TRANSCRIPT

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EPISODE NAME: Everybody Wins! A Reading Mentoring Program

Today on Across the Fence the joy and the importance of mentoring with kids. We are going to learn about where the growth of a highly successful mentoring program called “Everybody Wins Vermont.” Good afternoon and thanks for joining us I am Judy Simpson. A new partnership will help expand the state's largest mentoring program. United Way of Addison County is partnering with Everybody Wins Vermont to develop new reading mentoring programs in Addison County elementary schools. To find out more I'm joined by Abi Sessions who's the former principle and now the Coordinator of Everybody Wins at the Salisbury Community School also with us is Helen Freismuth. Helen is the Co-director of the United Way of Addison County welcome to both of you. Abi tell us a little bit about Everybody Wins Vermont.

Abi.: Everybody Wins Vermont has been in existence for 12 years working in Vermont. Everybody Wins nationally started in 1991 in New York City but it came to Vermont in 2000 with the help of Senator James Jeffords. We're working now in 22 schools and we had 600 mentor pairs as of the end of December. The Salisbury program started in January, and we now have 609 mentor pairs. Six hundred nine pairs up and running counting our new program at the Salisbury Community School.

Judy.: So how does it work the kids meet once a week or twice a week?

Abi.: It's a format we call power lunch. The mentors come during lunchtime, during student’s recess and lunch time and if it’s a working mentor it's often during their own lunchtime from their work. And they meet during that time one-on-one every week and they read together. The mentors choose the books that they know will meet the child's interests or the child can choose a book. In Salisbury Community School we have a librarian who is incredibly supportive so she's made the whole library open and available for the mentors and mentees to choose books from. And they read together.

Helen.: And they play games, talk and share.

Abi.: Right they talk about the kid's life and interests in the books. We have a growing collection of literacy games that they can play too.
Judy.: Nice. Helen why is United Way of Addison County establishing a partnership with Everybody Wins?

Helen.: United Way Worldwide has set a goal to recruit one million reading mentors over the next three years. The reason for that goal is to reduce the high school dropout rate in the country. Here in Vermont were not so concerned about the dropout rate although I found out last year 1300 students dropped out of high school which was really shocking to me. The ability to read proficiently is a critical skill that kids need throughout school. Kids that are not reading at grade level by fourth grade are not likely to catch up over the course of their school life. We're very enthusiastic about this reading program, this mentoring program supplementing the instruction in classroom.

Judy.: That's incredible thing to think about that if the kids are not reading proficiently by fourth grade then they don't make the ground up.

Helen.: By fourth grade students are reading to learn so they're using textbooks using the Internet but in all these mediums they have to be reading and so their reading skills and there interest in reading and their curiosity are really important to move them along.

Judy.: Mentoring does not take the place of classroom instruction.

Helen.: It does not take the place of classroom instruction and we know we have great teachers in all of our schools but it does help students practice skills early reading skills early reading comprehension helps them build content knowledge that helps build their interest and curiosity so it's just as valuable to enhancing a classroom experience.

Abi.: I think having a meaningful adult in your life who models the joy of reading is really important to a child. So the adult is communicating I love to read and I am sharing my love of reading with you. That forms a fundamental positive attitude towards reading which carries a lot of weight.

Judy.: Abi what is some of the history of Everybody Wins?

Abi.: It started as I said in New York City. It's been in Vermont for 12 years. My own personal history with Everybody Wins is that I was a principal for two years in a school in Burlington where Everybody Wins was going strong it was established program. We have about 30 mentor pairs in our school and I can see the joy that is brought to the students and to the mentors who would really look forward to meeting every week.

Judy.: What is involved in being a mentor if someone is interested in participating in this particular program, what kind of a commitment can they expect?

Abi.: You fill out an application and we check references and then you are committed for 1 hour a week. It's that simple. It's that confined. Your contact with your student takes place only during that lunch and recess time at the school. It's a very confined commitment it doesn't take up all your Saturdays. And then we hope you would stay in a relationship with the student as a mentor throughout their elementary school years.

Judy.: The program is called Everybody Wins and we've been talking a little bit about what the students get out of it but what to the mentors get out of it?
Abi.: Mentors say things like this is the best part of my week I can't wait for Everybody Wins day! I will run into some of our former mentors around Burlington and they'll come up to me and say my student is doing so well. It becomes important part of the mentor’s life this relationship.

Judy.: It really makes them feel engaged to I would imagine with the school system and school kids.

Abi.: Right exactly.

Judy.: Let’s touch on some of the new programs at the Salisbury Community School can you tell me a little bit about what's happening with this particular mentor program and the number of volunteers and so forth?

Abi.: We have nine volunteers some are working people some are retired people. Most live in Salisbury one lives in a neighboring town. I think it's only been going for the month of January but I think so far people are really enthusiastic. The kids are enthusiastic. After the first time that the mentor pairs met one of the first graders said to his mentor so what day do we get to do this and the mentor says the Thursdays. And he goes is tomorrow Thursday?

Judy.: It's suddenly the favored day of the week.

Abi.: Is tomorrow Thursday too?

Judy.: Helen why are you starting the program in the first and second grade?

Helen.: As I said earlier children develop their strong interest and skill in reading and it's important for school success in the first and second grade. We want students to get off on the right foot. Our long range outcome is high school graduation and it's important to United Way and to our donors to see results. We feel that starting at this level we'll give us the best results will get students started on the right foot and by fourth grade when students are taking achievement tests we will be able to see progress and track the progress over time. And we know that our donors to United Way are really looking for solutions and looking at results wanting to know the outcomes and how their dollars has helped. United Way is really pleased to be partnering with Everybody Wins. We have a three year agreement to fund new programs in Addison County.

Judy.: Does 1 hour a week really make that big of a difference in a student’s life?

Helen.: It really does. I don't know if you can think back to when you were that age maybe you had a special person in your life. I was very close to my grandmother who didn't live close by but when she came and we read together it was something I would always remember. I think with families being far apart with parents working with grandparents working having a mentor once a week can be a big influence on a child's life.

Abi.: I would say in addition to the activity of reading and how important that is simply the fact that you have the undivided attention of an adult who is special to you for an entire hour a week is big.
Judy.: I didn't think about that but that is huge because usually children if they're part of a family parents are busy doing all kinds of other things and in a classroom the teacher has any number of students so this would be a really big deal.

Abi.: You have someone's undivided whole attention on you for an entire hour.

Helen.: It's special and as I said I think it is rare. Everyone is so busy and so it's an opportunity for kids to broaden their horizons. They're probably meeting with someone that has different interests than they do I think they get a different perspective and respect for different types of people as well.

Judy.: It's also tailored for the student as far as if the student has a particular interest in a subject then that's encouraged.

Abi.: That's right.

Judy.: And also you are talking about literature games as well? I know you had a story about a student who's very interested in nature and science and National Geographic Magazine was a great fit for that, just to be able to talk and converse about what they're seeing in the magazine.

Helen.: The conversation is just as important at as the reading I think. It's developing vocabulary it's developing comprehension skills asking questions being curious. These are all important for reading and pre-reading skills.

Judy.: Is also setting up a bit of a habit for the student as far as getting in the habit of reading on a regular basis?

Helen.: Yes it becomes more of a habit that becomes the love of reading. Reading can be educational you can learn things but it could also be an escape. It can be a wonderful entertainment and I think through this program students learn about all types of reading.

Judy.: It's good to be away from a computer and actually have a book in hand I would think.

Abi.: Definitely.

Helen.: Yes we were talking about that on the way up. The difference between holding a book in your hand and using a computer or E reader. I think this will be a powerful experience for the students especially when these mentoring pairs continue over time.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about that because that's something that is encouraged. That the mentors can come back and follow with the student.

Abi.: One other reason we are starting with first and second grade at Salisbury School is with the hope that the mentor pairs will stay together all the way through sixth grade and what a pleasure that would be for the mentor to watch that student grow. We say they only need during lunchtime but the mentors of the school where I work in Burlington would come to the program so we do it in the school they would come and see their student give a performance or be a part of a singing concert or something and take pleasure in that.
Judy.: If someone's wondering about the power of mentoring I know you shared with us a picture and a note which I think is pretty telling and moving and note that one of the children wrote to a mentor reading with you and being with you and that's what it's about. Abi how does someone become a mentor are there special skills required?

Abi.: The skills are basically a love of kids a love of reading the availability to be present for that one hour once a week and just an enthusiasm to watch a child grow and blossom and share some interests and time together. I can give the contact information. www.ewvt.org Everybody Wins the number is 229-2665 and that's area code 802.

Judy.: Helen maybe you could just talk to us a little bit again about how important it is for kids to have the reading skills that they need?

Helen.: Reading is just fundamental to all learning throughout their life there really encouraging a lifelong learning. We know skills are important but that interest that curiosity the questioning the comprehension all of those things start early. They start with conversations about reading. We're hoping that this program like other programs around the state would be encouraging people encouraging students enhancing classroom activity and getting students off onto the right foot.

Judy.: Maybe you could give some information about United Way and volunteer centers.

Helen.: One way to find a mentoring program if there is an Everybody Wins program in your area then just dial 211. That's United Way's Vermont information and referral system. Just dial 211, there's a person there that can help find a mentoring program or a volunteer program in your area.

Judy.: Abi and Helen thank you so much for being with me today and talking about this program it sounds like everybody wins when Everybody Wins. Thanks a lot I'm Judy Simpson thanks for joining us all see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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