**Senior Buddies, the Gift of Volunteering**

*Local Elementary School Teacher Credited For Program That Helps Both Seniors & Kids*

Charlie Brooks was a Senior Buddy at Sunrise Park Elementary School. He forged an incredible relationship with many students, especially a student named Molly. Charlie started volunteering at 98 years old and came to classrooms weekly until he was 100. Finally, when it was too difficult for him to volunteer weekly, he had another Senior Buddy, Connie Pacman, drive him to school on occasion to visit the students and Molly. He told Molly “keep reading, be nice to all your friends, and one day you may even be President!” Every week Molly would look forward to Charlie’s visits.

This summer, Molly’s mom received a telephone call from Charlie’s daughter, Leslie Brooks. She informed her of Charlie’s passing and invited her to his funeral. At the funeral, Leslie had Molly stand up and explain the special relationship they had. She went on to explain how he bragged to everyone about “going back to school.” Later, Leslie presented Molly with a gift card to Barnes and Noble. She told Molly that Charlie wanted her to have this so she can keep reading and learning. Charlie’s goal was to instill a love of learning in Molly. Leslie told Molly that she would love to continue in her father’s honor to make sure she continues reading and learning and become her mentor. A beautiful friendship has emerged between Molly and Charlie’s daughter Leslie. Molly is currently in 5th grade and always striving to do her best in honor of her Senior Buddy, Charlie.

Seniors have a vast amount of knowledge and love to share with students. The Senior Buddies Program brings seniors from independent and assisted living communities to volunteer in schools. Sunrise Park Elementary School in Boca Raton has created a unique partnership with a senior living facility that allows ten seniors, ages 80 to 95 to work with students in the classroom. “The seniors come to school so elated and excited to work with students. Once the students see their Senior Buddy walk through the door their eyes light up! They are eager to share what they have learned, whether it is reading a book or an authentic piece of writing. “The students love the extra attention they receive. In return, what the seniors receive in priceless!” explained Sarah Lazarus, founder and program coordinator.

The program was inspired by second grade teacher, Sarah Lazarus, whose mother is currently in an assisted living facility in Miami.  It started as a simple idea a few years ago, and is now a full program for the children of Sunrise Park Elementary. Mrs. Steiger, principal of Sunrise Park Elementary, stated “This is an amazing program! It is a win-win as it gives our local seniors the opportunity to connect to their community. The Senior Buddies enrich our learning environment by providing our students with small group and individualized instruction. The relationships that have been established through this wonderful volunteer organization are truly priceless!”

For more information about the program or to schedule an interview with Mrs. Lazarus, please call Sunrise Park Elementary School at [561.477-4300](about:blank) or e-mail [sarah.lazarus@palmbeachschools.org](mailto:sarah.lazarus@palmbeachschools.org).

If you have questions about volunteering in the School District, please contact Debi Elfen at [Deborah.elfen@palmbeachschools.org](mailto:Deborah.elfen@palmbeachschools.org) or 561 434-8789.

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