She decided to move to Alaska in the early 1970s while working as a teaching assistant in Southcentral Los Angeles, raising a son. She kept getting robbed in her neighborhood. Alaska seemed safer for a child. She only expected to stay a few years, but she never left.

It was time for orchestra practice. The children got their instruments and sat in a semi-circle of chairs, crowded around Mary Schallert, a volunteer conductor. Schallert waited for them to stop wiggling and poking each other with their bows. They began, violas and violins a little droopy, muddling through a song called "Tallis' Canon," until, for a few lines, they hung together enough to bring the melody into focus.

"I'm not biased or anything," Staten whispered. "But aren't they good?"

I heard the story of Staten's first trip to Prince William Sound

one where she panicked in the tunnel, from a couple of people before I got a chance to ask her about it. It happened three summers ago.

Once she pulled herself together after the ride through the tunnel, she drove the children to meet a charter boat and loaded them aboard. Out in the sound, they landed near Blackstone Glacier, where the children were invited to try kayaking. Many had never been that far out of town, and the idea of kayaking terrified them.

It's unclear who started the singing — Staten or the children — but pretty soon they were all in, belting out "I believe I can fly." Even the most timid climbed into a kayak. And they all kept up the song, like it was a Sunday in church, bobbing there on the still water.

Julia O'Malley writes a regular column. Read her blog at [adn.com/jomalley](http://adn.com/jomalley), find her on Facebook or get her Twitter updates at [www.twitter.com/adn\\_jomalley](http://www.twitter.com/adn_jomalley).