

Tutor shares learning with student

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Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

ROCHESTER -- John Fawkes, 88, will tell you straight up -- when he was a young lad, he was a "lousy student."

No problem, the folks at Notre Dame Learning Center told him when he inquired about becoming a tutor -- lousy students make great teachers.

"Adults who struggled have empathy with a child who's struggling today," according to Sister Lorraine Burns, SSND, the center's director.

"There's an awful lot of people out there, that got much more talent than I have, that could easily do this job," Fawkes added, noting he hopes retired teachers might consider tutoring at the center. The NDLC is a ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and offers free math and language-arts tutoring to elementary-school students and adult women.

A parishioner at Holy Apostles Parish on Lyell Avenue, which is located near the learning center, Fawkes learned about the center through a parish bulletin announcement. "I think the Lord is telling me something," he said he remembered thinking.

Volunteering is in his blood, as evidenced by the fact that he's been an usher, bingo worker, parish council member and parish men's club president. So Fawkes decided to lend a hand at the center, he said, noting he's informally tutored his six grandchildren by assigning them math problems.

"The kids told me, 'I used to hate you for that, but I loved it later on when I did well in school,'" Fawkes said.

Although it's been 70 years since he's been in school, tutoring seemed like a good way to stay active, added Fawkes, a World War II naval veteran who worked a number of different jobs before retiring more than two decades ago.

"I utilize my spare time, or I wouldn't have been around this long," he said.

Every Thursday, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., Fawkes meets with Alex McElroy, a third-grade student at Holy Family School on Ames Street.

"He's a good kid -- we talk about TV and baseball," Fawkes said, adding that he helps Alex with his reading lessons. The boy said he enjoyed being tutored by Fawkes.

"He helps with my work and stuff -- phonics," Alex said.

Alex's mother, Ruthie McElroy, said Fawkes' tutoring has had a noticeable effect on her child.

"He's been doing better in school, his teachers are saying," McElroy said.

Helping children and their mothers do better in their lives is the mission of the NDLC, according to Sister Burns. She noted that the NDLC opened March 1, 2004, on the third floor of Charles Settlement House on Parkway. The center currently has one other staff member, Sister Mary Lou Brien, SSND, as well as 15 volunteer tutors serving 29 children and two women. Volunteers include retired teachers as well as high-school students from Aquinas Institute in Rochester, Our Lady of Mercy in Brighton and Bishop Kearney in Irondequoit.

Sister Burns said she and Sister Brien prepare lesson plans for the tutors, who are asked to commit about two hours a week to the center. Some tutors come in about a half hour before a session to prepare, whereas others, like Fawkes, spend time away from the center preparing as well.

"They don't need any basic teaching background, just a love for kids," Sister Burns said of volunteers.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Notre Dame Learning Center needs both tutors and financial donations. For information, call the center at 585/254-5110 or e-mail notredamelc@bluefrog.com.

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