The first part was easy: The youngsters gathered last week in the Karl Road branch of the Columbus Metropolitan Library got to grab rolls of aluminum foil, wrapping paper and other items in order to let their imaginations run wild in creating something that needed to be created.

Then came the hard part -- and the point of the exercise taking place under the auspices of the First-Year Writing Program at Ohio State University.

The 25 minutes of invention had to be followed by almost as many minutes of concentration because program participants were required to sit down and write about what they invented and why.

“It’s a competition,” graduate student Sherita V. Roundtree told the after-school gathering on Feb. 8.

The writing workshops conducted by Roundtree, Michael Shirzadian and other graduate students under the instruction of Dr. Edgar A. Singleton, director of the First-Year Writing Program at OSU, will continue through the end of the month. After that, Singleton said, he and the students will continue working at the branch’s Homework Help Center.

Helping these young students helps the older students, Singleton said prior to the start of last week’s workshop, and is part of what they call a community collaboration project.

“From a very practical perspective, it is a line in a curriculum vitae or a resume,” he said. “I think there's also an altruistic aspect to it. It’s an opportunity to be directly helpful.”
That help is much appreciated by Columbus Metropolitan Library officials.

“It’s important to get teens engaged in ways that harness their creativity,” Public Services Director Kathy Shahbodaghi said in a statement. “With partnerships like these, we can help teens build life skills with the goal of turning interests and hobbies into passions.”

“Our work at Karl Road is the result of conversation that took place last summer in which we considered ways that our expertise as writers could be of value to the community,” Singleton wrote in an email.

“In the past, we have responded to requests from high schools to talk with students about what to expect in a college writing course, but this collaboration has been our first sustained community interaction. Our goal was to discover a real need and respond to it, and we feel we have achieved that in our partnership with the library.”

He said the Karl Road branch was chosen because it was identified by CML officials as the place that could benefit most from the program due to the number of students from Columbus City Schools and nearby charter schools who seek homework help there.

Singleton said the OSU students came to know “the culture of the place” by volunteering weekly at the Homework Help Center.

“We wanted to figure out a way to be more involved in the community,” Roundtree said. “We’re trying to draw them in with creativity.”

At the first workshop, Roundtree said, participants were asked to create a “meme,” which Dictionary.com defines as a cultural idea that gets transmitted through repetition. She was expecting fun-and-games memes.

Not so.

“So many of the kids made political memes,” Roundtree said. “It was very political. They had a very strong stance.”

Helping to lead the workshops is an experience she said she has appreciated.

“It’s been great,” Roundtree said. “We talk about how much fun it is and how the
kids make us laugh.”

“It’s exciting to let kids use their minds in a way that isn’t bounded by normal classrooms,” graduate student Sam Head said. “There have been lots of cool things that have been created.”

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