

Celts pitch in to mentor Kennedy Wildcats

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

When Susanne Stefani showed up with a group of McNary High School students to help out with the Kennedy Elementary School Academy of Leadership (KAL) there was one problem: no one was exactly certain what they were expected to do.

"I saw an opportunity to see us further engage our students while at the same time increase our mentor program and community involvement by offering an afterschool opportunity. After floating the idea to some folks in the community we started recruiting mentors and the rest is history," said Jesse Leonard, Kennedy's principal.

During the course of the first hour, the Kennedy students and their assigned mentors got to know each other, played a couple of games and then ate dinner together.

Stefani, an instructional coach at McNary, had floated the idea to the Celtic leadership students. She enticed them by telling them how good it would look on a resume.

"Then we came here and it's not about us at all, it's about making connections with the kids. That's why we keep coming," said Celt Riley

Hamilton.

KAL held its third meeting of the year at the school Thursday, March 4, and it was hard to tell they hadn't been at it for a while.

At the start of the meeting, students and their mentors looked over the goal charts they'd prepared the previous week. It included an assessment by each of the Wildcats' homeroom teachers as to how they were progressing on the goals they'd set for themselves.

"One of my girls goes through a lot at home and it's hard for her to improve at school when there is so much else going on. She had her first review and it wasn't that good. It's eye-opening to see how the different parts of their lives affect them," said mentor Cory Matlock, a McNary student.

After offering some advice and guidance on how to do better the coming week, the students set new goals to work on in the future.

"One of my kids wants to have better behavior this week and she wants to clean her room. So I had her make a list on the back of her paper of steps she could take to do those things," said mentor Sydney Hamilton.

After working with their mentors in small



McNary's Ubaldo Rojas works with a pair of Kennedy students during a meeting of the Kennedy Academy of Leadership.

groups, the whole club heads to the gym from the cafeteria to take part in team-building exercises.

Some mentors, like Enrique Saldana, are drawing on their own experiences, having worked with older students when they were in elementary school.

"I used to have a potty mouth and I needed to be more respectful and my mentor helped me with that, now one of my kids is dealing with the same thing," Saldana said. "I have an older sister, but my mentor was like having an older brother and it's not quite the same thing."

For other mentors, providing guidance to younger students is a wholly new experience.

"I never had a mentor growing up and I thought this would be a good opportunity to give back something I didn't have when I was their age," said mentor Jaret Brown.

Celt Ubaldo Rojas, who is also president of the McNary Latino Club, said he felt a pull to be part of the program.

"I wish I had a mentor like this when I was a little kid and if I can do it for someone else, I'm

going to do it," Rojas said. "I ask them how their day is going and then try to be an older sibling. It's cool to hear what they want to do and answer their questions about high school so they can be good role models and do this when they get to high school."

Getting one-on-one time with students oftentimes struggling in ways others don't perceive has made McNary senior Alicia Capuchine more sensitive to what's happening in her own life.

"One of my girls has an older sister that kind of bullies her. She wants to be better at sharing how that makes her feel, and it's made me treat my sister differently. I ask her how her day was more often," Capuchine said.

As for those worries Stefani had at the start of the first meeting? Well, there wasn't much to be concerned about. At the end of the first hour, one of the Kennedy students came up and asked why every day couldn't be Thursday.

Kennedy's Academy of Leadership is looking for more mentors. The group meets every Thursday from 3:45 to 4:45 p.m. To volunteer, contact the school office at 503-399-3163.

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