

Tutors Make A Difference In Lives of Cabrini Kids

By Maribeth Vander Weele
Staff Writer

Raymond, one of the tougher children at Cabrini-Green's Manierre Elementary School, didn't want to ruin his reputation.

So the third-grader made sure his cronies weren't in sight before he made his move. Emboldened, he ran up to Joanne Alter, a one-time Chicago politician turned tutor, and spouted, "I love you!"

The week before, Raymond had stared curiously at an army of freckles on Alter's arm. She explained that each represented a time someone told her, "I love you." There were "dots" for her grandchildren, her daughter, her nieces.

Now Alter could add one more: Raymond's dot.

The "love-dot" story—and the day Raymond mastered long division—are among Alter's fond memories of Working in the Schools, the Cabrini-Green tutoring program she launched three years ago through a chance meeting with a teacher at a neighboring school, Byrd Community Academy, 363 W. Hill.

Alter, who gave up her seat on the Cook County Metropolitan Sanitary District Board to run for county clerk in 1990, offered to tutor after she lost that race. Upon seeing her efforts, then-Byrd Principal Janis R. Todd asked, "Are there any more like you at home?"

It began as a kitchen-table effort of Alter and her neighbor, Marion Stone. It grew into a program with a full-time executive director, Barbara A. Pace, and 120 volunteers in all five Cabrini-Green schools.

To ensure tutors' safety, the

group buses volunteers from three locations, two on the North Side and one in the Loop.

The group is seeking tutors from the suburbs and the inner city and hopes to expand eventually into a nationwide organization. Already test scores are inching up in classes where tutors have been in full force.

One element in the group's success is stability: Only a handful of volunteers have dropped out.

"We prepare our volunteers. We have feedback sessions. We have training seminars. We tell them they're not going into an idyllic setting where all the children read at grade level," Pace said.

Stone notes that many of the tutors are retirees who have found extra time. They also watched Chicago's high-rise public housing—and all of its ensuing problems—built decades ago.

"We're all guilty," Stone said. "This happened on our watch."

Today the group seeks to address an element of public housing problems with repercussions for even those seemingly far removed.

"There's nothing more important than the education of a disadvantaged child because it affects us all," Stone said. "People say, 'It's just a little piece of sand. It doesn't mean anything. The problem is so monstrous.'"

"But," she added, "the only way it's going to be solved is if each person gets involved one to one."



Marion Stone

A CLASS CHOICE



JOHN H. WHITE/SUN-TIMES

Volunteer tutor Richard Samuels has the attention of students at the Byrd Community Academy.

Mentors Getting Their Act Together

With hundreds of thousands of children living in poverty and neglect, the Working in the Schools program is the proverbial drop in the ocean.

"There are probably more people doing it than anyone imagines, but there is more need than anyone imagines," said Daniel F. Bassill, chief executive officer of Cabrini Connections, another group that tutors children.

Cabrini Connections has launched the Tutor/Mentor Connection, a first-time effort to connect tutoring programs from neighborhoods across the city, creating a directory and mapping out areas of greatest need.

Based on U.S. Census figures and various indicators of education and poverty, the organization has identified 17 of the neediest Chicago neighborhoods: Humboldt Park, West Town, West Garfield, East Garfield Park, North Lawndale, Oakland, Fuller Park, Grand Boulevard, Washington Park, Woodlawn, South Shore, South Chicago, Riverdale, New City, West Englewood, Englewood and Greater Grand Crossing.

The Tutor/Mentor Connection, housed at Montgomery Ward & Co., 535 W. Chicago, pinpoints corporations, outlines the neighborhood need, and asks them to contribute tutors.

Tutors from the city and suburbs give the one-on-one attention that teachers and parents can't or don't provide.

Retiree Julia Elston volunteers twice a week during the school year at Wheeling's Mark Twain

School, where she reads to children.

"She takes them one at a time and she gives them her undivided attention," teacher Fran Myers said. "She's listening to exactly what they say. She's giving them the kind of time and attention they really need and in some cases they don't get at home. She makes them feel like a million bucks."

Elston has been a steady volunteer for three years, but some programs face a high turnover in

volunteers—the job requires great patience and perseverance. First-time tutors often imagine "they'll walk to a site with an eager boy or girl ready to learn with books open," Bassill said.

The reality may be something different. "For many volunteers, they may spend the first year just getting the child to talk to them," he said.

John Horan, executive director of the I Have a Dream Foundation, which has 10 tutoring sites in the Chicago area, said tutors often create projects with immediate rewards to catch students' attention. For example, some tutors built a project around Alex Haley's "The Autobiography of Malcolm X." Students read the book a few chapters at a time, discussed it, saw a movie about Malcolm X's life and had a pizza party.

"It helped us do vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and history," he said. "It was all driven by the interests the kids had and it had very proximate awards: movie and pizza."

Maribeth Vander Weele

HELPING OUT

To list an organization in the Tutor/Mentor Connection or for a directory, which is now being updated, call 312-467-2889. Working in the Schools can be reached at 312-335-5747.