

Nettie & Friends: Increasing learning opportunities for students

Written by

Friday, 19 November 2010 14:53



“It tickled when the goat ate food out of my hand.” With wonder in his voice, a young kindergarten student told his Dad about the experience which was part of the first field trip he’d ever taken. Luckily for Dad, he helped chaperone that trip so he could be part of that magical moment for his son.

Food for the goats, chaperones, treats, even the bus ride to the apple orchard came compliments of Nettie & Friends, a small non-profit that works to increase the learning opportunities for students at Maxfield Elementary School and Maxfield Learning Center in St. Paul.

Last year, Learning Center students went to the Horse Expo. That was a chance to come face-to-face with a real live horse. (Those animals are really big, especially when you’re only three feet tall yourself.) Students have built gingerbread houses, carved pumpkins, published the stories they wrote and taken swim lessons. Kindergarten students sewed the cover for a pillow they took home to their families. For any student who needs it, there are warm jackets, snow pants and boots so they can join their classmates on the playground during recess.

Each year Nettie & Friends makes a donation to the school’s cafeteria. They do that so no student ever has to settle for anything less than a hot school lunch. And if a parent who comes to visit school wants to have lunch with their child and can’t afford it, Nettie & Friends will foot the bill.

It began in 2003 when Nettie Monroe, a kindergarten teacher at the Learning Center, was told there was no money in the school’s budget for the milk her students had enjoyed as a classroom treat other years. Monroe set out to solve that problem by making quilted pot holders and selling them at a local restaurant. She sold enough potholders making it possible for all 90 students in the three kindergarten classes to have milk each school day that year. Milk funding was restored, and Nettie moved on to other needs within the school community.

The next year she made more things and made more money. She and the teachers in the

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Learning Center took the kids on field trips, bought them “thinking treats” and stocked the shelves of the Learning Center’s school store with incentives for working hard, completing assignments and following the rules.

Today, Nettie & Friends continues to raise money and build awareness that individuals can help a school and its students, if only they will. When the school decided to host a family math night, Nettie & Friends helped get out the word, via a network of donors and volunteers, that the school needed 250 or so decks of “gently used playing cards”. (Those games improve math, teamwork, and planning, plus it’s a fun thing for families to do together at little cost.) One lady alone found 50 decks she didn’t really need, especially when she learned they would be put to such good use. In all, the school collected over 150 decks of cards, which meant they had to buy many fewer than anticipated.

When a dad was having challenges getting his son to school each morning, Nettie & Friends stepped in with bus passes until the father could get his transportation problem solved.

Each year Abby Lamberton, owner of Borealis Yarns, designs a pattern for a baby blanket. Her customers bring in left over sock yarn; other customers take that yarn and knit the baby blanket. At the annual Nettie & Friends holiday sale, a dozen or so grandmas buy a “one of a kind” blanket for the special child in their lives. In addition, they all know they’ve helped send a bunch of kids go on a field trip, buy supplemental classroom materials, stock the school’s uniform closet, make possible daily treats for 30 children and be part of the *100 Days of School* celebration for kindergarten students.

The Holiday Sale funds the majority of the work Nettie & Friends does all year. It runs through the end of December at the Egg & I East Restaurant on University Avenue in St. Paul every day. Check www.nettieandfriends.blogspot.com for more details.

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