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## **Tutoring Plus invites all to MIT Media Lab for its 50th anniversary Mardi Gras party**

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By [Monica Velgos](#)

Monday, February 24, 2014



**Tutoring Plus students created Mardi Gras masks to be used as decoration during Friday’s 50th Anniversary Gala at the MIT Media Lab. (Photos: Tutoring Plus)**

As our city grows and transforms rapidly, it can be surprising when a neighborhood tradition thrives and becomes entrenched even more deeply by the year. Tutoring Plus of Cambridge is a model of that kind of constancy.

On Friday, **Tutoring Plus** celebrates its 50th anniversary of offering free tutoring in Area IV with a Mardi Gras gala at the MIT Media Lab – and the whole town is invited. With the \$50 entrance fee comes the jazz sounds of **Ken Field** and **Stan Strickland**; hors d’oeuvres and buffet dinner from Jules Catering (including jambalaya, red pepper pasta, deconstructed muffuletta sandwich bar, pecan pastries and red velvet cake); a 70-plus item silent auction of goods and services from local businesses; and demos of innovative Media Lab creations (such as a **Makey Makey human synthesizer and fruit “piano”** and light-up name tags made with **circuit stickers**) as well as displays of Tutoring Plus **students’ projects**.

All tutors in the program, past and present, have been invited too. One couple in particular, Ruth and Julian Schroeder, will arrive from New York. The Schroeders met while they were tutors in the mid-1960s, when

the program also included summer field trips and workshops in photography, gardening, furniture making, art, theater and music. In a recent letter they thanked the organization for “50 years of love and caring.”

“When people become involved in Tutoring Plus, they tend to stay involved,” says Ellen McLaughlin, executive director. “If you come as a tutor and you can no longer tutor, you might become a donor. And you might come back years later and want to be on the board, or you may want to teach a class. We created this family, and it’s been going for 50 years.”

### Five decades of growth



**A Tutoring Plus volunteer and student work one on one at Cambridge Street Upper School.**

Tutoring Plus was born in 1964, when a group of mothers from the Roberts School (now Fletcher Maynard Academy) reached out to students from MIT to set up tutoring and mentoring for their children. Today the program serves four public schools in the Area IV vicinity in addition to **Cambridge Housing Authority “Work Force”** sites at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School, Roosevelt Towers, 119 Windsor St. and Jefferson Park.

Over the years local companies, community partners and other Cambridge universities have joined in to grow the organization, which now supports more than 240 one-on-one tutor-student matches each year. Since 2006, Tutoring Plus has partnered with Harvard and MIT to also offer free enrichment programs in science and engineering and with Lesley University to offer “Girls, Media and You,” an eight-week program in which middle school girls and college students study girls’ image in the media. A literacy initiative for boys of color is in the works.

In the mid-1960s, tutoring sessions took place after school in students’ homes. At the time (and much like today), Area IV was what one longtime resident describes in an upcoming book on the neighborhood as a “utopia” of integration, with African-American, Asian, Polish, Italian, Portuguese and French-Canadian families living side by side. The sessions bridged more than neighborhood boundaries and provided a rich

education for student and tutor alike.

As demand grew, sessions shifted to 5:30 to 7 p.m. to more easily accommodate the volunteer tutors and students' after-school schedules. It also shifted from homes to convenient central locations – the Cambridge Community Neighborhood House, Margaret Fuller House and Cambridge Community Center – that provided a safe haven for learning when the neighborhood experienced increased crime in the 1980s and early 1990s. It planted its presence even more firmly with its move into the neighborhood's schools and city's Work Force sites, with free sandwiches from Community Cooks provided during sessions.

### **Matching kids and tutors**

Tutor volunteers hail from Lesley, MIT and Harvard as well as Novartis, Biogen Idec, Genzyme and other local companies. All get **formal training**, and a Tutor Advisory Council fosters community among them by sharing tips and resources and engaging volunteers in social gatherings, such as tutors-only nights and tutor appreciation events. A Tutoring Plus running team participates in local races to raise money for the program. There are even married couples that tutor separate students on the same evening. The return rate of tutors is 91 percent.

As it was from the very beginning, tutors are matched to students. “Right now we have a young boy matched with a young man and both are very nerdy – and they are absolutely hysterical together,” McLaughlin says. “The young boy will come and talk about social problems and the older one has experienced that. You see them laughing, but you see them learning their social cues too.”

Matches are sometimes made serendipitously: “We have one boy and his tutor dropped out,” McLaughlin says. “The boy wasn't doing well in school. So we wrote a little blurb about him – his age, what he struggles with, what he needs. We put that request out to two companies, and within an hour we received 10 to 12 applications from each company.”

It's a personalized approach that builds strong connections. One former student, now grown and living in Ohio, went to visit Field, his former tutor, last Thanksgiving. They have kept in touch through the years. (Field, who put together The Mardi Gras All-Stars to play at the gala, is a board member and helps find musician friends to perform at each year's Tutoring Plus fundraiser when he's not available.)

### **“Like having another family”**

Bobbi Lemay began working with Summia, a shy English language learner, in her fourth grade. They are now in their fifth year together as tutor and student. Says Summia's mother, herself a student in college:

“Tutoring Plus helped Summia to be confident, to be an independent learner, to be organized in her schoolwork. Tutoring Plus always lets those parents who need help, who are in school or working, know that their kids get there and are safe. If there’s going to be a snowstorm, Bobbi tells Summia, ‘Call me if you need me.’ We’ve even visited her house – it was so fun. It’s like having another family.”

“We take any child, rich or poor, and our services are free,” McLaughlin emphasizes. “Because every child will benefit from having a mentor or tutor or relationship with someone.”

McLaughlin prefers, however, to keep the program focused primarily in the neighborhood. “What we do is we look at the whole family, how do we get everybody engaged. It’s not just the kid who shows up,” she says. “If we went citywide, we’d lose families who can’t get across the city for a program. And the children would begin to feel uncomfortable with the tremendous social/economic gap.”

“Programs develop personalities,” she continues. “And families go where they feel comfortable. I want our kids to feel they can be whoever they want to be. I believe we can stay true to our neighborhoods.”

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Tickets for the 50th Anniversary Gala, from 6 to 10 p.m. Friday, can be ordered in advance online [here](#) or bought at the door. Those who can’t attend can “like” Tutoring Plus on its photo-filled [Facebook page](#).

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