

Habitudes Underway at Rome Middle School



Just after lunchtime last Tuesday, community leaders packed the front lobby of Rome Middle School carrying bags of goodies for the first Habitudes lesson of the year. All sporting brand new red t-shirts provided by the school system, volunteers were led to classrooms by RMS Leadership students where teachers awaited with their smart boards filled with Habitudes materials for the 2018-19 school year.

Habitudes is a research-based character building program developed by Dr. Tim Elmore that focuses on the qualities of effective leaders. Dr. Elmore is the founder of Growing Leaders where he uses motivational speaking and literature he has penned to inspire others to become better listeners, more emotionally connected to their peers and more open to the world around them. As a world-renowned expert on Generations Y and Z, Rome City Schools has chosen his lessons as a way to improve overall school culture.

All volunteers were assigned student groups they will speak with once a month for the entire year. Each lesson is roughly 45 minutes long and each lesson provides a visual element used to drive home a central idea. This month's lesson was about being a host verses being a guest. Following the curriculum laid out by Habitudes organizer and Community Relations Coordinator for Rome City Schools, Julie Smith, 37 pastors, law enforcement officers, educators, business people and other community members gave examples of how to be more assertive when hosting others. Also, the lesson drove home the goal of being a host in every social situation, so that others feel more comfortable when forming relationships.

Cheryl and Sarah Huffman, new mother-daughter Habitudes volunteers, said that they enjoyed their time with the kids during the lesson. "I heard about Habitudes from a friend who worked at Rome

Middle School last year," said Sarah. "I was looking for a way to get involved in the community and I have always had a passion for helping kids. This was the perfect opportunity for me."

Sarah, who works for the City of Rome, went on to say that she used the example of going to birthday parties to explain what being a good host was all about. "I think that I was able to learn things from the lesson as well. Helping the students has helped me, because I use the tools in the book with the people I work with. They will work, if we can encourage the kids to apply the lessons to their lives," she said.

Cheryl, Sarah's mother, is a former Rome City Board of Education member and she heard about the Habitudes program last year. This year, she decided that she would not let the opportunity pass again after reading about the need for volunteers in our local newspaper. "I thought it would be great for me to volunteer now because I have so much more free time," Cheryl smiled. "After reading the lesson and reviewing the material I wanted to impress upon the students the importance of being a host. So, I baked cookies and offered the kids a cookie and a napkin when they came in. I wanted to serve each student at their place to relate to the images outlined in the book."

"I am thrilled about how Habitudes turned out today," said Dr. Christy Epps, "and our numbers have increased significantly since last year. Our kids are organized according to their passion projects, and we have also paired our volunteers up with students who share common interests with the adults. Our teachers and our students are very excited about the groups this year. The purpose is to provide advocates for our students inside and outside of the classroom. We want to build the relationships with our students in the community as well."

Smith said that she is also pleased with the outcome of the first lesson and she has plans to build the program, hopefully offering it to more students. "I am so excited about the cross sections of community members we have and about the strong male role models," she said. "Volunteers like Scott Thompson, who is a local musician; Dave Roberson, a Floyd County Sheriff's Officer; Ghee Wilson, with the GBI; and Joe Costolnick are all new to Habitudes and folks who I think our children can learn a lot from. These gentlemen can also help to drive home the lessons through their experiences."

When looking for members of the community she said have a "high EQ" or "Emotional Intelligence Quotient", Smith thought that musicians and law enforcement officials are good at connecting those visual elements that Habitudes leans heavily on for lessons.

"It was important that we put different faces in front of the kids, not just business people," said Kristen Thornante, System Social Worker for Rome City Schools. Thornante worked with the first group of Habitudes volunteers and she is also excited about the growth of the program in only one year's time. "For example, it is so important for our students to see law enforcement as a resource and not a threat. We need to build those strong relationships with our students and it all starts with trust."

Smith has a few goals for Habitudes. "I want to have a waiting list of volunteers and we hope to implement the lessons in our new Sixth-grade STEM Academy. Habitudes is such a great way to build better students and better people, so getting them into the program earlier can make the transition to high school much easier," explained Smith. "We had eight volunteers return from last year, so growing that number is definitely a priority for Rome City Schools."