

# Investment of hour a week pays big dividends for kids

By Jill Ragar Esfeld

**K**ANSAS CITY, Kan. — “I always tell people that Learning Club is why I love Mondays,” said Holy Trinity, Lenexa, parishioner Kelsey Finley. “I genuinely look forward to going each week and working with the kids.”

Her brother Chris Nill agrees.

“The first time you go is for you,” he said. “After that, you don’t think twice about the why.”

“You know you’re a part of something much bigger.”

Kelsey and Chris meet their dad Stan Nill at St. Margaret’s Community Center in Kansas City, Kansas, every Monday night.

There, the three Holy Trinity parishioners tutor underprivileged children who live in St. Margaret’s Park, an affordable housing community in Kansas City, Kansas.

It is one of five sites where volunteer tutors donate an hour of their time each week to give disadvantaged children a hand up toward success.

The results are remarkable.

A former student told executive director Brad Grabs, who founded the organization in 2002 in the former Blessed Sacrament School building in Kansas City, Kansas, “Learning Club has been a good influence in my life, and it’s helped me stay on a good path.”

“I think the impact we have is really profound,” said Grabs, a member of Our Lady & St. Rose Parish in Kansas City, Kansas. “It’s really a very direct ministry.”

“The volunteer tutors can make a significant, long-lasting impact on the life of a child.”

## Unlikely friendships

Most Learning Club volunteers are from affluent neighborhoods in the archdiocese, and Grabs sees them making what he calls “unlikely friend-



ships” with the children they tutor.

That’s his term for a friendship between two people who, superficially, seem to share nothing in common.

“But they begin to realize how much they have in common in terms of things that matter,” he explained. “They form a human connection that’s not based on where you’re from or what you do or who you know.”

“I think a relationship like that is really life-giving.”

Through his volunteer experience

## IN A FLASH

Stan Nill quizzes Mykel with flash cards during a tutoring session at St. Margaret’s Community Center in Kansas City, Kansas.

with Learning Club, Stan Nill has come to see the children he works with as no different from his own.

“It just reminds me that, just like my own kids, they are beautiful creations from God and deserve every opportunity that other children enjoy,” he said.

His son sees opportunity as the key

component of the equation.

“Everyone grows up with the same ambition and drive to be great and to succeed,” said Chris Nill.

“Life circumstances change that drive for some at varying points in life,” he added, “but with the same opportunities, these underprivileged kids can be just as successful as anyone else.”

The Learning Club is in need of more volunteers wanting to develop these unlikely friendships — especially now that it’s expanding into Missouri and hoping to reach out to more marginalized children in Kansas.

“We’re looking to partner with some other organizations to find other kids,” said Grabs. “The KCK school district says they’ve got about 1,400 kids at any time who are homeless.

“We’d like to reach out to kids like that.”

## Just be a parent for an hour

One of the most satisfying aspects of volunteering with Learning Club is being part of such an organized, supportive program.

“It is a well-run organization with solid leadership,” said John Cotter, a member of St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Leawood.

“It will give you an opportunity to live your faith and make a positive difference in the life of a child,” he said.

Tutors work one-on-one with school children through fifth grade.

Volunteers attend a short training session to help them get comfortable with the tutoring process, which essentially involves being a parent for an hour — helping a kid with homework.

“You don’t have to have a teaching background or be an academic whiz to volunteer,” said Cotter’s wife Kelly, who also tutors. “If you care for children and are willing to give your time, everything else comes naturally.”

And don’t worry if your math skills are subpar.

“There is always someone to help when you don’t know the answer,” said Finley.

Indeed, Learning Club staff is always on hand to make sure the session runs smoothly.

“We really want to respect people’s time, especially volunteers that come,” said Grabs. “The tutoring session is about an hour; the kids come early for a snack and that adds on about 20 minutes.”

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Kids bring their homework or do lessons provided by The Learning Club.

Tutors help and, in the process, experience a connectedness that makes the effort worthwhile.

Holy Trinity, Lenexa, parishioners Larry and Kathy Ryan volunteer together and enjoy getting to know the children personally.

“A great reason to volunteer at The Learning Club is the hour spent with a child — talking with them, asking about their day, showing them that you do indeed care about them and their family,” said Kathy.

The couple also sees benefit in the time spent together.

“It is something for my wife and me to talk about,” said Larry. “It has added a richness to our relationship.”

## Getting to know you

Many children stay in the program with the same tutor for months or years, so relationships are formed.

“As long as the tutor and student have a connection and it’s working,” said Grabs, “we try to keep them together.”

“Seeing the faces of the children,” said Chris Nill, “when you show up for a session. They make you feel so good when they make eye contact and light up after seeing you.”

For the last six months, John Cotter has been working with a young boy named Ishmail.

His favorite part of his tutoring session is seeing Ishmail’s smile when they meet.

“I feel like tutoring is one way to bring my faith to life,” he said. “My relationship with him grew slow but steady as we developed a trust and understanding of one another.

“I am excited he is happy to see me,

as well as the fact that he is there to continue to learn and develop.”

Finley has been working with the same student for more than two years.

“My first day as a tutor was one of her first days coming to Learning Club,” she said. “I remember she was shy, quiet and behind in school.

“She struggled with math. And because English was not her first language, reading was also a challenge.

“Today, she’s like an entirely different girl. She can rattle off times tables, read chapter books and has made incredible strides, both academically and socially.”

## Giving it to God

Mentors are important to these children because their lives outside of The Learning Club can be hard.

It’s important for them to be able to share their difficulties, and volunteers understand that.

“I enjoy exchanging what has gone on in our day,” said Stan Nill. “That’s always interesting and often sad.

“I most love to encourage the children to dream of a brighter future by setting goals and working hard to achieve them.”

Volunteers often feel helpless to solve the hardships their students present and so each Learning Club session ends in a circle of prayer after the children have gone home.

“There are a lot of things that are out of our control,” said Grabs. “And it’s a great exercise in faith to just turn over that concern and care we have for our students to God.”

And those prayers often go beyond the circle.

“I truly see God in these kids every chance I get to work with them,” said Chris Nill. “I pray for them each week in Mass as well.”

Volunteers appreciate the opportunity The Learning Club gives them to live their Catholic faith.

“I have been truly blessed in my life through God’s grace — not by my own doing,” said Kelly Cotter. “The children who are served by The Learning Club live and attend school in impoverished neighborhoods through no fault of their own.

“As a Catholic and a Christian, I am called to serve those who are less fortunate.

“Volunteering at The Learning Club is just one way I can be like Christ to others.”