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Beth El reaches out to Sterling Elementary

Faith communities partner with needy students

Marissa Brooks



Lisa Garfinkle volunteering with Sterling Elementary school 1st graders. They were working on reading fluency.

Lisa Garfinkle volunteers at two different schools and coordinates a partnership between Temple Beth El and Sterling Elementary.

As my longtime friend, it was enlightening to find what drives Garfinkle.

Growing up in a family involved in social action and community service inspired Garfinkle to do good.

"We all have a duty to repair the world," she said. Garfinkle said she hopes to be an example for her four children and for others.

Garfinkle, 43, earned a law degree from Wake Forest University.

"I really went to law school because those five years of working in Washington (as a legislative assistant in the House of Representatives) taught me that knowing more about the law would be a good way to meet my objectives of being able to help people," she said.

Garfinkle works to meet that objective by volunteering regularly at Elizabeth Lane Elementary and Providence High School, but the three-year-old partnership between TBE and Sterling Elementary is "the project that is near and dear to my heart," said Garfinkle. "My biggest focus has always been on children."

Sterling Elementary is considered a Title 1 School Improvement School, meaning that, for the sake of federal funding, it is required to offer a public school choice or free tutoring services to students who receive free or reduced-price lunches.

When she heard about Charlotte-Mecklenburg School's initiative to get faith communities paired with schools that are most in need of extra support, she knew she had to be involved, even though none of her children attend Sterling. Garfinkle took action on her belief that "making sure that children get the best education they can get is a key to solving a lot of other (societal) problems."

When speaking about the partnership, Garfinkle is quick to say she is "just one of a large team of people" who make the partnership work. Twelve to 15 Temple Beth El congregants volunteer regularly in almost every grade level at Sterling.

There are at least 20 more people who help prepare class materials at home. The temple's congregation also supports supply collection drives for Sterling.

Three first-grade classes benefit from Garfinkle's attention every Tuesday.

"No job is too small for her," says first-grade teacher Tonya Haygood.

"The students benefit because they get extra time to practice fluency and comprehension," Haygood said. "Lisa gives me another set of eyes and hands when she is in the room."

Garfinkle pulls small groups to work on sight-words, and times the students on their fluency passages, performing whatever tasks the teachers need.

Garfinkle said she enjoys seeing the children progress throughout the year. She gets as much out of helping them as they do by having her assistance in class.

"It has been so rewarding," she said. "We have awesome public schools."

Garfinkle said she recognizes that every school benefits from having a large volunteer base, especially in light of budget cuts.

If parents can't get into the classrooms, for whatever reason, then "other people need to step in and do that," she said. "Teachers need all the support they can get."

Ruth Hood, Sterling's Family School Advocate, said the school gets support from partnerships with other faith communities, Beverly Woods Elementary and the business world.

"Teachers always need a helping hand," said Hood, who sees how the children respond and knows they appreciate that someone cares about their learning. They do better because of that attention, she said.

Hood also speaks highly of Garfinkle: "She is a phenomenal woman: passionate, insightful - a great communicator who knows our needs."

Garfinkle encourages people to volunteer in schools. "It brings communities together ... building bridges."

"If you can get children early, get them a good education, get them a good start in life, then a lot of (societal) problems will diminish," she said.

She feels that those of us who are fortunate have a responsibility to give back, especially to people who don't have as much.

"Give as much as you think you can, and then give a little bit more," she said.

Marissa Brooks is a freelance writer who lives in the Arboretum area. Have a story idea for Marissa? E-mail her at mbrookspt@earthlink.net.

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