

Parents Take the Lead When It Comes to Learning

Volunteers lend a helping hand in the classroom

BY RICHARD J. BOCKLETT

It is said that teaching others is admirable, but inspiring them is gifted.

For fourteen years, Cathy O'Sullivan has been looking into children's eyes and seeing their future. As a Learning Leaders (LL) volunteer, she spends a couple of hours a week with first graders at P.S. 113 in Glendale, helping them learn the alphabet, numbers, and basic words. She walks the classroom aisle, offering assistance in reading and writing to whomever needs help.

"I enjoy working with kids," she explains, a note of pride in her voice. "Some kids need extra attention and they are so happy to see you. And you know you made a positive impact when on the street they look up, exclaiming 'I know you. You're from PS 113!'"

Founded in 1956 and incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1970, the Learning Leaders New York City Volunteers Program matches trained parents and other adults in tutoring and general assistance roles with students in neighborhood schools.

The first in the country and a national model, LL has placed 14,000 volunteers in over 960 schools in the five boroughs, aiding 265,000 pupils - or about one-quarter of the total number of students in the pre-K to 12th grade public school population. Its 2007-2008 budget is \$4.7 million, with 25 percent coming from the Department of Education (DOE) and City Council and 75 percent from grants and other donations.

LL's three-fold mission includes tutoring students on a one-to-one basis and being generally supportive to the school principal's needs and wishes; enabling participating parents to gain greater insight into helping their own children educationally; and engendering thought concerning the volunteers' own educational status and opening career goals that might include employment in the public school system.

Basically, volunteers sign up for at least two hours of service per week for the entire school year. They may help in tutoring, in English as a second language (ESL) instruction, or preparing pupils to take Regents Exams and SATs for college acceptance. Volunteers may also perform office and library support chores, act as cafeteria and recess monitors, or liaise with PTA groups.

Currently, about 10 LL volunteers are servicing PS 113. O'Sullivan, who in the past worked as a LL coordinator and recruiter, flashes back in her mind.

"In the old days," she recalled, "volunteers tutored individual pupils on a table in the hallway. Today, volunteers immerse themselves within the class as a whole, but by teacher instructions will focus on particular pupils."

"Teachers can only be in so many places at one time," added O'Sullivan, "and an extra pair of hands for the child is worth it. The more parents that volunteer, the better it is."

Some days and projects are especially fun and rewarding. Volunteers may help with special events, like a school play or auditorium presentation, or decorating the school to match the season.

Over the years, economic and societal changes have impacted young children. For example, one-parent households have increased and two-working parents is becoming the norm.

"Many kids need that extra bit of attention from someone because parents are so busy now," explained O'Sullivan. "LL volunteering involves only a couple of hours a week and the kids appreciate your being there so much. And remember, whatever you give to these kids you are getting back yourself; you are helping the community."

"In hard economic times, the schools always take a hit," lamented Moira Arie, vice president for external affairs at DOE. "Concerned citizens might not be able to contribute with money, but they can volunteer their services with Learning Leaders. How people can serve is as diverse as their backgrounds, talents and the needs of the school."

Arie explained that LL does screening, training of applicants, and placement. There is an initial eight-hour instructional period augmented by follow-up sessions pertinent to elementary and middle school curricula.

"We emphasize sustained volunteer commitments for the entire school year so that participants become a part of the fabric of the school," explained Arie.

Although volunteers usually work in their local public school, abilities and needs are also considered. For example, P.S. 182 in Jamaica has a diverse immigrant student population that speaks 150 languages. In that school, ESL volunteers are especially needed to help pupils get up to speed academically.

Sarah Harlow, the program coordinator for school districts 24 and 25, stresses that LL also seeks to change parent behavior with their own children at home. As Harlow explains, volunteer parents spend more time reading with their children, taking them to the library, and helping with homework assignments.

"Volunteers get interesting

learning resources to work at home with their own kids," she said.

And statistics show the program works. A 2003 study of a three-year period documented that kids of volunteers had a 25 percent less absenteeism rate than their schoolmates, and they scored up to 15 percent better in English and math skills test.

Also, 67 percent of LL parents speak with their child's teacher at least once a week, and LL parents are twice as likely to join the parents association and school leadership team.

Schools as a whole also improved. Schools with 20 or more LLs are safer, reporting up to 26 percent less student suspensions than comparison schools in two school years.

With people out of work and more time on their hands, volunteerism becomes more attractive. LL gives volunteers a chance to consider a career shift to the education field. There is a fast track for math and science teachers, but also opportunities for substitute teachers, para-professionals like parent coordinators, and teacher aids. Although there is no formal guarantee, some volunteers have segued into jobs in these areas.

"LL provides excellent classroom experience, learning from the teacher, and seeing how the school operates," said Harlow. "You develop professional relationships and might even get a job reference in the future."

However, Harlow noted that every volunteer has a different motivation.

"I've met some who have been in the program ten years or longer, and some who volunteered in the school they attended as a child," she said. "Some took ESL classes and now help with that. Others want to set an example for their child while aiding their community."

Mariana Colella-Chong has been a volunteer at P.S. 81 in Ridgewood since 2002, where she puts in 20 hours a week. With three kids herself, Chong explains, "I love to be a part of education. It's an ongoing experience

about myself, as well as a natural giving and taking."

Colella-Chong recommends LL for at-home moms as an opportunity to learn and motivate their own kids to learn.

"I home-schooled my kids for three years and volunteering helps a lot," she said.

Colella-Chong adds that more men volunteers are needed to bring something different to the table as good role models for the kids.

"LL is a pleasure," she said. "It's a reward to tutor one-to-one. They smile and say thank you and you see the child progressing. It's really warming to the soul."

Nancy Rivera spent four years with the PTA at P.S. 239 in Ridgewood, and then decided she could do more. She just finished training and will start as a LL volunteer in January as a cafeteria aid from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., three days a week. She talked about her training.

"I learned how to address the kids, help them in the classroom and with their homework," she said. "And how to accentuate the positive, help build their self-esteem, and keep their spirits up."

Bhupatty Kissoon started with LL at P.S. 239 in October.

"The school needed help," she explained. "I have two daughters - ages ten and thirteen - and I could help."

She says her children are proud of her volunteering.

Kissoon works two hours a day, three days a week, filing, photocopying, and performing general office duties, as well as lending a hand in the cafeteria.

"I enjoyed helping out," she said, and urges others to follow her example. "The school needs the parents and it's good for them to learn how the schools are working."

Learn more about Learning Leaders at www.learningleaders.org.



Learning Leaders volunteer Gabriela Castro works with a second grader at P.S. 149 in Jackson Heights.