

Highlights of the St. Louis  
Student Transfer Program

# volunteer

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## Middle School Book Club Delivers Positive Outcomes

By Peggy Magee

*A book club for seventh grade African-American males at North Kirkwood Middle School, now in its fourth year, began as a way to improve overall reading proficiency and spark the joy of reading for pleasure. It has succeeded in doing both, plus yielded other unintended results, according to Principal Tim Cochran, at whose suggestion the club was started back in the 2012-2013 school year.*

It came to be “a kind of boys’ club,” a peer group that encourages the exchange of thoughts and the forming of positive relationships, notes Cochran who formed other book clubs in his school after frequently sitting in on this first one, run by seventh grade Social Studies teacher Ron Taylor, and seeing the benefits.

Each year, Taylor’s book club enlists 10 to 12 recommended boys who spend 35 minutes each week gathered around him, taking turns reading passages and discussing plots and characters. “I pick books I know the boys can relate to,” points out Taylor. One such book was *Chameleon*, a coming of age story about a 14-year-old named Shawn who is dealing with the realities of living in the inner city and having to make tough decisions about the direction of his life. A highlight for the boys was a visit by the author, Charles R. Smith, who led them in some good conversations about what Shawn was experiencing, according to Taylor.

The books the veteran teacher selects are intended to be thought-provoking and sometimes, he says, “heated” discussions ensue, on topics such as women, homosexuality or equality and equity. “It’s a chance for the boys to discuss issues and ask questions, knowing they can talk candidly and not be judged.”



Social Studies teacher Ron Taylor encourages participation in his book club for African-American males at North Kirkwood Middle School. In addition to improving reading skills, the club gives the boys a place to belong, which positively affects their attitude and demeanor. The club also unites them in such a way that they come to look out for and bolster one another. The success of Taylor’s book club has led to the formation of other book clubs within the school.

Photo by Peggy Magee

Taylor views his role with the book club as much more than a facilitator. “On a personal level, I want to mentor these kids and instill values,” he says. He chats casually with the boys about their classes and their lives outside of school. “It’s an opportunity to talk about relationships, behavior and discipline.”

When handing out slices of pizza that sustain the boys during the lunchtime meeting, Taylor commends the first young man he serves. “Good old-fashioned manners! I like that!” The others take the prompt, offering words of thanks. Taylor corrects a boy who answers a question with garbled speech, saying, “I can’t hear you. Your hand is over your mouth.” As the boys head to the door, ready to move on to their next class, Taylor reminds them, “Be respectful when you leave.”

In between their meetings, the boys read on their own assigned pages from the book. “The expectation is that they complete the assignment and are ready to contribute to the discussion,” Taylor points out.

For former book club member, Tori Banks, now at Kirkwood High, it was the advance preparation and group camaraderie that helped him tap into his leadership potential. It is also part of Taylor’s

# WEST COUNTY MOM STEPS UP

## *to Ensure Students' Success*

*An after-school program run by a West County mom is testament to the difference one person can make. The lives of several Rockwood Valley Middle School students have been greatly enriched by Susan Berardi, who takes the "It takes a village" concept to heart.*

Berardi, the mother of three boys, has been a parent in the Rockwood district for the past ten years. As an observer of the VICC program, she believes that students' learning and growing are enhanced by hanging out with classmates and engaging in enrichment activities, things that typically cannot be done within the confines of the school day.

She holds other theories that pertain to student achievement. "It's my belief that self esteem and sense of belonging are the two most important factors that affect success," notes Berardi, a leadership and strategy consultant with more than 20 years' experience in both corporate and educational settings.

She saw from her oldest son, when he was in middle school, that playing on a team, wearing the uniform and being a part of an organization were instrumental in boosting his self worth. And so her program, called Soul Potential, for which she donates her time and services, provides an organizational structure for involving students in athletic, social, and enrichment activities.

Berardi launched Soul Potential in the fall of 2013 when her youngest son Derek started sixth grade at Rockwood Valley Middle School. The first activity, which she describes as "the carrot" she dangled to pull in students (with permission from their parents), was a sixth grade boys' basketball team through Rockwood Community Education. "Team Future," comprised of six VICC participants and five resident students, is entering its third year. Before their weekly practices, Berardi takes the boys, "scholars" as she calls them, to Fortel's Pizza Den in Ballwin (a partner she recruited) for an

after-school snack and activities she coordinates that focus on leadership and responsibility.

Through competitive play, the boys learn not only basketball skills, but plenty of life lessons from Ms. "B" and her husband Coach "B," Alan Berardi. The couple emphasize that the goal of the game is not to win, but to have fun, learn and work not for oneself, but for the good of the team. They also remind their players that success only comes through discipline of body, mind and mouth. The basketball season concludes with a sleepover celebration at the Berardi home in Wildwood where Coach B awards personalized trophies and medals as he delivers heartfelt remarks about each player.

Volleyball is another activity popular with the all-male group which, after basketball season, shrinks to a core group comprised of the VICC participants and the Berardi's son Derek. Each week, Ms. B leads the boys in drills in the school gym (which she rents out for their use). Always tacked on to their volleyball play is a leadership activity with a take-away lesson. In a group think activity one day, she stressed to the boys, "The



Susan Berardi, above, a West County mom, has played a big part in shaping the lives of students at Rockwood Valley Middle School. The program she heads up, called Soul Potential—now in its third year—provides after-school sports, enrichment activities and leadership training to a core group of VICC participants and resident students. Here, she and her students gather outside a local Hindu temple they toured last spring.

*Photo by Peggy Magee*

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## Middle School Book Club *from page 1*

strategy-- to identify one or more students who have the potential to positively influence the others. Reports Tori, "If we were supposed to read chapters five to ten by Friday, I would call my friends and ask, 'Did you read it?'" He says he checked in with them because he didn't want to see them fail. Tori himself, though very capable, had some missteps the previous year. The book club helped him realize he could be smart and popular at the same time, according to Taylor.

It became routine for the boys in the club to support and encourage one another. A standard of behavior was collectively embraced, described by Tori as, "There was no slacking off." That is Taylor's intent with the book club. "Here they are leaders, full participants." The idea is they carry over that mindset to their other classes.

And in many cases, that has occurred. "I think if you talked to my colleagues, their response would be favorable," notes Taylor, adding, "They would say the boys are better behaved and more agreeable." Why you ask? Because, he says, "They feel more connected and settled. They have a place where they belong and they are happier because of that."

The boys themselves speak highly of the book club. Asked about how it has helped them, overall they point to improved reading, citing everything from more interest in reading, faster reading, mastery of bigger words and fewer reading mistakes. One boy chose to address the social aspect, pointing out, "It's a chance to spend time with my buds."

In this case, that has proven to be a very good thing.



Participants in the after-school program, Soul Potential, pose with the manager of Fortel's Pizza in Ballwin, Kevin McDaniel, who provides them with a meeting space and snack.

Photo by Susan Berardi

## WEST COUNTY MOM STEPS UP from page 2

point is that you are individuals. It is much more important that you do your own thing and not follow the crowd." Transportation home from the weekly practices, provided by the school, is coordinated by Berardi.

Field trips and other learning opportunities fill in the weeks outside of basketball and volleyball seasons. Singlehandedly, Berardi plans and carries out every activity. Once the boys rush out of school and descend on her van, she heads off on yet another adventure, always focused on combining fun with teachable moments. "We're like a clown car," she says with a chuckle, referencing the seven young people plus herself who pile out of her vehicle. While they may look comical, when the talk turns to grades, college, good citizenship and other such topics, as it does with great frequency, a serious tone prevails.

During March Madness, they toured McCarthy Building Co. in Rock Hill (another sponsor Berardi recruited), heard from the chief operating officer about career opportunities and filled out their brackets in the corporate conference room.

On their last day of school, they spent the afternoon in Forest Park learning about King Arthur and the Round Table. They lunched on a selection of English cheeses and drank from plastic goblets. Berardi "knighted" each of them, referencing chivalry and honor, and gave them personalized certificates that she created in Old English script. To conclude their learning experience, they viewed a collection on Arms and Armor at the St. Louis Art Museum, a place most had never visited.

In July, the boys attended for the second year a five-day Adventure Academy at Ranken Technical Institute (another program sponsor) where they designed and built projects and learned about career options. They received tuition scholarships from McCarthy and Berardi provided them transportation.

Intent on making sure the boys know all their options after high school graduation, last year she took them to a college fair at St. Louis University. They talked to college reps about admission requirements and observed campus life. It was a field trip that opened their eyes about the in's and out's of college, according to Berardi. "They were surprised to learn that college applicants don't have to have straight A's."

Berardi's efforts are yielding favorable results. The findings of a multi-part survey she conducted, which included questions for the students about how they feel about themselves and their social connections at school, are proof of that. The boys' parents, with whom Berardi maintains weekly email contact, also participated in the survey. All responded very positively about the affect the program has had on their children.

The program also gets high marks from Rockwood Valley Middle School principal Karen Hedrick who reports that the boys have become a strong support system for one another, unusual for this age group. She notes, "We have seen them talk one another down when something has them upset and build one another up when life gets them down. Mrs. Berardi has formed them into a team having high expectations of one another and holding each other accountable."

It's impossible to predict the kind of long term impact Susan Berardi and her Soul Potential program will have on the boys. When the program ends after this school year, she intends to follow their progress in high school at Lafayette. But the growth and fulfillment she has observed are satisfaction enough for now. She has groomed them for the pursuits that await them. As scholar Jalin Reese says, "Ms. B has gotten us ready for the future."

"It's my belief that self-esteem and sense of belonging are the two most important factors that affect success."

Susan Berardi

# Message from the CEO



To usher in the New Year, many people create resolutions. By the time you receive this newsletter, it will be a month into the New Year and I am curious about how many of your resolutions you are keeping. I have found that the key to successfully achieving your resolutions is to make them realistic, establish positive things that you can do and sign up for every day, and to share your resolutions and experiences with family and friends. If you establish unrealistic expectations and then fail to meet them, the result can be rather discouraging. Similarly, if you do not take specific action each day to achieve your goals but instead continue doing the same thing, as they say, you will keep getting the same results. If what you are doing is not working, it is time to consider a new approach. Generally our resolutions involve change and change is hard. Sharing your goals with family and friends provides you with some accountability partners.

When we make resolutions most of them generally fall into certain categories such as losing weight, exercising more, getting our finances in order, or stopping smoking. However, as educators it seems to me that we should also be setting goals that will be helpful to us in our profession and, most importantly, helpful to our students. Here are some ideas for you to consider for the remainder of the school year:

- Be positive. Look for ways to make your school or your classroom an enjoyable place for you and your students. Staying happy will be beneficial to you and your students.
- Provide individual time and attention to each of your students. Look for opportunities to assign a task to a student and work together with him or her on common goals.
- Make a meaningful connection with each student and help them enjoy their learning. Connecting with students helps them recognize that they matter. It is important that students enjoy learning and that they feel valued.
- Integrate some new technology into your school or your classroom. There are always new opportunities to learn and gain expertise in technology and fresh ways to incorporate it into our daily teaching.
- Enjoy your students. Time flies quickly and before long they will no longer be part of your school or your classroom. How will they remember you and the difference that you made in their lives?

Each of us has a responsibility to improve and to help our students improve every day. Let's stop discussing our problems and challenges and become part of the solution in a way that helps our children and their families be the best they can be.

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