



◀ Ron Diner lunches with Davion, a St. Petersburg, Florida, fourth-grader and his “lunch pal” for more than three years.

Lunch and Learn

The menu’s weekly special: supportive time with a pal

Ron Diner’s first lunch pal was a 7-year-old named Tommy who lived in a Salvation Army group home. The two met for lunch in a school library, where Tommy, in the beginning, liked to sit with his favorite *I Spy* puzzle book across a table from Diner.

“After a number of weeks, he moved to my side of the table and put his arm around me and we did the book together,” Diner recalls. “Was this kid missing somebody? And did he find somebody in me?”

About 1,000 students in **Pinellas County, Florida**, have somebody on their side through the **Lunch Pals** program, which Diner, an executive at the financial services firm Raymond James, helped start in 2013 with Pinellas County Schools. The aim was to create a mentoring experience that’s so easy and obstacle-free for the participating adults that its organizers don’t even use the word “mentor” to describe it.

“Too many people say to themselves, ‘I can’t be a mentor!’ So I don’t use that word,” says Diner. “Anybody can do this. It’s just a couple of pals having lunch for a half-hour a week.”

The program grew out of a partnership between Raymond James and a single elementary school in the Tampa Bay area.

“I met with the principal and asked her, ‘What are your challenges? What can I do for you?’” recalls Diner.

“And she told me, ‘I have kids who are homeless. I have kids who live in motels. I have kids from group homes, lots of single parents.’ She said to me, ‘We need mentors.’ I said, ‘We have 3,000 people at Raymond James. I think I can

find some for you.’ I found 87 that year.”

The program has expanded every year. In 2017, the school district had Lunch Pals partnerships with more than 50 companies, plus dozens of churches and local government offices, resulting in more than 700 mentors at 81 schools, says Susan Schneck, the school system’s Lunch Pals coordinator.

Each mentor undergoes a background check and an hour of training, which Schneck can provide at the mentor’s job site. The training includes ideas for conversation starters.

“If the heart is willing, but they’re just a little intimidated by the idea of talking to a third-grader for 30 minutes, it’s helpful to have a few things in their back pocket,” says Schneck. “But I tell them, ‘You’ll likely expand your viewpoint, not just about the educational system but about today’s kids. You’ll see how they’re ready to sit down and talk.’”

“People tell me it’s the best 30 minutes of their week,” says Diner.

Students are identified for the program by their teachers or counselors. “We stay away from it being a situation that might be too intense for a layperson to handle,” says Schneck. “It could be a student who isn’t as academically engaged as he or she used to be, or maybe something has changed in the child’s home and we anticipate it might have an impact, or maybe the student had a friendship go sour and just needs a little lift.”

Diner sets aside time to lunch with his two lunch pals at each child’s school. Recently, he asked one of them, “If you could have lunch with anybody in the world, who would it be?”

“I was expecting to hear a famous football player’s name, but you know who he said?” Diner recalls with delight. “He said me! I couldn’t believe it!” ■