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Nonprofit makes sure every SCPS staff member is appreciated

By Ashley Miller The Northern Virginia Daily
Aug 15, 2023

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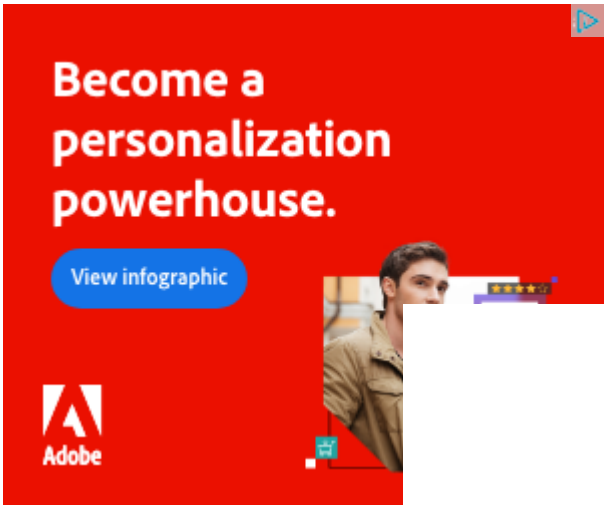


Debbi Rauhala, a special education teacher, serves herself from Monday’s taco bar provided by the nonprofit Just Because.
Ashley Miller/Daily

QUICKSBURG — On Monday, 75 teachers and support staff at Mountain View High School were surprised with lunch provided by local nonprofit Just Because ahead of the upcoming school year as a show of appreciation for all they do.

“It’s rewarding,” said Karen Caspersen, the nonprofit's founder. “If we can give the teachers a little something to remind them that they matter and spread a little kindness, we’ve done our part.”

The nonprofit, which launched five years ago, has grown tremendously. The organization provides quarterly goodie bags to teachers and support staff across Shenandoah County Public Schools, making a difference one smile at a time.



The luncheon, which was one of nine, was made possible by a $1,500 grant Just Because received from the United Way of Northern Shenandoah Valley earlier this year. Caspersen said the nonprofit was pleased when it learned of the grant and worked diligently through the application process.

Special education teacher Debbi Rauhala said she’s been receiving the goodie bags since the nonprofit's founding in 2018.

“It’s really nice to know that there are other professionals and people in our community that recognize what we do,” Rauhala said. “I don’t want to say that we deserve it, but you know, in a way we do. There are struggles we face as teachers and it’s nice to know that they care and are willing to put some little token of appreciation and love in our boxes.”

Knowing that there are organizations and businesses across the county that even remember staff is incredible to Kim Eastep.

“It doesn’t have to be much,” the special education teacher said. “Our jobs are difficult too and that sometimes we too need that extra support just as much as our students do.”

On a bad or even good day, Eastep said if there’s chocolate in her box, she knows things are going to be okay.

As a retired teacher, volunteer Jonathan Nateghi-Asli said the day before students return to the classroom can be the most stressful. Being able to sit down and enjoy a nice meal is the pick-me-up they need.

“It’s genuine,” he said. “It’s hard for teachers and support staff. I mean, the pandemic was hard. School in general is difficult for teachers. Boundaries have changed.”

Nateghi-Asli, who is running for Shenandoah County School Board District 2, said that the tiny moments of recognition not only bring joy but bring individuals together. He said now more than ever it’s time to end the divide and work together.

Job coach Nancy Liskey said attending the luncheon is a nice pick-me-up. It was a happy surprise to first-year staff member Emma Dulin.

Dulin, an 11th and 12th grade guidance counselor, admitted she knew little about the nonprofit but was encouraged to learn about an organization that was supporting teachers and staff through a simple act of kindness.



“It’s wonderful and amazing to get any sort of appreciation,” Dulin said.

Like many of her fellow staff members, Spanish teacher Meredith Zirkle has found goodie bags in her mailbox. While standing in line waiting to serve herself, Zirkle said the simple act shows that teachers and support staff mean something to the community.

“In a world where it’s sometimes difficult for teachers to receive that recognition — it’s nice to get little goodies every now and then that remind us that we do mean a lot to them and our community.”

For Zirkle, who has been teaching for 26 years, the kindness is well appreciated but she takes it to another level. When she receives pencils, she puts them in her pencil cup on her desk and shares the tissues she's gifted in hopes that the act of kindness can be passed on to another.

"While it's nice to have those little things, I have students that don't," Zirkle said. "I have to have things for my kids too."

Staff of Mountain View High School said some of their favorite items over the years have been the packs of acetaminophen, water bottles decorated in colorful art, yummy snacks including chips and, of course, the chocolate.

Covering the tables in the high school cafeteria were placemats designed and colored by assisted living members and children. Powerful reminders were written on many of the placemats encouraging staff to aim for the moon and that a simple smile holds a lot of joy.

A taco bar and dessert table allowed staff to enjoy a few minutes of downtime as they prepared for the first day back to school on Tuesday. Laughter could be heard in the background as they enjoyed mingling among themselves. Door prizes were awarded and messages of thanks and well wishes were shared.

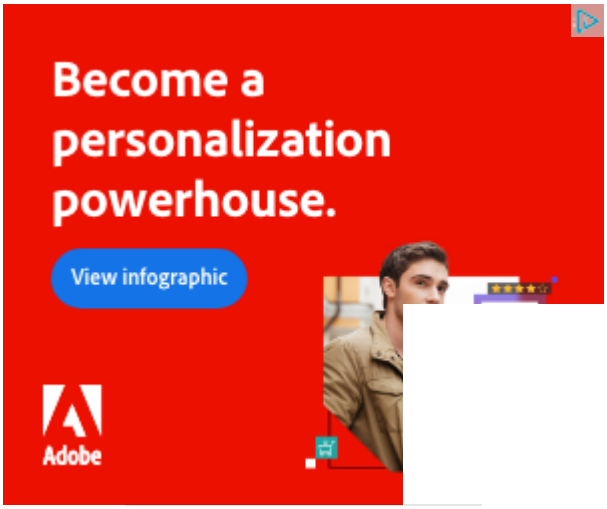
Rebecca Gleske said because teaching is such a large career across the board, it's hard to be recognized. For the science teacher it's a cheerful moment when she notices the goodie bag in her box because she realizes her impact matters.

Just Because will finish up its special luncheons by the end of August. Caspersen noted that the nonprofit hosted a separate event for the district's transportation department.

What the future of the nonprofit for the county holds, Caspersen is unsure. Looking back five years, she said she had no idea the nonprofit would be where it is today. Starting with goodie bags and moving on to hosting luncheons, she said her hope is to offer something at the end of the school year to celebrate staff accomplishments.

Looking around the room, Liskey said she wants volunteers of the nonprofit to know that she really appreciates their recognition.

"It's nice to be thanked — just because."



— Contact Ashley Miller at amiller@nvdaily.com