



Howe Helpers

Building Bridges Between Congregations and Schools

On any given school day, 20 classrooms at Howe Elementary School in downtown Green Bay, Wisconsin, will have an additional caring adult, spending one-on-one time with the students of this “inner city” school, a school full of children at risk who need just this kind of attention. Each of these volunteers wears a cross and flame on his or her name tag. The Howe Helpers of First United Methodist Church have provided this kind of help for 11 years, showing kids how to add, subtract, read, write, and love.

The Need

Howe School is located two blocks from First UMC, the oldest United Methodist congregation in Wisconsin at 175 years old. Although “inner city” may seem like a strong term to use in a city of only 100,000, the children of this downtown neighborhood face many of the problems and risks of bigger cities. When the project was first researched in 1990, these were the numbers that faced Howe School: Over 70% of the students qualified for free lunches; 32% of the children

came from single parent families; 40% of the student body were minority students, three quarters of those Hmong and Lao refugees with limited English language skills. In addition, the Howe attendance area has a large proportion of rental housing, and several homeless shelters and transitional living facilities, creating frequent student moves in and out of Howe School. Also, at that time class sizes were often 28 or more students per classroom, and there had to be 30 in a class before an aid was even provided. In the years since then, some things have changed: Hmong refugees have given way to Mexican immigrants, and a government program called SAGE has reduced the teacher to student ratio to 1 teacher for every 15 students in grades K through 2. But the teachers of the school wouldn’t think of giving up what they have gained by having Howe Helpers in their classrooms.

Start Up

The Howe Helper project began in 1990, after several members of First

United Methodist Church, led by recently retired school social worker Mary Metzger, and UMW president Glenda Burdick, met to find a hands-on way they could be of service to the at-risk children of the neighborhood. Their motivation was summed up in the title of the Women’s Division video they viewed at their first gathering: “To Love in Deed.” They wanted to find a way to put the love they had received from God into action for others. The criteria they used for selecting their project were clearly spelled out:

- It would reach out to the neighborhood of the downtown east side of Green Bay
- It would be preventative
- It would be a well-defined smaller project
- It would be researched
- It would fill in a gap in the community otherwise not likely to be filled

They met six times over three months, inviting various school and service agencies from the area, and offering themselves as volunteers. They received the

most enthusiastic response from then principal of Howe School, Steve Kimball. After carefully planning their recruitment and training procedure, they began. Within the year, they had put a volunteer in each of the 6 kindergarten classes, every day for 2½ hours. There are now Howe Helpers in every grade, though the focus continues to be on the younger children.

What A Howe Helper Does

The Howe Helpers meet three times a year for detailed in-service and continuing education, and for an appreciation luncheon. They are trained in practical matters such as where to park, school policies, privacy matters, and who to call for help. They also received training from professionals such as the school district's Child At Risk Coordinator, school social workers, English as a Second Language teachers, even a Sign Language interpreter. But most of their time is put in in the classroom.



Each volunteer is matched with one classroom and teacher, and comes in one day each week for 2 hours and 40 minutes. The goal is to have a Howe Helper in the classroom four days of the week. Kindergarten helpers mostly work one on one with each student, doing specific, teacher-selected activities. Other Howe Helpers' tasks vary with what their class is doing. They may offer additional repetition for a child new to the English language. They may offer a steadying hand on the shoulder of a disruptive student. They may listen to children read or assist with penmanship or math.

Care is taken to place Howe Helpers in the classrooms where they can serve best. Some people, both teachers and helpers, prefer more structure, while some are more spontaneous. Some Helpers like to follow the same group of kids, graduating from grade to grade with them. Others fall in love with an age group, or with the special needs classes. When Howe Helpers have a particular set of skills to offer, they are placed where they can best use those skills. Dave Otto, a retired journalist, led a special newspaper unit in the class where he helps. Stu Smith, a local actor in the advertising business, led a class in a unit on storytelling. His wife, Bev, also an actor, as well as a retired read-

ing specialist and history buff, led a group in researching the history of the school's namesake, Timothy Howe, and preparing a play about him. Art Solie, a retired veterinarian more familiar with cows, finds himself consulted on the snuffles and pregnancies of class guinea pigs. This care in matching needs and gifts is part of the success of the Howe Helpers.

Many Howe Helpers have been coming back for all 11 years, some wanting to work in multiple classrooms. Each year new volunteers join. Last year's new volunteers included the husband of the school board president. Next year one of the new volunteers will be the newly retired kindergarten teacher in whose classroom the first Howe Helpers worked. Most Howe Helpers find themselves drawn into the lives of the kids with whom they work, so that soon they are attending concerts, school picnics, and Chili Bingo night. Said one Howe Helper, "We love being needed by the kids. We all do! That's why we do this!"

Success Stories

There are many ways you could gauge the success of the project. One is by the awards the group has received. The Howe Helpers were recipients of the Golden Rule Award, and the Green Bay Education Association Friend of Teachers Award for Community Involvement. They have also been nominated for other community and national awards. But there are even better ways to see the effectiveness of this program. The first year of the Howe Helpers, Howe School had a class they called "The Tween Class." It consisted of students who had finished kindergarten, but were not quite ready for first grade. After one year with the Howe Helpers, that class was eliminated, and the principal attributed the students' better readiness for first grade to the Howe Helpers. The teachers' response also gives an indication of the value of their work. "They're taken for granted now," Mary Metzger said, who still co-leads the Howe Helpers, along with Glenda Burdick. "But at the beginning, they thought heaven had opened!" Teachers treat these volunteers very well, and they are respected as "pseudo-staff." With the introduction of the SAGE program, and its reduced class sizes, the Howe

Helpers asked last spring if they were still needed. "We were met with an unhesitating and overwhelming, 'We still need you in the classroom.'" said Burdick. The response of the Howe Helpers themselves is also a sign of success. Volunteers come back year after year. Some have taken jobs and stopped, but come back after retirement. Others have moved away, but come back when returning to town. Two Howe Helpers continued to serve after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. Florence Hochtritt, a Howe Helper who lives with chronic pain says, "The more I help, the less I hurt." Florence currently serves as a Howe Helper in three separate classrooms.

Ripples

The connection between First United Methodist Church and Howe School has deepened because of what the Howe Helpers began. The congregation now sends school supplies in the fall, a mitten tree of cold-weather gear at Christmas, and snacks all year round. The summer programs held at Howe School have sent a group to learn and practice gardening skills in First Church's flower garden. When the Howe Neighborhood Family Resource Center started up, and bought and renovated a building next door to the school, members of First Church were instrumental. A member started a program called "Rock and Read," which gets community members involved in reading with students. The impact of the Howe Helpers continues to spread.

This fall, as they head back into the classrooms, the Howe Helpers will continue to love in deed. As they do, they are most proud that they wear the cross and flame on their nametags. They know that the children they serve will always associate that symbol with people who care and give their best. □

Karen Ebert has served as associate pastor of FUMC Green Bay since 1994. She was pleased to find this effective program in place when she arrived. She is also grateful for the Howe Helpers, who have served in the classrooms of her children: Stephan, who is now in middle school, and Julia, who is in third grade at Howe School.

