

# VICC volunteer

*Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program*

## ROCKWOOD STUDENTS LEARN LIFE LESSONS THROUGH CHESS

### Program Conceived and Run by Former VICC Student

by Peggy Magee

An after school program held at several Rockwood elementary schools teaches students lessons for success in life, packaged in such a way that they are actually eager to learn.

The program, Character Chess, came first to Rockwood's Green Pines Elementary and then moved on to two other Rockwood elementary schools. The children's keen interest in the popular board game made them receptive to this insightful version of it. So much so that at each of the eight weekly sessions, the Green Pines students sat attentively and took turns reading out loud the short stories that put in real life context the ten character les-

sons explored: know the rules, think then move, have a plan, stay in control, keep learning, flock together, protect your community, be good, be prepared, and each one teach one.

The stories, found in the textbook each child received, center on young

Harlan Hodge's introduction to the game of chess while growing up in East St. Louis and how he became masterful at it. The students read about the corresponding character lesson and its

See Inside *Character Chess*



Former VICC student Harlan Hodge, right, advises two Green Pines Elementary students on chess strategy in a program conceived by Hodge called Character Chess. Lessons in character are incorporated into learning the game. At left, Green Pines PE teacher Dan Hogan tries to outmaneuver his student opponent. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

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## Chess Program *(from page 1)*

importance not only in the game of chess, but in life. In session one, for example, the lesson of “know the rules” plays out with Harlan watching others and receiving instruction before he is ready to compete. He loses a lot at first but by continuing to practice, he begins to win.

In between the readings, students complete a response sheet in the textbook that encourages them to review the facts and identify the values displayed in the passage, such as diligence and honest work, obeying the rules, respect for others, respect for authority, humility, worthy accomplishments, personal responsibility and contributing to society. They are also asked questions about ways the character lessons and values from the story can be demonstrated in other situations.

Next up in the day’s session, the students are instructed in the game of chess, learning different pieces and plays at each class. As reinforcement, they do workbook exercises and play simulation activities on a SMARTBoard. Finally they face off with a partner, putting into practice what they’ve picked up that day and ultimately, by week four, compete in full games. On the final day of the program, a tournament is held, complete with medals for the winners.

Each session also includes a written reflection activity that prompts students to think about strategies for success in their own lives. Through pre- and post-program evaluations, students measure their commitment to good character.

It is Harlan Hodge himself, now 39, who runs the program and is author of the textbook. Known as Coach Hodge, as in chess coach (nationally recognized), he is a former VICC student, Parkway North High School – class of 1992, who holds a master’s degree in social work from Washington University. He dedicates the textbook to his sophomore English teacher at Parkway North, William Jenkins, “for relentlessly challenging me to rise to a higher standard of character. It is because of you

that I do what I do.”

The premise of his program, says Hodge, is that the values and lessons students glean from character chess become guidelines for accomplishing any task or goal. “If they learn and practice these principles, it will lead to better performance in school and in life.”

With interest and passion and wearing his uniform t-shirt that reads, “Life is Chess, Make the Right Moves,” Hodge talks to students about how the principles of chess apply to everyday life. When talking about the first rule of chess, know the rules, he asked them, “What are some of the rules in your school?” Later he inquired, “If you want to get better, who do you want to surround yourself with? That’s right – people who are better,” implying they should be selective about who they choose as friends. Every class begins with the children reciting this affirmation, the motto of character chess: “I am focused, I am good, I am focused on being good.”

In his experience as a social worker and youth development professional, Hodge has observed that, “The kids with good character tend to excel in school and go on to lead productive and healthy lives. Those with poor character often struggle to find their niche in life because they have not developed values consistent with the world in which they live.”

The character chess program is among Hodge’s many services that are contracted by school districts and other organizations serving young people. He ran the Green Pines program for 65 children (grades 3 to 5) with the help of his two chess assistants and three Green Pines faculty members (two who did not know chess), all of whom went up against the children in games. Before arriving at Green Pines, he worked on character chess with students from Rockwood’s Selvidge Middle School.

Although a diverse group of Rockwood students participate and benefit from character chess, the program was launched in the district with VICC students in mind. “We intentionally

recruited them,” reports Angela Lewis, area supervisor for the department of Educational Equity and Diversity, “because the relationship piece is critical for their success and the best way to build relationships with other students and with teachers is by working on something together, such as learning chess.”

Lewis notes that many VICC students have never been exposed to chess and that being involved in after-school activities “makes them more connected to the school community.” Chess also helps develop discipline, improve confidence and focus, manage aggression and release frustration, she adds. Especially interesting to the children, she believes, is that Coach Hodge, about whom they are reading, is working with them in the program. “He’s a great role model for them.”

What Green Pines principal Paul Godwin likes about the character chess program is that “it marries an activity that kids love with the character traits we shoot for in our building.” He believes that having the teachers be part of the program shows the kids they care and that they too are interested in learning something new. “The students see that learning never stops regardless of how old you are or how much experience you have.”

Hodge explains why chess is an especially good vehicle for building relationships between people of different cultures or ethnicities. “Language can be a barrier to developing relationships,” he says, noting that perceptions are formed by how people talk. “Chess requires little to no speaking and so any language advantage or disadvantage is undetected, facilitating the development of relationships.”

Second grade teacher Kasey Mollerus, who assisted with the Green Pines program, is enthused about its mission. “Sometimes in schools, there is so much curricula being taught that it often leaves teachers without the time to teach character. This program gives great lessons on how to be a better person in everyday life.”

## BUS DRIVER MAKES COMMUTE FUN

# Shares Ideas with Other Drivers

by Peggy Magee

Rockwood district bus driver Alicia Smoot has won the hearts of the 18 Babler Elementary School youngsters she transports and the admiration of school administrators and bus officials. She is the recipient of Rockwood's coveted R.O.S.E. award, a service award that this year went to only 15 individuals (staff and volunteers) of the hundreds who were nominated. In addition, the VICC transportation office chose Miss Alicia's bus for its annual "Love the Bus" recognition program.

There is no question why Smoot is so beloved and respected when you hear about what's going on during the twice a day, 45 minute commute to and from north St. Louis, straight from the mouths of babes – her young passengers. For the "Love the Bus" competition, they wrote comments on valentines about why their bus is special.

Several students wrote affirmations, such as "I will show respect" and "I will be responsible," referencing the character education traits that Smoot emphasizes on her bus. The practice of incorporating a school's character development program into the bus experience is highly encouraged by both the school and the VICC transportation office. Babler Elementary principal Diane Metz points out that Miss Alicia "reinforces our character goals and strives to promote citizenship and caring each and every day."

Smoot is a shining example of what VICC transportation manager Tami Webb asks of all drivers – "to make the bus their own in an effort to impact good behavior."

Providing the children a special bus experience is important to Smoot. One little girl wrote about how she spends her time on the bus. Tuesdays and Thursdays are activity days when the children do fun activity sheets, color or play games, such as show and tell or a guessing game. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are reading days with a bag of books available for students and the option of bringing a blanket and pillow from home. Bus monitor Rosemary Pickett assists Smoot with coordinating the day's project. One child wrote, "Miss Alicia and Miss Rose try to keep us having fun and to not be bored."

In December, the children made a snow man chain and snow flakes which were used to decorate the bus, something Smoot does for every season or holiday,

along with special activities that relate to the holiday. She says her school is always happy to provide the supplies she needs and to run copies for her. Impressed with Miss Alicia's ideas as an effective way to manage bus behavior, the school encouraged the other VICC drivers to follow her lead. To help facilitate this, Smoot shares with them what she plans to do and supplies them materials to replicate her idea in their own way.

Babler Elementary assistant principal Missy Parker credits Smoot with bringing about positive outcomes. "Alicia's efforts have drastically decreased bus write-ups and provided a loving and caring environment from curb to curb."

Smoot's goals are to make certain the kids are happily engaged so she can keep



Babler Elementary School bus driver Alicia Smoot, at center in back, is all smiles after finding out she had received Rockwood's R.O.S.E. award. She is pictured with bus monitor Rosemary Pickett, wearing cap, and her student passengers who enjoy their driver and the bus activities she plans for them. Photo by David Downs, Rockwood School District

them safe by focusing on the road and to create an environment they look forward to returning to every day. The trick is “to be consistent,” the young mom of five stresses, noting that the kids look forward to what the day brings. Consistency is key to her overall bus management style. “You can’t let them jump over the seat one day and not the next,” she explains. One little girl’s comment gets right to the point: “Miss Alicia makes sure we follow the rules.”

Smoot also replicates a school practice of giving out blue tickets as rewards for exemplary behavior, a cooperative spirit or making good choices. The tickets go into a drawing and, if pulled, the student is acknowledged on the morning announcements.

Many of the students wrote about how much their driver cares about them. “Miss Alicia makes us feel like family,” reported one little boy. First grade teacher Cara Moore confirms that Smoot has “an amazing relationship” with all her students, greeting each one by name with a smile and a hug and always asking them how they’re doing. She reports that her students eyes “lit up” when Smoot unexpectedly dropped by the classroom holiday party. “Miss Alicia makes a positive difference in their lives each day,” she says.

One little girl summed it up best by writing, “Miss Alicia makes me want to ride the bus.”



## PATTONVILLE SENIOR SERVES AS ROLE MODEL

# Students View Time with Marcus Triplett as “Bonus”

by Peggy Magee

A high school student in the Pattonville district has touched the lives of hundreds of children over the years, creating a stir of excitement each week when he visits his former elementary school, Drummond Elementary, to volunteer in the classroom.

Eight years ago, VICC student Marcus Triplett had Julia Graham as his fourth grade teacher at Drummond. “He’s been coming back ever since,” she notes with fondness, explaining that his first return visit was to catch up with her after he had moved on to Holman Middle School. “He would pop in occasionally,” reports Graham, who had then moved to second grade. When Marcus was a sophomore at Pattonville High, he began helping out in her classroom and has been working with her students ever since. A 2013 graduate, when he informed Graham of his last day working in her classroom, she wept, a testament

of how big a fan of his she is.

But she’s not alone. “Marcus is kind of like a rock star around here,” she points out. “The kids get so excited when they see him. They feel attached to him because he’s been coming here so long. He’s everyone’s big brother.”

Drummond principal Jason Van Beers describes Marcus as “a stand up guy.” He explains that by working at his school, Marcus is fulfilling the service hours required for the A+ Schools Program which enables high school students who meet established criteria to attend two years of community college or vocational school tuition free. Marcus plans to attend Florissant Valley Community College.

Van Beers is also a member of the Marcus Triplett fan club and nominated the teen for a scholarship offered by Kohl’s. “He has gone above and beyond by hundreds of hours the amount of volunteering that is required for the A+ program and for graduation. He spends quality time with the kids, befriending them and serving as a role model.”

Marcus’s responsibilities include conducting small group reading sessions, leading spelling or math exercises

and working with students one-on-one. He has brought in the instruments he plays and led them in song. His service extends beyond the second grade. When he volunteered to work as a counselor for fifth grade camp, his involvement was so appreciated that he was encouraged to return the following year, which he did. “The campers would listen to me and do what I asked,” he notes. He has also helped out on track and field day and run alongside children in the annual Harvest Run.

According to Graham, Marcus sets a wonderful example for the younger students. “He exhibits all of our Pattonville character education models of cooperation, respect, kindness, responsibility, service, honesty and perseverance. He is the epitome of a good citizen, shows gentlemanly manners and is completely genuine – the real thing.”

Marcus is a well rounded young man who participates in sports at Pattonville High and is involved in orchestra, choir and mock trial. In everything he does, he tends to push himself to his limit. “I try to be the best I can be,” he points out modestly.

He certainly has excelled at winning the hearts of youngsters at Drummond. When picking students to go out in the hall for reading time with Marcus, Graham says she might select a child celebrating a birthday or those who have “earned” something special. “You get Marcus,” she will tell them, knowing how much that means to them. “Marcus is the bonus.”

Pattonville High School student Marcus Triplett is loved by students and staff at Drummond Elementary School where he has volunteered for two years. According to teacher Julia Graham, Marcus sets an example for the younger students because he exhibits all of the Pattonville character education traits. *Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman*



volunteer

A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

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# Message from the CEO



I imagine you have heard the expression that the most important things in life aren't *things*. As I was reading the articles in the current issue of the *Volunteer*, I was reminded of this truth and the importance of quality relationships.

Harlan Hodge, with his program Character Chess, emphasizes the importance of the relationships that are developed between students as they work together on strengthening their character and learning the game of chess. Bus driver Alicia Smoot has outstanding relationships not only with her students but with teachers and administrators at the school and this has led to outstanding success and cooperation among everyone. VICC student Marcus Triplett also has developed amazing relationships, not only with his former teacher, but with the students with whom he works as well.

In the movie "Castaway," Tom Hank's character – stranded on an uninhabited island – creates a face on a volleyball and talks to the ball, which he names "Wilson," as if it were a person. Though fictional and funny, the gesture illustrates something very basic about us: relationships are important – so important, in fact, that our brains are hardwired to form them.

As I was investigating the significance and importance of relationships, I have to admit that I was a little surprised to learn how important quality interpersonal relationships are for all of us. Not only do quality relationships provide opportunities for success in life and help enable us to achieve our goals, they can also lead to improved health. A study conducted by Brigham Young University scientists determined that social connections among friends, family, neighbors, fellow students and colleagues may improve our odds of survival as much as 50 percent!

The study concluded that the importance of relationships is not limited to older adults, but impacts all of us. Other studies have shown that people with a strong social network tend to live longer, respond better to stress, and have an improved ability to fight off infectious diseases.

We should look closely at how we spend our time. Are we using some of it to strengthen, grow and build new relationships?

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