

BBBS Does Lunch!

A new mentoring program matches employees of Hanover Insurance Co. in Worcester with children at Worcester Arts Magnet School during lunchtime. The Lunch Buddies program offers busy volunteers the opportunity to make a connection during their lunch hour with children who are clearly benefiting from the time they spend together every week.

Inspired by the school-based and site-based mentoring programs that bring Big and Little Brothers and Sisters together weekly for after-school activities at 21 locations throughout the Worcester and Metrowest areas, Lunch Buddies join their Little Brothers and Sisters every week at mid-day.

Lunch Buddies share more than a meal, however. Over the course of the school year, relationships have developed, as both Bigs and Littles have experienced the positive impact of spending time together.

The Lunch Buddies made “a dramatic impact on the children at our school,” said Susan O’Neil, principal of Worcester Arts Magnet School. She noted that the program helped improve attendance and reinforced good behavior in the children who had a Lunch Buddy.

The student population at the school is largely from low-income families and they face many of the challenges associated with poverty. “For some of the children, their Lunch Buddy is the only positive role model in their lives,” O’Neil noted. “For others, it’s another adult who’s supportive.”

The principal and staff at Worcester Arts Magnet School have been enthusiastic supporters of the Lunch Buddies program. “We don’t see it as time away from learning, but as time to support learning,” O’Neil said. “The Lunch Buddies encourage the children to do their best.”

The adults get a boost from the program too. Leslie Houle, a Hanover claims analyst, says that 10-year-old Rudy, her Lunch Buddy, “brightens my day.”

Houle notes that Rudy has “quite an imagination and always has lots of stories to tell.” During months of lunches, Houle says, she has helped Rudy to realize “he doesn’t have to make up stories to impress me. He’s opening up more. I’m getting to know the real Rudy.” Houle has introduced Rudy to her own children. “They love his sense of humor and really look forward to being with him,” she said.

Another mentor’s experience proved the importance of consistency in building a relationship. Keri Hudzik, also a claims analyst, was matched with Genesis, a shy 10-year-old who barely made eye contact with her for the first few weeks.

“She was very guarded,” Hudzik said, “Other children were greeting their Lunch Buddies with high fives and hugs. Genesis hardly acknowledged I was there.” But Hudzik refused to give up, believing that “consistency is important,” and bringing her Lunch Buddy slices of cheese pizza every week. By the end of the school year, “you couldn’t believe the difference,” she said. “Genesis had come so far.”

In addition to getting together over lunch, the two have gone bowling and to baseball games. Hudzik says she will be including Genesis in family outings this summer. They may not share hugs or high fives, but the two Lunch Buddies developed their own handshake they use to greet each other and say goodbye. “Everything is working out positively,” Hudzik said.

The Lunch Buddies program is one of several mentoring opportunities offered by Brothers Big Sisters of Central Mass/Metrowest: “We partner with businesses, colleges and high schools to match volunteers with children in local schools and Boys and Girls Clubs in Worcester and the Metrowest,” said Melanie Perreault, vice president of programs. “Last year we served over 1,100 children and over 700 were matched through our school and site based programs.”