

Lunch Break

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“A lot of our participants need to start on those basic life skills,” said Herdeen. “And then they can grow into and advance their skills.”

With more than 70 volunteer coaches, the program has a range of businesses and trades represented. Many coaches are retirees who come from skilled backgrounds – finance managers, real estate agents, social workers and electrical engineers – bringing with them a wealth of experience.

For example, a volunteer who ran his own business helped a participant apply for and be accepted to form an LLC (Limited Liability Company) so she could start her own business.

“And many of our coaches share similar backgrounds as the participants that they work with,” said Herdeen. “So I think when they match with a participant that they can see themselves in, they build such an incredible relationship.”

Participants, she said, think: “They were in my shoes too and look where they are now. I can do that.”

When Kathy Welch of Rumson semi-retired from her job as executive vice president for a development firm, she offered to volunteer at Lunch Break’s Life Skills Program figuring that her years of business knowledge would come in handy.

“In my mind, I anticipated people coming in and needing help with résumés and looking for jobs and that sort of thing. But it really hasn’t been that at all,” she said. “It’s been much deeper.”

Welch has been coach to three participants and

found each experience fulfilling. “You get to know these people and you really can have an impact on a person’s life by just by being there for them and helping them on their journey,” she said.

Her participants were experiencing homelessness and had other issues they needed help solving. Instead of polishing their interview skills, Welch plunged into a crash course of how to secure housing and researched the various resources that are available for people who are struggling.

“It’s an ongoing relationship,” Welch said of the bond. “You try to help your participant understand the difference between a job and a career. Then try to set them on a path, so they’re not just going to be working a minimum wage job for six months and then move to a different one because they get a 25-cent raise. But to get them to really try to think about why it’s important to stay in a job for a while and the kinds of things you can do to improve your position and how you can move up.”

One of the Life Skills Program’s most celebrated participants is Amanda, who preferred not to use her last name. Amanda came through the Family Promise program, which has now merged with Lunch Break, and Welch has been working with her since October 2019.

Welch’s role involved getting to know Amanda’s personality and making suggestions on what types of jobs might be good for her, helping her apply, then securing transportation to

and from the interviews.

With Amanda, it was the right match. “She happens to be a very positive and warm person,” Welch said.

After working toward and accomplishing several goals, Amanda is now a medical assistant and is getting certified in phlebotomy. She recently purchased a car; Welch helped her with the research process, paperwork, applications and more. She and her children live in a rented home and she is now saving to buy a house.

Welch said she gives as much time as she can to her participants, keeping in mind to set boundaries – such as times of the day to call.

“You just try to be there when they really need you.”

She may offer parental advice or a pep talk or just lend an ear. “Sometimes Amanda just needs to vent. She’s a single mom with five children, some of whom are teenagers,” said Welch, whose own children are in their 20s. “So, when she calls and she’s in that frame of mind, even if I’m eating dinner or watching TV with my husband, I try to take that 15 minutes and just listen to her.”

Through Family Promise, participants can take parenting classes, among other helpful resources.

Amanda’s oldest daughter is now working with a Life Skills coach and has been able to secure a grant to help her in completing a cosmetology certificate. With urging and guidance, one of Amanda’s sons participated in the Alliance for Success program at school and recently applied to the Auto Mechanical Vocational High School. And Amanda’s seventh-grade son, an avid and talented basketball player, now plays with a local basketball team. One

of his biggest supporters is Welch, who brought him to tryouts and helps with transportation.

“Kathy has definitely been there,” Amanda said. “She has been there through every step of the way. Once I got into my own apartment, and I became stable, she tried to help me further my education and even helped my kids get into groups. She’s had a big impact on my progression.”

Amanda said it’s the knowledge, the time and the access to resources that Welch and the program offered her.

She took to heart one of the first things Welch told her. “She said ‘I can help you, but you have to put in the work. I can give you all these resources, but if you don’t do anything with it, then there’s no point.’”

“But I knew where I wanted to be in life,” Amanda said. “I just needed a little help finding resources and just someone being there telling me, ‘You can do this. Calm down.’”

She points out there are mentors and tutors available for kids and teens. “But for adults, I feel a lot of people don’t know that there are resources out there.”

A program like this, she said, is wonderful for someone who wants to “move forward in life.”

For Welch, the role of coach has been rewarding. “It’s incredibly gratifying just to help someone and, in this instance, get to know the whole family,” she said.

She said they’ve moved from helping a mom to helping the children and making sure that their lives are better than their mother’s. “That’s a goal of Amanda’s – to make sure that her children have a better life than she has. So we’re working together. I can help, but she’s really the driver.”

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75 West Front Street Red Bank NJ 07701
732-219-5788 • Fax 732-224-0806
Email editor@tworivertimes.com
Website www.tworivertimes.com

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