The Heart of STAIR: A Conversation with Site Leader, Sandi Soucy

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As STAIR celebrates its 20th anniversary, I sat down with Georgetown East Site Leader Sandi Soucy to learn what inspires her commitment to children, volunteers, and the mission of STAIR. What I discovered was not simply the story of one Site Leader, but the heart of STAIR itself.

"I believe STAIR found me."

Those were among the first words Sandi Soucy shared during our conversation.

After careers as a cartographer and a nurse, Sandi was searching for a meaningful way to continue serving others. A Facebook post about STAIR led her to Georgetown East Elementary School, just five minutes from her home. She answered the call, never imagining it would become what she now calls her true calling.

Today, as she begins her tenth year with STAIR—six years as a tutor and now her fourth year as Site Leader—Sandi still smiles and says, "I believe STAIR found me."

At the heart of every successful STAIR site is a dedicated Site Leader. While tutors help children become stronger readers, Site Leaders quietly bring the mission to life. They build relationships, support volunteers, partner with school staff, communicate with families, coordinate with STAIR staff, and create an environment where every child feels welcomed, encouraged, and ready to succeed. Having served as a Site Leader myself, I know this role is about much more than organization. It is leadership rooted in relationships. That is exactly how Sandi leads.

"I give it all I've got," she told me.

As I listened to Sandi, one thing became unmistakably clear. She celebrated STAIR before she celebrated herself.

She reflected on STAIR's 20-year journey, praised the dedicated STAIR staff, and spoke enthusiastically about the new curriculum, describing it as engaging, well organized, and user friendly for both tutors and students. She believes it allows tutors to spend less time preparing lessons and more time building meaningful relationships with children.

She also spoke with deep appreciation for her Co Site Leader, Nancy O'Brien, a retired middle school educator with 30 years of experience, describing her as energetic, dependable, and an invaluable partner. Together with a team of phenomenal tutors and the support of Georgetown East Elementary School, they create a welcoming environment where children can thrive.



Sandi believes STAIR succeeds because of its strong partnership with Georgetown East Elementary School. Administrators, teachers, counselors, and staff welcome the program as part of the school community, creating an environment where children, volunteers, and families can flourish.

Behind the scenes, Sandi keeps her tutor team connected through a weekly newsletter filled with updates, encouragement, and appreciation. She also creates monthly themes that keep STAIR fresh, fun, and engaging. She believes every child learns best when learning is joyful.

One partnership Sandi especially values is STAIR's Big Red Van, which provides free transportation home for students after tutoring. Funded through the generosity of a dedicated donor, the van removes one of the biggest barriers many families face, getting children home safely after the program. "The children simply love the Big Red Van."

For Sandi, every detail matters because every child matters. During April's Earth Day celebration, every student proudly wore gardening gloves purchased by Sandi before heading outside to clean up around the school, plant seeds, and journal their progress. As I listened to Sandi describe the day, I realized this was about much more than gardening. Just like the seeds they planted, the children were learning that with care, encouragement, and someone who believes in them, they too can grow and flourish.

On graduation day at Georgetown East Elementary School, as Sandi's former student prepared to leave for middle school, he found Sandi, wrapped her in a huge hug, and said, "I wanted to thank you because you helped me."

To celebrate STAIR's 20th birthday and the end of the school year, students gathered for The Big Birthday Party, inspired by The Best Birthday Ever. It was more than a celebration. It was Sandi's way of reminding every child that they are seen, valued, and worth celebrating.

That same spirit extends beyond the classroom. When Georgetown East librarian Mrs. Green was expecting a baby, the students created handmade baby cards decorated with pink hearts, and the tutors joined together with a gift. It was a simple act of kindness that reflected the caring community Sandi works so hard to create.

Sandi's commitment extends beyond the school day. Married for 52 years, the mother of two and grandmother of four, she and her husband have embraced STAIR as a family commitment, generously supporting the Georgetown East program in many ways. Her granddaughter, a junior at Annapolis High School, recently served as a guest reader. She wanted to experience the program her grandmother speaks about with such joy.



Sandi's granddaughter was a guest reader for STAIR students at Georgetown East.

Then I asked Sandi about the moment she has never forgotten. She smiled and told me about a student who had little interest in reading when they first met. Week after week, they read together, and little by little his confidence grew. On graduation day at Georgetown East Elementary School, as he prepared to leave for middle school, he found Sandi, wrapped her in a huge hug, and said, "I wanted to thank you because you helped me." For Sandi, that simple moment affirmed everything she believes about STAIR.

One caring adult can change the course of a child's life.

As our conversation came to a close, I realized that STAIR's greatest work begins long before a child opens a book. It begins when someone believes in a child, encourages them, and faithfully shows up, week after week.

Behind every successful STAIR site is a caring team led by dedicated Site Coordinators, supported by faithful tutors, school partners, generous donors, and committed volunteers who believe every child deserves the opportunity to succeed.

As STAIR celebrates 20 years of changing lives, Sandi's story reminds us that our greatest work has never been about books alone. It has always been about people. One child. One caring adult. One life at a time. **That is the heart of STAIR**