

The power of volunteering

Ask not what your school district can do for you ...

PAT RILEY JR.

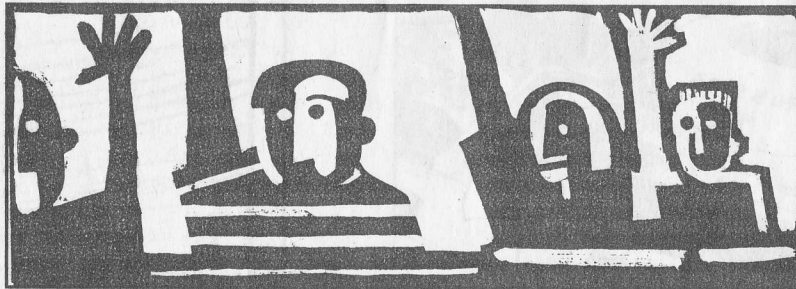
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

The Little Rock School District (LRSD) is a hot topic these days. Its impending governance fate and daily operation are the source of a surprising torrent of passion and concern from all corners of our town. I salute the concern and share the passion. But no matter which decision is made on Wednesday, I'd like to make a proposal to harness all this energy and use it as a force to transform our public schools and city into something extraordinary.

Of what magical force do I speak? The simple but profound act of volunteering one's time and talent to mentor or tutor a child who could use the help.

I've seen this magic firsthand and I can tell you its impact can be life-changing for both the student and the mentor. My first taste of school-based mentoring occurred 17 years ago when I was paired with a second-grader named Brandon; he of mocha skin, fiery spirit and radiant smile. Even at age 7, Brandon was already lagging far behind his classmates in reading. He needed some extra help.

The day I was to meet him, I stood in the school's hallway as a parade of beatific munchkins marched by. As we looked on, the principal, as motivation I suppose, cited statistics from a study about the shamefully high odds that an African American boy from a single-parent, poverty-stricken household would one day end up in prison. This actuarial insight in the presence



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of such innocence made a deep impression. Brandon, of course, fit the high-risk profile.

So I made a solemn commitment to read with Brandon one hour a week. In our meetings, he would read a page aloud, haltingly, errantly. Then I would read a page aloud. That's how it went. That was my brilliant plan. Sure enough, little by little his reading improved, but the real magic was just showing up week after week, year after year. At some point along the way we became truly important to one another. Our lives became enmeshed.

Brandon is 24 now, and we are still in regular contact. I still serve as a mentor. He hasn't become a "statistic" but his life is, even now, a high-wire act; sometimes I have to hold my breath. But I know he's at least got a chance and that I've played a part in making that so. When I allow that to sink in, it feels, well, meaningful.

Once Brandon got too old or too cool for my in-school help, I found oth-

er ways to volunteer inside the LRSD. Several years ago, for instance, I helped start a program at Forest Heights Middle School called Dream Team Mentoring. This year, I was the proud volunteer assistant volleyball coach for the Lady Eagles at Forest Heights STEM Academy.

I am far from alone as a public school volunteer. There are thousands of us. Each year at its annual awards banquet, the ViPS (Volunteers in Public Schools) Department presents a check to the superintendent for the cumulative value of in-kind volunteering services in the district. Last year that check was for \$19,268,000 (representing an impressive 870,289 hours of volunteering).

And it isn't just individuals who pitch in. Many businesses befriend a school and become a Partner in Education. St. Vincent Hospital, for instance, allowed its employees to take a paid break each week to volunteer in the Dream Team Mentoring program. There are more than 250 businesses that have signed up to be Partners in Education.

The current level of volunteering in the LRSD is a fantastic achievement, but with an influx of new recruits it could be even more impactful.

Most of the time when I hear someone speaking casually about the LRSD, it's about how dysfunctional the schools are. And yet, when one spends time in a school as a mentor or tutor or coach, that's not the feeling one has. Instead, one becomes an advocate for the school and a proud participant in the education of the children there. One begins to care deeply about that place, and the adults who work there daily, and the children they serve.

So here's my Big Idea. What if Little Rock adopted its public schools in a profound way by amassing an army of caring volunteers? What if we matched up every single elementary-age student whose reading is below grade level with a volunteer tutor? What if our business community embraced the LRSD by partnering with a school of their choice by asking how can we help? We would change our world, one Brandon at a time. And in so doing we would finally replace the historic stigma of intolerance represented by Central High in 1957 with a new and more fitting image as the City that Cares.

If you would like to volunteer in one of Little Rock's public schools, contact the ViPS office at (501) 447-ViPS (8477) for further information.

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