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Faith In Action by Alberta Lindsey

Doing What Jesus Would Do Building a Community of School Volunteers

When Bob Argabright retired three years ago, he planned to play golf and fish.

There's been little time for golf. He has fished a lot—mostly for men rather than trout.

Argabright, a member of Trinity United Methodist Church in western Henrico County, is a tireless advocate for students, parents and faculty at Oak Grove-Bellemeade Elementary School in South Richmond, says Mary Hetzel, also a member of Trinity and an associate with the Micah Initiative, a partnership program between faith communities and Richmond city's public schools.

"Bob uses all of his business savvy, communication, people skills and personal integrity to build communication between our volunteers, students, teachers, the business community and most important of all the students....He has a tremendous love for children and solidarity with struggling single parents or grandparent-led families," Hetzel added.

A humble person, Argabright, 65, sipped coffee in Starbucks and talked about his work with children. He agreed to the interview only because it would draw attention to the needs of pupils at Oak Grove-Bellemeade and hopefully interest more people, especially minorities, in volunteering.

"We have to step up to the plate and take the hand of a child. Jesus was with the disadvantaged, the children, the hurting. He didn't hang out around the country club," said Argabright, who was recently honored as Central Virginia's mentor of the year by the Virginia Mentoring Partnership. He also is a nominee for the Governor's Volunteerism and Community Service Award.

"I want to recruit more minority males. I don't think it's a good thing to have all West End white males for role models," he said.

First Involvement Leads to More

Argabright began mentoring at Oak Grove-Bellemeade in September 2004, a month before he retired as general manager of Packaging Corporation of America. He also spent 35 years as a turn-around specialist for Chesapeake Corp. In that position, he would spend two and a half years at a company to get it on the right track.

Once he saw the needs of the children at the school, he wanted to do more. His plans to play golf and fish went on the back burner.

Ninety-five percent of the children have no male role model in the home. Forty-five children at Oak Grove have an incarcerated parent; statistically speaking, 34 of these children will end up in prison.

"We ought to do something on the proactive side. How fair is it to give up on a child at 7 or 8 years old?" Argabright said.

Meeting Children's Needs

"Bob understands the reality of our school: transient and high-needs children, low parent involvement and many first-year teachers," said Jannie Lausen, principal of Oak Grove-Bellemeade. "Bob consistently seeks new ways to touch the lives of our children."

Leon is an example of the difference a mentor can make.

Argabright began working with Leon in 2005 when the child was in second grade. Because of an automobile accident, Leon had missed most of the previous school year. The mentor invited Leon along with other boys for bike rides, ball games, swimming and a week at camp. As a third grader, Leon proudly showed Argabright an honor roll report card, which is continuing in fifth grade.

The Outreach Expands

In 2004, when Argabright started recruiting volunteers from the faith community, there were eight Micah Initiative volunteers from Trinity. Now there are 47 weekly volunteers who serve as mentors, tutors, classroom assistants and lunch buddies. Another 10 read to the Head Start children at Bellemeade and 21 assist with special projects.

Three years ago, he raised money to send three inner-city children to camp for a week at Westview on the James, a United Methodist camp. The following year, he raised money to send 47 children to camp and last year, 87 youngsters went. This summer his goal is 134.

"So many of these children have never been north of the James River. Some have never seen the river," Argabright said. One Saturday a month, some of the children meet together to focus on team building and outdoor education as it relates to the SOLs. With help from the James River and the Virginia Wildlife associations, the children will learn about such things as the watershed.

Argabright organized a Sunday afternoon Kid's Club at Central United Methodist Church that draws about 50 children. And he's starting a Boy Scout Troop with

15 boys. He has visited the families of the 15 boys: "I want people to show up at my parties. More people show up if you personally invite them."

Adotevi Akue Moevi, who moved to South Richmond five years ago from Togo Republic in West Africa, said his son, Yann, benefited from Argabright's help. Argabright has helped make Yann's integration into American society easier, Moevi said. "If this city could have two Bob Argabrights, so many things would positively change in our community."

Argabright said: "I just wanted to make a difference in a child's life. I was not prepared for the huge impact these children would have on me. I receive far more than I'm capable of giving."