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1875 Greeley Street South, Stillwater, MN 55082

Volunteers keep kids reading in district elementary schools

December 31, 2019

It's just another busy morning in the media center at Stonebridge Elementary School. The media specialist is helping several students with their research projects, while also giving a lesson on keyboarding skills to another group. Several giant stacks of books are piled on the counter as kids return last week's reading materials, and a line forms at the desk as they wait to check out this week's favorites. As the teacher gets pulled in four different directions, the stack of books gets ever taller. How can she ever keep up?



Enter David Waldschmidt and his media center volunteers from the Stillwater Sunrise Rotary Club.

Now into their second school year, Waldschmidt and seven other Rotarians have spent hours of their time volunteering in the Stonebridge and Rutherford elementary school media centers. Each week the volunteers restock the library shelves with hundreds of books, assist in checking out other books, and work with students to find materials on bookshelves. The volunteers also spend time reading one-on-one with kindergarten and first grade students and helping them practice their literacy skills.

"We got started because there is a big need here," Waldschmidt said. "There's a big need from the standpoint of kids needing more time to read. And there is a big need here because the media center staff has been reduced."

Over the years, budget cuts and changes in programming and state standards have had an impact on media centers in the district. Media specialists have become few and far between and those that remain split their time between two or even three buildings. With their limited time in each school being focused on instructing students, there is very little time left for reading with students, checking in books or restocking the shelves.

"Shelving books seems mundane," said Don Schuld, a semi-retired educator and current volunteer. "But our work keeps books available for kids. If they aren't shelved, they cannot be found or checked out."

The media center volunteer program began as an idea from a staff member as part of the district's annual Idea Quest. A team of staff members identified the issues that arise because of short staffing in the media centers and developed a solution for elementary schools that involved reaching out to the community for help. The Stillwater Rotarians heard of the need and, under Waldschmidt's leadership, the volunteer program was born. Though it has been piloted at just two schools initially, the hope is that additional volunteers can be

recruited from the community and the program might grow to more of the district’s elementary schools in the coming years.

“I am so happy to be able to help the librarian and I’m very pleased to be able to work in the library as well,” said Lynda Halbert, a Rotary volunteer and former school teacher. “But there is nothing more moving than to see the smiles on the faces of the students I’ve been able to connect with. I know it is important for the student to be reading the letters and words, but for me, I am reading their faces for that big smile.”

Interested in learning more about how you can volunteer? Contact David Waldschmidt with the Stillwater Sunrise Rotary at dwaldsch42@gmail.com (<mailto:dwaldsch42@gmail.com>).

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