

Oasis Project growing at Kettle Moraine schools



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(Photo: Carol Spaeth-Bauer/Now media group)

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At the age of 66 (going on 40 as she says) Jan Frans is pumped. The retired Kettle Moraine Middle School teacher's [Oasis Project](#) took off faster than she could have imagined and now the project is reaching under-resourced students in two additional Kettle Moraine elementary schools this year.

Starting the tutoring project in September 2015 at Cushing Elementary School, about 30 Oasis Project tutors, all retired or working teachers, now work with under-resourced students at Dousman Elementary and Wales Elementary schools as well.

Some may think the Lake Country area doesn't need services for under-resourced children, but Frans said the most shocking thing is that about 13

percent of children in the Cushing Elementary area are living at or below the poverty level and about 18 percent in Dousman and Wales.

Under-resourced children may also come from single parent homes where a child doesn't have someone at home to support their work, Frans added.

The idea of the project was "like something I couldn't shake," said Frans. "I couldn't not do it," Frans said. "I couldn't get to the end of my life and wonder what it would have been like if I had tried."

Frans spent a year visiting non-profit organizations thinking "I would see I can't do this," and discovered "no one knew what they were doing when they started."

As a retired teacher, Frans knew she did not want to "add one more thing" to teachers' plates as she started the Oasis Project.

"I want this to make your job easier, because I've been there, done that," Frans told teachers.

Success

At Cushing Elementary School last year, Frans saw the number of students reading at or below grade level drop from 68 percent in September to 20 percent in January, and by the end of the school year it was even lower.

According to Cushing Principal Rebecca Toetz, 75 percent of Oasis students were reading at grade level by the end of the year, compared to 20 percent at the beginning of the year.

In math, 60 percent of Oasis students met their growth target, compared to an average of 53 percent in the whole school.

"The academic progress I'm pretty convinced is the caring, is the loving," said Frans. "A lot of these kids, their little cups are under resourced too."

Oasis tutors work in partnership with reading specialists, teachers and principals at the schools. Tutors who are still teaching during the day work with students after school. Some tutors, like retired teachers, work with students over lunch periods.

"A lot of these retired teachers have tread on their tires yet," added Frans. "They still love kids."

Most of the teachers who tutored last year returned.

"That's just the way teachers are. That's the kind of person they are," explained Frans."

Dousman Elementary Principal Jeremy Monday said the project is "incredible."

"Just the amount of engagement we have," Monday explained. "I expected a lot because I knew it was successful at Cushing, but this has overly exceeded expectations."

Students receiving tutoring need the extra time. Teachers are excited by the project because they feel supported, Monday said. The one-on-one attention motivates even students with behavior problems because they don't want to miss the time with their "reading buddy."

"It's amazing to see how happy the kids are, and then to see the tutors at the end of the day, to see how excited they are that they are accomplishing something for the community," Dousman reading specialist Karen Barry said.

As Tresa Knutson, a retired middle school teacher from Watertown finished working with a Dousman student, she said she enjoyed working one-on-one with students instead of in a classroom setting. She was glad she found the Oasis Project. Frans said she was glad she found Knutson.

"It's an outlet to make me feel like I still matter," Knutson pointed out. "When you're used to teaching all the time, it's hard to stop."

Future

At 66, the future of the Oasis Project sits on Frans' shoulders. The tutoring center is only phase one of her vision.

Frans would eventually like to have a safe and fun place for teens to connect, a family communication center where "people who are stuck in life can get wise counsel at a free or reduced rate."

As Frans explains, life happens, people get stuck.

"Not everyone is there because they are lazy," said Frans. "We just want to have a more compassionate response to people."

She would also like to see a resource center where parents who "don't know what to do," could attend seminars or group discussions.

"I think the need is out there," Frans added.

As the Oasis Project builds for the future, Frans is working on obtaining 501c3 status, hoping to become financially sustainable in years to come.

"Eventually, if there are going to be younger people (running Oasis), they are going to need a salary," said Frans. "I would love to turn this over to a millennial."

Actually, Frans would "love to see this concept go viral."

"Why can't other communities do the same?" she asks.

As Frans bumps "along in the night," as she explains her work with the Oasis Project, doing what she feels is "providential" in her life, she likes the appeal of leveling the field for all students by providing extra resources to improve academic levels and help them achieve success.

"I thought it was a good idea. I didn't think it was this good," Frans said. "There is no reason in this community that we don't have the resources to level the playing field. It's not a level playing field."

Visit oasisprojectwi.org to learn how to volunteer or donate to the Oasis Project.



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