



Sisters in Ministry

Nourishing the Body, Mind and Spirit at Kids Café

BY KATHY WILLIAMS

In a large, light-filled room in the Parish Life Center of St. John Paul II Parish in the Hikes Point neighborhood of Louisville, Sister Ruth Ann Haunz, director of Kids Café, is busy preparing to welcome volunteers and student participants to the café. With her color-coded sign-in sheets and forms in hand, she is ready for the afternoon rush to begin.



Playing chess at Kids Café

Kids Café, a program sponsored by Dare to Care, provides hot, nutritious meals to children at over 30 partner sites throughout Louisville. St. John Paul II Parish is one of these sites. To qualify to be a Kids Café site, at least 60% of the students in your neighborhood school must qualify for free and reduced lunches.

The program, which runs from 4:30–6 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, draws students from Goldsmith, Klondike Lane and St. John Paul II

elementary schools, grades one through eight. Sister Ruth Ann, who believes that “Good education and good nutrition go hand-in-hand,” says that the 30+ students in the program are recommended by their schools mainly based on nutritional needs.

Transportation can be an issue for many of the students, as they do not have a bus that can pick them up and drop them off for the program, so parents have to arrange transportation.

The participants are a diverse group and include children of immigrants from Vietnam, Mexico, Cuba, Iraq, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Burma-Myanmar, Congo, Gambia, and Ethiopia, who may not have access to a reliable car.

Another requirement of the program is that each site must have at least an hour-long activity for the students prior to the meal. Sister Ruth Ann says that Dare to Care is not very strict on what the activity is. Some sites just have open gym.

Sister Ruth Ann has developed a curriculum for the program, which includes working out of the Simple Solution workbooks, games which increase language arts and math skills, and other activities. On nice days, they will take a “field trip,” which involves going outside on the parish grounds to play.

The backbone of a program like this one is the volunteers. Sr. Ruth Ann, who has a background in

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Audrey, Kids Café participant



Sister Ruth Ann Haunz visits with students and volunteers.

pastoral ministry and religious formation, has done an excellent job in recruiting and retaining volunteers. On any given day, she will have 25 volunteers, which translates into focused attention for each child, as one volunteer will work with 1–4 children. About a quarter of the volunteers come from John Paul II Parish, several from St. Martha, Ascension and other parishes, and many from the neighborhood. She gets many volunteers through word-of-mouth. She says that many volunteer once a week, but several volunteer two or three times a week.

Several high school volunteers arrived around 4 p.m. Two young men from St. Xavier High School, stopped by to talk. “The kids are great—they are very fun to help, and the staff is nice,” according to Jaxson Stone. Danari Timberlake, a sophomore, adds, “I just love it here, I like helping them.”

There are several longtime adult volunteers, and they have formed community with each other. They will check in with each other and go out to eat together. Sister Ruth Ann cares for them, and tells them, “Health, family, then volunteering, in that order!” With the students, she says, “Family, school, health!” Her volunteers tell her she makes it easy to volunteer, and one can see why—Sr. Ruth Ann moves around the room, anticipating needs and questions before they are even asked, giving hugs and encouragement.

When asked how she got involved in the program, Sr. Ruth Ann says that after finishing her term in Ursuline leadership in 2014, one of the people she

mentors in spiritual direction told her about Kids Café. At first she said no, because up until that point she had only worked with high schoolers and adults. But God had other plans, and in 2015 she became the manager of the program. Now, she says, “I am so blessed by all the students and volunteers here.”

In addition to this program, Sister Ruth Ann also manages the parish’s Dare to Care Mobile Pantry, which gives out food the second Tuesday of each month from the church parking lot. She also volunteers with Catholic Charities of Louisville, facilitating household goods donations for immigrant families.

Several of the volunteers are retired teachers and one is a retired physician. Cindy Morrison, a volunteer who worked in finance, comes three times a week and brings play money with her for counting exercises



Dinnertime! Students line up for the meal.

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Sister Ruth Ann Haunz

with her students. She says, “The feeling that I am accomplishing something with the children, seeing their smile and knowing that they are happy to be here, is what motivates me to volunteer.”

Dare to Care drops off the meals early in the day in containers that keep the food heated. Shirley Bedard, who is 89, was in the kitchen prepping to serve the meal. As she worked on setting out items, she said how blessed she was to be able to volunteer twice a week at



Sister Ruth Ann Haunz laughs with a participant.



Volunteers Ava Metzger and Hillary Pazo Pino of Sacred Heart Academy chat with Sister Ruth Ann Haunz.

her age. She was soon joined by two other volunteers, and they all worked efficiently together to get the serving table ready for the 5:30 p.m. meal. Audrey, a student from John Paul II, says, “I like it because we get special help, and we get to eat!”

Right on the dot at 5:30 p.m., the worktables are cleared. Helpers collect pencils and other items; and students wash up. The dinner on this particular day included chicken gyros, fruit and vegetables, all of which looked delicious.

Before the meal, Sister Ruth Ann, microphone in hand, played a quick recall sort of game, calling each table one by one to answer questions such as, “Add up your fingers and then count how many ears you have. What is the number?” Students were gleefully shouting out answers and clapping for each other. The joy in the room was contagious.

Sister Ruth Ann reflects, “Kid’s Café is a multi-faceted ministry that has blessed my life. I get to work with amazing adult and youth volunteers (about 70 total), and delightful children. Our sessions, three times a week, are high-energy, fun, rewarding and challenging. Kid’s Café has brought many generous people into my life, and they have shown me the face of Jesus. I think, together, we are changing children’s lives while nourishing the body, mind, and spirit.”