

Giving to Students

By: Andrea E. Garcia
Vacaville Magazine

They say a teacher can help build a student's self-esteem, and it's true. Anyone who has seen a foreign child learn a second language, carrying the burden of translating for the family, knows the difference a teacher can make in their life.



Rob Salmon, a 1979 graduate of Fairfield High School, knows this. It was evident the day he revisited his alma mater last spring, as he stood firm with his eyes welled up while watching a video presentation featuring students. But it wasn't just any video. And they weren't just any students.

They were a group of graduates who were able to attend colleges, such as U.C. Berkeley, UCLA, Sacramento State, and Solano Community College, in part by the Fairfield High School Staff Scholarship. The endowment fund has helped more than 50 students reach their potential and is one that Salmon has supported financially for seven years anonymously.

Well, anonymous until now.

It was 47-year-old Salmon and his wife Patty who made the primary donation in 2000 through a fund held at the Solano Community Foundation and have since donated thousands each year to support these selected students during college – students who may fall short of the top grades but rank high with confidence and drive. Through contributions and earnings, his scholarship fund totaled more than \$580,000 by the end of 2007.

That was his goal when the fund was created, to show what can happen when teachers make a difference and the benefits the students receive. And it's his way of helping teachers help students.

But this story isn't about him, he said, nor does he want it to be. It's about the teachers who influence the students, the ones who build self-esteem and leave an impact in their minds. Teachers like Vacaville's Patrick Carter.

For more than three decades, Carter has recognized the potential in each of his students at Fairfield High School. And every day, even the most trying ones, he finds the spark that leads his students in the direction of success.



“It’s not about me, it’s about them,” said the English teacher with a steady gaze. “I’m the facilitator. I can give them the help and motivation, but it has to come from within them. When I see that creativity, I feel gratified for the positive outcome.”

It’s slightly after 3 p.m. on a January school day, and the cold air grips the myriad students on campus. Some stand impatiently by the front doors as they wait for a ride. Others, perhaps considered the lucky ones, proudly drive off in their second-hand cars.

But the school day continues for Mr. Carter. In the middle of the campus, in one of the portables used as a classroom, he’s planning the next day’s lesson for the 150 students who frequent room K-15 daily. Tomorrow they’ll discuss poetry.

For the past 35 years, Mr. Carter has been at Fairfield High School, having taught about 5,000 students during this time. He never chose to leave the school and even declined transferring to another. He likes this school, and enjoys being with his students.

“I’ve had some students come back and tell me the good things they’ve done with their lives and it’s great to hear,” he said. “It’s all very exciting.”

One of his students was Lance Morrison, a 6-foot 5-inch tall water polo player who Mr. Carter said “worked very hard to succeed in class” to earn a FFH Staff Scholarship. And he did, graduating in 2007 with a 2.9 GPA and garnering a scholarship of \$2,500.

Morrison knows he didn’t have the best grades but he tried, he admitted. Then again, he didn’t have the best situation growing up.

Morrison was just 10 when his father left the family, a moment he describes as “horrible and shocking.” He remembers how he always wanted to play ball or go fishing with his dad, as most other boys do with their fathers. But that didn’t happen once his father left, he said, and it’s clear his father’s departure left more than an empty seat at the dinner table. It left a vacancy in his heart that took years to mend.

“I had a lot of anger problems, was an angry child and got in trouble a lot in school. I was definitely going down the wrong road,” he recalled. Silence embraces him for a moment, as if stepping back in time. “My mom didn’t want the divorce . . . it hurts now to even think about it.”

He continues to talk like a man with a lifetime of experience, reflecting on the pain he endured as a child, the years of financial burden and the struggle to calm his raging soul.

But he found solace during a church camp in his freshman year, he said. And it was then Morrison decided to turn his life around and grow up, letting go of the pain that held him back for so long.

His motivation was stirred further after meeting Mr. Carter in English class, who unknowingly helped in Morrison's journey – an act of which Morrison will always remember.

“He's a big motivator, talked about colleges and was the only teacher I talked to about water polo,” Morrison said. “He understood that I was serious and was interested in sports and athletic success. He kept me going.”

Morrison now attends Santa Rosa Junior College and, in addition to his studies, trains full time with the water polo team. Last year, they took third place in the water polo state competition. This year, Morrison said, they're going for first.

These are the students whose lives Salmon wants to impact, the ones he doesn't know, the ones who have a story to tell. They are the ones who, even for a moment, had a teacher believe in them, building their self-esteem.

“Seven years later it is rewarding to know the teachers of Fairfield High School, like Pat Carter, fully embrace the scholarship fund and use it to help make a positive impact on a student's success in life,” he said. “It's an incredibly good feeling.”

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