State budget cuts end USL reading program at MLK

By Bill Decker
Staff Writer

The government giveth and the government taketh away at the Martin Luther King Center.

The center's Butler Library will be the local base for a computerized homework-tutoring system run by the Louisiana Department of Education. Librarian Ruby Wiltz confirmed that Wednesday night.

But on Thursday afternoon, USL honor students said good-bye to the adults and elementary school kids they've tutored for up to six semesters. State budget cuts have eliminated the USL Literacy Scholars program that brought the college students to MLK.

Adult reading-class regular Elnora Simpson, who learned to write her name at age 60, said she'll miss the college kids.

"All these young people are wonderful to work with us old people," Simpson said. "I'm so sorry it didn't continue."

The adults learners, the college students and about 30 youngsters had a farewell party Thursday at the center. An hour or so later, a few doors away, half a dozen kids huddled around a Butler Library computer terminal.

Wiltz, center director Charles Bernard and the kids shared something with people in offices all over America: They were trying to figure out why the terminal said their printer was hooked up incorrectly.

The terminals are in the library thanks to the Louisiana Church-Based After-School Tutorial Program. Wiltz said Butler Library will be the center for smaller stations in churches, schools and day-care centers around the area.

The big attraction: The elementary students will be able to learn their way around a computer.

At that age, Elnora Simpson, 63, and her sister, Lorena Comeaux, 66, didn't even have the chance to go to school. They were raised on a farm. And in those days, black farm kids worked.

The law extending compulsory education to African American children didn't take effect until Simpson and Comeaux were married.

Simpson talked about going to a store without being able to read labels or prices: "You'd better not get one if it didn't have a picture on it."

Simpson said she decided to take reading classes because they were offered at the King Center, which is near her home, in the afternoons.

"Most of all, I wanted to learn to read my missal and my Bible," Simpson said.

One of the Literacy Scholars gave Simpson a large-print missal at Thursday's party.

Patricia Rickels, the USL English professor who runs the honors program, said 60 honor students, 30 adult learners and hundreds of kids have taken part.

But the budget cuts have hurt. Laura Edwards, who has a doctoral degree in reading education, is already gone.

"We talk a lot today about improving human understanding and multiculturalism," said Rickels. "This is a great way to do that."

"It's a shame that the funds had to be cut," said Bernard. "These kids are here after school and they coming in to get more learning. They want the help and need the help."

The King Center is still the site for a variety of homework, adult education and literacy programs. Wiltz said volunteers are needed.

For information, call her at 234-0363.