

GOODNESS INDEED

Having Lunch and Making a Difference: Pinellas County Students Benefit from Having 'Lunch Pals'

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On Diner's first Lunch Pal was a student at Mount Vernon Elementary school. The school described him as 'challenging' – Diner wasn't surprised. The 7-year-old lived in a group home at the Salvation Army with his 4-year-old brother. He'd go home, and "his mother was never there," Diner said. No wonder he was a little challenging.

At first, Diner's Lunch Pal would sit across the table from him. After a few weeks, the two were sitting side by side, and reading in the school's library during the lunch hour.

Lunch Pals started five years ago, after Raymond James partnered with Mount Vernon Elementary on an initiative that paired business executives with principals. Diner, the director of Strategic Community Partnerships at Raymond James, asked the principal what was needed. The response was simple: adults who can be a positive presence in student's lives.

"They had a lot of children who had challenges in their lives," Diner explained, adding that there are children in Pinellas County Schools who are homeless, living in group homes or motels, or have a single parent. They just need "someone to talk to on a regular basis," a responsible role model.

Mount Vernon and Raymond James continued talking and created a format. Program participants meet for 30 minutes during the student's lunch break. Meetings occur at the school in a safe, supervised environment. This might be in the lunchroom, outside at a picnic table, or in the library. There is no commitment beyond this weekly 30-minute lunch, and no cost to the schools, businesses, or individuals.

But before Diner would start asking others to join, he needed to sign up himself. He wasn't going to ask someone to do something he wouldn't do.

ANYONE CAN BE A LUNCH PAL

What started as a partnership between Raymond James and Mount Vernon has grown to a program that has nearly 60 local businesses and community organizations participating, and reached 1,000 students last year. Lunch Pals has a goal of reaching 1,500 this year.

More than 100,000 students are enrolled in Pinellas County Schools, and a little over half are categorized as 'economically disadvantaged,' meaning they are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Or, as Diner puts it, there is a "good chance a lot more kids could use a friend."

Lunch Pals pairs organizations and individuals with nearby schools, making it easier for participants to get to the school for the student's lunch break. Before meeting with students, volunteers attend a workshop. It lasts for approximately an hour and goes over rules and regulations, and offers ideas and resources.

Teachers identify students for the program, and their parents consent to participation. Parents and students also have a chance to sign up for a Lunch Pal. Diner says the Mount Vernon principal told him "every student" wants a Lunch Pal.



Lunch Pal mentors with their students



A close bond develops between mentors and students



"THANKS FOR BEING A COOKIE"

At 7:30am on a Tuesday morning at Raymond James, Celia Dubey thanked a room full of current and future Lunch Pals for "being a cookie." Dubey was at Raymond James along with Nikki Gaskin-Capehart to speak about leadership at the fourth Lunch Pals Summit.

Dubey's message about 'being a cookie' was a reference to her godmother, Cookie, who served as a positive force in her life.

Gaskin-Capehart struck a similar theme, stating that a simple conversation can have a major impact on someone, and you never know.

The leadership-development speakers series is part of the Lunch Pals program and open to the public. Although other themes were discussed, the simple act of being there for someone and having a conversation resonated with the core requirement for being a Lunch Pal: showing up.

Students in the program can be in any grade, but Lunch Pals focuses on elementary schools and encourages Lunch Pal relationships to last several years, not just one school year. This fosters consistency for the students, which may seem like a small detail, but goes a long way for children in the program.

In comments from an online survey, one participant noted: "My Lunch Pal told me that he knew

he could count on me to always show up."

Another said, "Seeing how excited my Lunch Pal gets when I arrive brings a smile to my face and lets me know even though it may seem like such a small contribution, I am making a difference in her life."

MAKING FRIENDS, MAKING AN IMPACT

From community development to improved employee engagement, there are a variety of facts and statistics that point to results and support the program's goals. However, the strongest case for being involved comes from the infectious enthusiasm of participants.

After the summit, Raymond James employee Michael Geller discussed his involvement in Lunch Pals. Geller heard about Lunch Pals on his first day of work at Raymond James. He was new to the area and eager to be involved, but had to wait for school to return from summer break.

The only requirement for Lunch Pals is a weekly lunch with a student, but through the program, Geller found an outlet for taking on other volunteer opportunities with the schools.

Regularly 'tackled' by the excited students when he visits the schools, Geller described the positive impact Lunch Pals has:

"For the kids – it's having a friend who is there for you," he explained. "For the Pal? It's a feeling that just makes your day, your week, that much better. I'm not quite sure who gains the most here, but at the end of the day, it's a win-win."

And at the end of the day, who doesn't want another friend? For more information, or to become a Lunch Pal, visit www.LunchPals.org and click "Become a Lunch Pal." ●

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