

RAISING EXPECTATIONS: THE TASK OF ST. PETER'S TUTORS

BY PAMELA J. WILLITS

THE 20-YEAR RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ST. PETER'S, Lakewood, and Watterson-Lake Elementary School has been less of a planned ministry initiative than it has been a "divine accident" becoming one of the church's central community outreach programs, according to the Rev. G. Keith Owen, II, rector of St. Peter's.

Nan Miller, who identified the need for tutors at Watterson-Lake two decades ago, is the spiritual engine of the project, according to Owen. "One passionate person involved others and over the years the parish sort of adopted the school," he said.

"To work as a tutor is to come face to face with the crisis conditions of the Cleveland Public School system. It can be a very sobering experience," acknowledged Owen. In a building he characterized as cramped, noisy and deteriorating, dedicated, hard-working teachers struggle to instill knowledge while managing students' behavioral problems.

Three years ago, St. Peter's parishioner Elisabeth Vinson assumed leadership of the tutoring program. As a retired elementary school principal who spent 17 years teaching in the Dayton inner-city school system, Vinson is aware of the challenges facing today's youth.

The interaction with these students provides more than an academic benefit. Having a tutor on the same day, at the same time, is a relationship the children come to count on. "These are their formative years," cautioned Vinson. "These kids feel alone, and with families who have no expectations for them, it's hard to make a child feel secure and help move them along the academic track.

"Some of these children reveal personal information that is very hard on them. You don't make judgments, you're just there in that moment to give support to that particular child."

Keeping a log on every child she tutors allows Vinson to share her insights with the other tutors, as her students advance in grade level. Working solely with 1st graders, Vinson said it's rewarding when students she has worked with leave the 8th grade and still remember her.



Janis Carlson, member of St. Peter's, tutors a student at Watterson-Lake Elementary School

Addressing Special Needs

For parish member Janis Carlson, working with special education students at Watterson-Lake is an extension of both her professional and personal lives. For 15 years, Carlson worked with special education pre-school age children. As the mother of a daughter with Down syndrome, Carlson knows first hand that parental involvement is key to raising special needs children.

As an advocate for special education, she doesn't believe teachers or parents should set limits on what children can achieve. Her own daughter, now 33 years old, is a testament to that belief. "She's still learning and she reads because we push her," Carlson said.

Using word cards, Carlson works with children to increase their recognition of primer words and improve reading skills. "At the end of the year, we count up the cards they've come to know by sight and they're really excited to see how many new words they've learned," she said.

The kids enjoy the extra time spent with them and the relationship [we] build with them, said Carlson, who makes it a point to bring treat bags on Valentine's Day and Halloween. "Everyone at Watterson is supportive

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The Rev. G. Keith Owen, II

of our efforts. It's a great place to go, because we know we're appreciated."

Learning Through Sharing

Two years ago parishioner Richard Willits came on board. Tasked with tutoring a group of seven to nine children, he noted that they have good and bad days, just like everyone else. "Some days one of the kids will say they don't want to read today," said Willits. But he always manages to get them on back on track.

At times he'll digress from the reading material to share a personal experience from his youth. "If their eyes widen, I know I've hit on something." At those moments, sharing stories becomes an extension of the learning process, as the children in turn share their own experiences with the group.

At 84, Willits said tutoring is an opportunity to help someone else live a better life. "Seeing the results is the greatest reward. I wish I had done it sooner," he said.

Brigitte Pronty, principal at Watterson-Lake, said the tutoring program helps build self-esteem and self-confidence in kids. "It provides stability for them and they look forward to seeing their tutor every week."

The weekly interaction goes beyond building literacy and math skills. It instills each child with a sense that adults are interested in them and their well being. With many of the students coming from stressed single parent or foster homes, this interest is often lacking.

With the demands of daily life, education seems to be falling through society's cracks. Pronty noted that parent-teacher conferences suffer from low attendance. "It's hard for parents to have a vested interest in a child's learning when they are more worried about rent and utilities."

Add to it parents who had a negative experience when they were in school and the result is a low expectation for their own children's academic achievements. Pronty recognizes the importance of engaging children in learning at an early age, noting that peer pressure can also have a negative influence on children.

Books of Their Own

Six years ago, when parish administrator Leslie Hannan learned that Half Price Books donates gently used books to non-profit organizations, she seized the opportunity to help Watterson-Lake students. Through the benevolence of Half Price Books' literacy program and their annual book drive, Hannan has helped transport dozens of cartons full of children's books to the school.

Upon hearing that Watterson didn't have a school library before receiving the donated books, Half Price Books has since chosen to feature St. Peter's efforts in their 2013 corporate calendar.

Without access to quality books, promoting literacy becomes a greater challenge. "Some of these kids never owned any books," said Hannan. Now, with the help of teachers, they are selecting books to take home. Placing books to call their own into the hands of these children gives them a sense of pride and moves them one step further to becoming successful readers and life-long learners.

Despite the difficulties in these children's lives, Owen noted there are

moments of hope. "Many of the kids clearly yearn to learn and manage to, in spite of the huge obstacles facing them. Many parents are equally determined to make the school a good place, in spite of their own struggles," he said.

"Our society is allowing the great institution of public education to wither on the vine, and in doing so potentially damaging generation after generation of kids before they even get the chance to shine. But even on the worst days there are kids whose eyes burn with the light of curiosity, teachers who still love these kids and community folks who won't let despair be the final word," he added.

As a show of appreciation for the volunteers' efforts, as well as the students' achievements, Watterson-Lake staff and teachers host a year-end party for the tutors and students, complete with cupcakes, watermelon and pop. Tutors also bring each of their students a book, which is theirs to keep.

Many of these volunteer tutors will return the follow-

ing year. For some, autumn will bring a new set of faces, while others will follow their students to the next grade level.

When Pronty describes the relationship between the tutor and student as one of give and take, St. Peter's tutors might say they get more than they give. In sharing their love of reading and learning as well as

personal life experiences

with each child, they gain a sense of purpose – the opportunity to help children develop to their greatest potential.

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Richard Willits