

Fifth Graders Give Gift of Self
by Rosemarie Howard
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Gifts come in many sizes, shapes and packages, but the gift of self-of service and friendship--cannot be contained in a package or given a monetary value. At the beginning of the school year, Art City Elementary students in Dori Fisher's fifth grade class committed to voluntarily give some of their time each week to mentor the students in Doreen Snyder's class. Snyder's students are not your ordinary students: they struggle with a handicap called autism.

School counseling psychologist, Kim Kasayki, says that autism is a spectrum disorder--meaning that its effects can be manifest in mild to profound ways. Most who have the disorder are born with it and the signs of its presence are usually evident by the time a child is two. Common signs include language delay, social delay, and an "insistence on sameness" --that routines, other familiar patterns, and physical environment, stay the same. Some dysfunctional behaviors include repetitious, non-goal directed behavior, self-injury, sleeping and eating problems, poor eye contact, insensitivity to pain, hyper-/hypo-activity and attention deficits.

Kasayki helps with coordinating and facilitating the special education programs at the school. This year there are two autistic classes--one for kindergartners and first graders, taught by Mara Mills, and the other for second and third graders, taught by Doreen Snyder.

So what would motivate your regular fifth grade student to volunteer to spend time working with students that are different than they are; and what have they learned? Students in Fisher's class were eager to share the answers to those questions.

"I just like helping people," said Shannon Powell.

"I wanted to see how their minds work," said Shane Spencer, "to see how they do things and why."

"I thought it would be fun to try," commented Ryan Shaw. "One of them likes to run a lot and I run with him."

“I wanted to help them have fun,” said Xanthe Webb. “They are different but not that different.”

“Like my mother said,” Matthew Hansen shared, “ they need me; not many people are there for them.”

“I think they’re smart,” observed Jessica Johnson. “When they stare, I think they are studying something out, really observing.”

“My cousin was born without part of his brain,” Jory Reece shared. “Working with Mrs. Snyder’s students would give me good experience for helping my cousin.”

“They see things a lot different,” remarked Nelson Boyer. “They appreciate nature a lot more than we do; they’re more careful with it.”

The fifth graders may choose one of three ways to help Snyder’s class: they may volunteer one hour in the classroom a week to help the students with their academic work; they may spend a 15 minute recess time with them; or they may spend lunch recess, about 45 minutes, with them. All of the choices involve giving up either their own recess or some of their regular class time--and making up the missed assignments on their own time.

Behind every well-working program is a person of commitment and ability. The person behind this successful program’s organization is Doreen Snyder. She is in her first year at Art City Elementary, coming from nine years of experience in the Alpine School District’s special education programs.

The idea of the student mentors came into being when her principal at Scera Park Elementary asked her if she would like some help, Snyder said.

“What do you have in mind?” she responded. Soon she had several sixth grade students helping her with the downs’ syndrome children she taught. At first there were only a few sixth graders helping, but by the time she left the school last year, there were 70 students involved.

Now at Art City Elementary, she has initiated the same kind of program. Student mentors usually come to Snyder's class in groups of two or three and tutor the special education students in several areas-- manipulatives, math, art projects, P.E., cooking, reading, and working on the computer. They also often sit with the class during assemblies. Because of the extra help, Snyder can give each of her special students around 45 minutes of one-on-one teaching time.

"Without the students' help, the program wouldn't work," Snyder said.

Along with the fifth grade students, Cory Mills, a Springville High School student, works with Snyder every other day. "We keep telling him he should go into special education," smiled Snyder. "We need more special education teachers. There is a real shortage."

And what do the students in Snyder's class think about all of this? They go home and talk about their peer tutors non-stop, reports the school secretary, Rhonda Crane.

The gifts make a difference--for both the givers and the receivers--the kind of difference reflected in the words of the song all of these children sang together at a Christmas program recently presented for their parents:

"I believe there are angels among us, sent down to us from somewhere up above. They come to you and me in our darkest hours, to show us how to live; to teach us how to give; to guide us with the light of love."

These are the gifts that keep on giving all year round.