

NEIGHBORS

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Janitors run job program

By RUTH OTTERSON
Of Middleton

CROSS PLAINS — Park Elementary School custodian Peanuts Esser doesn't want a standing ovation, a ticker-tape parade, or any other fanfare for running a summer Employment and Training Program for low-income or disabled teenagers. But he deserves one.

For 25 years, Esser and co-worker Dan Ripp have gone beyond their custodial duties to help two or three teenagers each summer learn basic maintenance skills such as buffing and stripping floors, cleaning, vacuuming, painting, washing and waxing.

Students work four days a week, six hours a day, for minimum wage. Esser and Ripp supervise the work.

Although they have had no formal training to work with students who have special needs, the two custodians have enjoyed a great deal of success doing so. All 34 of the students who have completed the program have since obtained full-time jobs.

Joan Sanzen of Cross Plains saw dramatic changes in her son after he began working with Esser. Ben Sanzen, a student at Middleton

High School with a mental disability, needed help staying on task and mastering basic skills. As Ben became proficient in a number of skills, his confidence level dramatically increased.

"What he has given Ben is invaluable," Joan Sanzen said. "He never would have made it this far if it hadn't been for Peanuts."

Sanzen wishes more students could participate in vocational programs such as the Employment and Training Program. Federal funding is based on adult unemployment rates, which means Dane County, with its low unemployment, does not receive as much money as other areas.

Esser has found that running a successful program takes a great deal of patience. "The students come to us with a variety of personalities and levels of expertise," he said.

Esser and Ripp use a gentle, but firm approach. Once a student masters a task, the custodians assign the task again to build confidence.

"The feeling of accomplishment is one of the biggest things we have to deal with," Esser said.

"You also have to see the humor in things. They're going to make mistakes. Boy, are there mistakes!

But what you have to do is concentrate on what they do well and let the mistakes fall by the side."

Esser has worked with at least two students every summer for 25 years, but never more than three.

"If I hear of a child with a special need, I may call the family to suggest they be part of the program," he said. "It's up to the family to discuss it and decide if it's in the best interest of the student."

Esser and Ripp enjoy seeing students blossom over the summer. At first, students feel intimidated and don't utter a word. However, after they receive their first paycheck, they're eager to tell what they plan to do with the money.

Esser encourages students to place some of their earnings in a savings account and to set savings goals.

The custodians feel good about the success they have had with the program.

"We have a good relationship with students," said Esser. "In fact, it isn't uncommon for them to drop by the house, or to be in contact over the holidays."

To Esser, helping young people is the natural thing to do. "We see a need, and we go for it," he said. "Parade or no parade."



PHOTO/Joseph W. Jackson III

Rod Esser shows Ben Sanzen how to work efficiently with a floor buffer. Esser is better known as "Peanuts," a nickname he has had since he was a child growing up on a farm near Cross Plains. A neighbor, the late Charles Adler, observed that Rod was small in stature and had peanuts in his pocket, and called him Peanuts. Before long, everyone else was too.