

Tireless dedication

Volunteer helps define true spirit of St. James school



Nancy Knowles is shown here slicing papayas for a tropical food day at St. James Catholic Elementary School. She has been volunteering with the WECDSD for more than 20 years.

(Windsor, Ontario, Tuesday, May 24, 2016) – More than bricks and mortar, it's the people who selflessly give of themselves who truly define a school community, making learning both memorable and meaningful for the children who become part of its fabric.

Nancy Knowles is one of those people, and through her tireless efforts, she contributes to the exceptional atmosphere that's been created at St. James Catholic Elementary School.

While teachers feed their students' minds, Knowles nourishes their bodies, providing them with the sustenance they need to be active learners. The coordinator of the school's busy kitchen, she oversees a breakfast program that serves about 5,000 portions a month to the approximate 300 students who go there.

"I call them my kids," she says of the students. "I love working with the kids, and it gives me something constructive to do."

Knowles, who recently turned 65, is at the school every morning between 8 and 11 a.m., quarterbacking the food preparation, delivery, clean-up, and ordering of all the supplies. With a pool of about 40 volunteers from the Knights of Columbus Council 4386 in South Windsor, and St. Anne and St. Joseph parishes, she can count on anywhere from three to five volunteers to help every day.

"We're really lucky to have all the friends that we do," she said. "If somebody's willing to help, I'll find something for them to do."

The school's program began humbly about eight years ago, prior to Knowles' arrival there, with staff providing grilled cheese sandwiches and some fruit and vegetables a few times a week, according to school secretary Mary Bowyer.

"We're lucky to have such a dedicated group of volunteers who have been with us since the beginning," she said. "We're very blessed and the kids understand that. Without volunteers, you just can't run a program like this. It's very labour intensive and time consuming."

Funded through the Ontario Student Nutrition Program, the program also relies on donations from Windsor Goodfellows, other parishes, and community organizations.

Since coming to St. James in 2010, Knowles has helped elevate the program to entirely new heights. Prior to arriving there, she had been doing similar volunteer work at the former St. Francis Catholic Elementary School on Detroit Street. Dan Laporte, that school's former principal was transferred to St. James prior to St. Francis being transformed into an adult education campus, and he asked Knowles if she would come to St. James.

"I felt like I was coming home," said Knowles, who grew up in family of nine children near Grove and Curry, just a stone's throw away from St. John Catholic Elementary School. Her father, a milkman who died in 1988, loved the west end, she said.

"We grew up poor, but we never felt like we were wanting for anything," she said. "We had family, which was always important to my parents. My Dad always said that whatever you get, you give back tenfold."

Even though she spends most of her time giving back, Knowles said the rewards she receives are ample.

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“The joy I get is huge,” said Knowles, who was the recent recipient of a 20-year Ontario Volunteer Service Award from Essex MPP Taras Natyshak. “I know what I do is appreciated. The kids are very grateful.”

Her faith, she added, is what motivates her. Coincidentally, the epistle of St. James is framed by a theme of patient perseverance during life’s trials; Knowles has had a few trials of her own, including a number of car accidents that left her with a variety of injuries. St. James encourages believers to live consistently with what they have learned in Christ, and to live humbly in Godly wisdom, simple rules that Knowles has clearly followed.

“That’s what’s kept me going, the thought that someone is watching over me,” said Knowles, a member at Sacred Heart parish in LaSalle. “As long as my body is physically able, I’ll be here.”

Besides feeding all those students, Knowles also puts in a tremendous amount of time making the outside of the building look beautiful, working regularly with both present and former students in the school’s gardens.

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“I love nature,” said Knowles, who has three children of her own, and five grandchildren. “I grew up with gardens, and every kid loves working in the garden. It’s a soothing thing and it teaches them respect for nature. We put things in the ground and the Lord does the rest.”

With the help of her husband, a retired editor from CBC, she works on the garden throughout the summer. She even has a group of about eight boys who are former St. James students who now attend Assumption and still help twice a week.

“Without all of the kids helping, this would never happen,” she said.

If Knowles has learned on thing about living and working in west Windsor, it’s that perception is rarely the reality.

“Everybody thinks that because this is a west end school, it’s bad,” she said. “There’s so much good here that people don’t see. I think it’s a great community.”