“WE NEEDED EACH OTHER”
‘All Students Matter’ creates bonds between tutors and students

“Diego has helped me feel like I’m needed and wanted,” said All Students Matter (ASM) volunteer Talia Parsons, talking about her favorite 4th grade student she tutors at Willow Oaks Elementary in East Palo Alto.

You might think that a tutoring relationship is one-sided, but according to Ms. Parsons: “This relationship definitely goes both ways.” Ms. Parsons has volunteered for ASM for six years now, “As long as we’re in the Bay Area, I’m in it for the long haul,” she said. “I love the work.”
ASM has been connecting people like Ms. Parsons and Diego in the Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) for over 10 years. “We tutor literacy,” said Angie Holman, Executive Director at ASM, “but what also ends up happening is this very beautiful relationship with the student.”

In 2008, three local moms founded ASM in Menlo Park with the vision that every child deserves a quality education no matter their zip code. They have expanded every year and now coordinate almost 200 volunteers in the RCSD to tutor literacy, math, and social-emotional skills donating over 6000 hours of support every year at no cost to the schools.

“The disparity is unbelievable,” said Holman, “Facebook on one side, Stanford, and the homes of some of the richest people in the world on the other.” In the middle, “surrounded by wealth,” is East Palo Alto and the RCSD, where the vast majority of students are low income, perform under grade level in both math and reading, and almost half experience housing insecurity. It’s also an area known for gang activity.

“I just hope Diego doesn’t fall into a gang,” said Ms. Parsons. “That’s my worst fear.” She went on: “He’s a follower, he wants to please people, and if someone took him under their wing and offered him love and support for all the wrong reasons, he might take it. I worry about that.”

Even the best teachers get overwhelmed

Diego was lucky to get Ms. Rodrigo for 3rd grade. “She is amazing,” according to Ms. Parsons, who was starting her second year tutoring in Ms. Rodrigo’s class. After the first couple of months of school, Ms. Rodrigo came to Ms. Parsons, threw her hands up and said “I don’t know what to do with Diego.”

“Even the best teachers get overwhelmed,” Ms. Parsons said. Ms. Rodrigo explained that Diego didn’t listen, didn’t do what she asked, and couldn’t work independently. “He just disrupts!” she said, exasperated.

Looking back, Ms. Parsons explained: “He’s very chatty,” she said, “he’s willing to work hard, but sometimes he doesn’t know how to do that, so he gets frustrated.” That frustration came out by chatting up his friends rather than working.

Together, Ms. Parsons and Ms. Rodrigo devised a plan. “When I was in the classroom, he was sitting next to me,” Ms. Parsons said. Ms. Rodrigo would give her Diego’s independent work and the two would work together as usual for 20 minutes. Then, rather than Diego returning to his table, Ms. Parsons would say, “I’m going to work with Joey now, and you’re going to sit quietly and work independently right here with me.”

And every time he’d say: “I’m going to go to the bathroom.”

“We teach literacy, but what also ends up happening is this very beautiful relationship with the student.”

~ Angie Holman, Executive Director at ASM
“No ‘bud,’ you’re gonna wait until break.” If he got distracted, Ms. Parsons would tap him on the shoulder and remind him, all while working with other students. “It was challenging at first,” said Ms. Parsons, but “when that plan worked, when he started to really focus with me, that was the moment I started to feel like there was something special between us.”

And what does Diego say about Ms. Parsons now? “She’s nice and she’s kind,” then he smiled, “and she bakes delicious stuff that I eat.”

“I’m not above bribery,” Ms. Parsons said.

Diego went on: “And she makes me more smart, more intelligent, and with math I can be a scientist one day.”

“Wait a minute,” Ms. Parsons said, “isn’t there something else?”

“Oh yeah, a scientist and a doctor.”

“That’d be awesome,” said Ms. Parsons.

“And maybe a daredevil too,” Diego added.

**Things weren’t always so smooth**

Ms. Parsons’s story and her skills with kids began when she had her own kids – she retired from her career, became an at-home mom, and volunteered in their schools. As her kids grew, the teachers no longer wanted her in the classroom.

“Well now what?” she said to herself.

By chance, her daughter was best friends with the daughter of Keri Tully, the Program Director at ASM. Tully didn’t skip a beat: “Come to All Students Matter. You can work in the classroom again and you’ll love it!” That was six years ago and Ms. Parsons is still going strong.

But things weren’t always so smooth. Ms. Parsons said that her family faced a crisis when one of her daughters in college on the East Coast began a long battle with depression and anxiety. Ms. Parsons and her husband were forced to fly back and forth constantly. “When I was home, I felt completely out of control. I didn’t know how to handle it all,” she said.

Ms. Rodrigo insisted that she take time off. “No,” Ms. Parsons said, “this is the one thing in my life that I can control. I can’t fix my kid’s problem, but I can help Diego.”

“That’s why I say this goes both ways, it’s not just for him,” Ms. Parsons said. “He needed someone to be there to keep him on track and I needed to help someone else when I couldn’t help my daughter. It seems simple now, but it was born out of not so simple things.”

Ms. Parsons has been touched by her time with Diego and ASM. She asked him if he feels more confident now that they’ve been working together.

“I feel more confident just thinking about you,” he said.

What, she wondered, would he tell another student who was going to work with her.

Diego started slowly: “Well, Ms. Talia can help you with anything,” he said, “math, reading. She’s funny and she dresses funny on Halloween.” But then he seemed to look inward, “I always keep her in my heart,” he said.

“That’s so sweet, Diego, you’re making me cry,” Ms. Parsons said.

“I’m making myself cry too,” said Diego.

Looking to the future, Ms. Parsons said that she’s definitely going to continue working with Diego in 5th grade. “Our platform works because of consistency, being there,” Ms. Parsons explained. So who knows, she said, “maybe there’s even a way we could continue into middle school. I’d like that.”