

Highview volunteer leader: 'I'll be 80 years old and they'll be telling me to leave'



The Random Acts of Kindness Committee front row from left: Amy Thompson, Greta Lozada, Hannah Gombold, Bianca Ballwanz, Emily Thokmorton-Bates, Carrah Faggett and Emily Berner. Back row from left: Te'jah Fields, Makayla Neumann, Elizabeth Aldridge-Mueller, Prisilla Rivera, Bona-Czech), Becky Snyder, Sarah Nelson and Emily Nelson. - *Submitted photo*

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SHOREVIEW — Of everyone in the Mounds View School District, perhaps no one is more frustrated with school budget cuts than Highview Middle School's Sandy Bona-Czech.

She values being part of students' daily lives so much, she said, that she would work as a school paraprofessional for free.

"I would be devastated if I lost my job because I love it — not because of monetary reasons," Bona-Czech said. "I would do this even if it wasn't funded."

Her passion as parent volunteer coordinator has brought her in contact with many students over her eight years at Highview. To her, few things are as important as access and opportunities for students in public schools.

"If politicians could spend one day (at Highview) they would see how critical it is to have well-rounded kids," she said. "I don't think they are trying to target schools as much as just not knowing their importance."

Funding or no funding, Bona-Czech provides a fountain of opportunities for students at Highview. She hosts a book club, a Thursday night mentor program and a Wednesday night student volunteer committee called Random Acts of Kindness (RAK).

Through RAK, Bona-Czech encourages students to raise others students' self-esteem through secret thank you messages and treats for those observed doing good deeds at school. Members are also encouraged to volunteer their time, and have so far helped groups including Families Moving Forward, Feed My Starving Children and the Ronald McDonald house.

At the group's March 25 meeting, students brainstormed a way to help patients at Minnesota Children's Hospital.

"I like the kids to take control of project ideas," Bona-Czech said of the group. "I'll give them a whiteboard marker and facilitate for kids to speak. It's something I try real hard at, to give them opportunities to see how they can make a difference."

In addition to RAK, the lifetime New Brighton resident has helped attract more students to the library through her book club, Sandy and Friends. Currently, her club is comparing the novel "Twilight," to its film counterpart.

"Kids who would never come in are now asking me about books I can recommend that are similar," Bona-Czech said, who spends most of her day in the school's media center.

She makes sure to keep updated on what students are reading the most. She loves mystery, but the self-described "book nut" also brings home dragons and wizards to stay well-informed.

"I take home some more male-oriented books to get energized about them," she said. "Graphic novels are grabbing the attention of kids now. It's just great how it has brought in kids to try reading."

Through her mentor group, she helps students who lack organizational skills learn through older peers.

"One time a young lady asked me why I'm not a teacher," Bona-Czech recalls. "One of the other girls answered, 'she teaches love.' If the school gets nothing else from me, I hope that I make a conscious effort to say something positive about everyone who walks in the building."

Her work at Highview has gained the praise of colleagues, including Highview Principal Ramona Fadness.

"She's an expert at relating with students and building good relationships," Fadness said. "She's very positive and approachable, but she can take command if she needs to direct a group."

Mounds View District spokesperson Rachel Gutierrez said Bona-Czech "makes a difference in the schools, as well as the community."

Bona-Czech is currently working on organizing a new musical at her school after doing past

productions including "Annie" and "Willy Wonka Junior."

"Sandy tries to get all the students involved in her musicals," Fadness said. "She keeps their interest and they feel valuable."

Outside of school, Bona-Czech has coached lacrosse, baseball, track and volleyball.

The mother of three, whose children all passed through the halls of Highview, said she will continue to be involved in some form at Highview for years to come.

"I'll be 80 years old and they'll be telling me to leave," she said. "If the budget cuts get bad, I will just do the job for free."