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Sunday dinner: feeding a community

Charitable organizations and food pantries compete for Cottage Grove's hungry and manage to fill stomachs but they run things a little differently at Soup's On. And its working.

By Caitlyn May
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Stan approaches the counter, a limp in his step and a smile on his face. He's gotten his four-year chip and he wants to show it off. Noah, no more than eight, drags the back of his hand across his mouth and dumps his plate into the trash, just like he was taught the first time he came here.

There's Michelle and Doris, the younger crew that sits by the front doors and the club of older ladies--a Rosie the Riveter among them--that requests the same table every Sunday. These are the people of Soup's On, a Sunday night community dinner held in the Shepherd room of the Cottage Grove Community Center. "I'm the mom and they're comfortable



here. They know we don't have an agenda," Sharon Jean, founder of Soup's On, said. The program is in its seventh year and Jean still stands guard over her

flock from her spot in the kitchen. She's the boss. And they know it. When talk of starting a soup kitchen for any and

Please see **SUNDAY PG. A8**

Kindergarten

Continued from A1

ask you when there are ten other families around."

Back on the living room floor, Parsons is sitting on the carpet with her shoes off. Lydia and Lydia's mom, Danielle Hirschi, are now comfortable next to her on the ground. Parsons hands Lydia a book of the alphabet that included how to sign it in sign language and the two begin to talk. They go over favorite colors, how many letters are in Lydia's name and Parsons has Lydia sign her "autograph book" that has the name of all the kids from her home visits in it. Through the entire time Parsons is in the home, her focus is locked in on her new student and the family of that student.

"I will not look around [the house]," says Parsons. "I keep my eyes in eye contact with the people the entire time. Very intentional."

This visit is packed with information for everyone involved. Lydia gets to see her new teacher in a comfortable environment while receiving

undivided attention; Hirschi gets to meet her daughter's teacher and is encouraged to ask any and all questions ("no silly questions" Parsons reminds her); Parsons gets to learn about the family while doing some slightly subtle sleuthing of the student's current abilities.

"We do some very covert assessments on the kids... Can you read your name, do you know what it looks like? Do you know the letters in your name? Can you count those letters in your name? Can you write your name?" Parsons explains to me before the visit.

The visit continues and Lydia expresses her excitement for homework, explains how a scar on her left hand can be used to remind her which hand to hold a pencil with, and more excitement at the prospect of having three recesses in one day ("Three recesses?" she cheers. "So one time when recess is over we get another turn and another and another one?")

Parsons then shifts the conversations to Hirschi about logistics of getting to and from school, how to best educate her daughter and any concerns that she may have. With that the meeting concludes; another suc-

cessful home visit.

"I was just telling family and friends from Indiana and Utah [about home visits]. They've never heard of home visits ever. And I love it. I love it," said Hirschi. "Everyone kept saying, 'Why doesn't everyone else do this?' And I was like yeah, spread the word."

The goal of each home visits is to get to each home but if home does not work, or if there is a level of discomfort, then the group can meet on the porch, at a park or if necessary, at school. But the goal, for the third year in a row, is to meet at the future student's home. The home visits at Harrison started three years ago when the shift was made from half-day kindergarten to full-day kindergarten.

"When we were moving into full day we said we want to do this," said Parsons. "We really just looked at what can we do to set the families up... to be successful. We thought that there would be a lot of question or anxiety around kids being in school all day and this would be one way that we would be able to combat that."

The relationships jumped out to a good start but the full-day was too much for these excited

and anxious five-year old kindergarteners.

"Three years ago when we started the full day kids were melting in the afternoon. They were tired, they were hungry. They couldn't make it," said Black.

Since then, Harrison has changed their approach and now utilizes half-days at the beginning of the year to ease these five-year-olds into a full day of school. Last year they had three weeks of half-days and this year they will have two. The kindergarten teachers express that in a perfect world they would like this half-day period until the first set of conferences in mid-October, the teachers are, for the moment, hanging on tightly to what they have.

"Last year was very successful; it was a smooth transition," said Parsons. "It's not the most convenient for families, it isn't and we recognize that. But we are so passionate about the benefit that we are going to be inconvenienced for two weeks but we really feel like this is going to set your student up for success."

The kindergarten classes also start the year a week after the rest of the school in order to give the teachers time to go on these home visits so that they can, like they did this year, meet with every one of the 67 families one-on-one before the school year begins.

"We're really proud of our team for being committed to the home visit model," said Harrison Elementary School principal Heidi Brown. "It's a lot of energy, it's a lot of time, it takes you away from classroom prep a lot; so it's a commitment that they really believe in and we totally support. Home visits are just by and large are just fantastic. All research would show that it builds that relationship and builds community and trust early on. And for kindergarten it's a great place to have that foundation."



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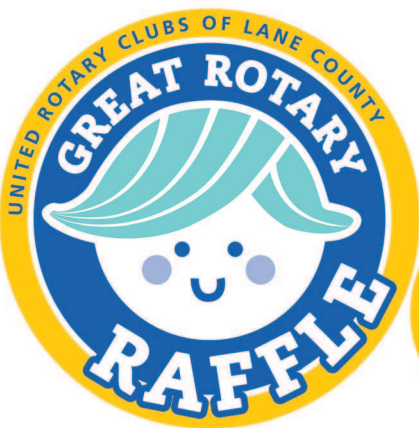


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