

Marin Voice

Feeling good about helping children learn

By Barry Phegan

I volunteer at Venetia Valley School in San Rafael teaching third-graders reading and writing.

I started in 2012 after my wife died and I realized I should spend more time doing what makes me feel good.

I love playing with my grandchildren and thought I'd try teaching. I'd read about Experience Corps in the New York Times so I contacted the local chapter here in Marin.

Experience Corps Marin let me choose the school and grade level.

I had never formally taught children and was a little anxious, but Experience Corps Marin offered excellent training and on-site support that helped me get comfortable in my new role.

The third-graders I work with are delightful, loving, open and somewhat innocent.

When I arrive in the morning they often shout, "Good morning Mr. B."

What a great way to start my day!

Then the teacher explains the lesson to me and which students need help.

Often I work with the student at his or her desk, but about half the time I take them to the library. Either one-on-one or as a small group, we sit together and work on the reading assignment.

It's very intimate. We laugh and have fun.

In my first few years, I thought that completing the assignment was essential. Now in my fourth year I see that many of the children I work with lack self-esteem or a sense of confidence or achievement.

This year, I make sure the students know how much I care for them and respect what they think and say. I rec-

I truly enjoy my everyday experiences with these beautiful young people. I also know I've made a big difference in many children's lives.

ognize their successes and that helps them become more confident in their ability to learn.

One time, I was with a boy who seemed to be very bored with the reading assignment. I knew he was good at sports so I asked him which player he liked best. He said LeBron James so I asked him to find a basketball book. He led us directly to the sports shelves where we looked at all the relevant books and he selected one he was comfortable with at his reading level.

We had a wonderful time reading the book together. I was fascinated with his knowledge and obvious pride as he told his "teacher" (me) many

additional facts about LeBron James and basketball rules. From then on he was eager to read with me — even the class assignments.

In class, some children play with erasers or fidget with papers on their desk. One time, I asked one of these children if she was listening to the teacher. She said, "It's confused inside my head." I asked her to say some more and she explained, "Too much is going on and I can't listen."

Another time, I asked a boy who was intently playing with his pencils if he was listening to the teacher. He immediately summarized exactly what she

had said.

I learn a lot when I ask questions. These seemingly side conversations, where I don't "correct" or judge what they do, build the relationships and trust we need in order to work well together.

I truly enjoy my everyday experiences with these beautiful young people. I also know I've made a big difference in many children's lives.

I thank Experience Corps Marin for the opportunity they provide for children and we volunteers to learn and grow together.

Thanks to them, doing what makes me feel good has been very rewarding.

Barry Phegan of Greenbrae is a volunteer with Experience Corps Marin, Senior Access and the Alzheimer's Association. To learn more about Experience Corps Marin, visit www.ec4marin.org or phone 415-464-1767.



Experience Corps Marin

Guiding the next generation of readers.

Email:
opinion@marinij.com
Phone: 382-7291
Fax: 382-7209

Mail to: Readers' Forum,
Marin IJ, 4000 Civic
Center Drive, Suite 301,
San Rafael, CA 94903

Twitter:
Follow and
send tweets to
@MARINIJ

Facebook: Leave
comments at
**FACEBOOK.COM/
MARINIJFAN**