



Sherry Stewart shares her love of reading with a young student.

The Joy Of Reading

Friends of MacDowell help nurture literacy at their former school.

Stacy Gittleman | Contributing Writer

All her life, Sherry Stewart, 68, of Bloomfield Hills has been true to her school.

Growing up in Northwest Detroit, Stewart attended MacDowell Elementary School in a “happy, stable” era, when the school served as the core of this diverse middle-class neighborhood, when kids walked to school with brown-bagged lunches and every mom on the block knew who you were.

A longtime member of one book club or another over the years and a substitute teacher in the Bloomfield Hills School District, Stewart said she owes her love of literacy and reading to her school days at MacDowell.

In that spirit of loyalty and the desire to give back to her alma mater, Stewart, in 2002, spearheaded Friends of MacDowell, a group of dedicated alumni who come to the school each week to help nurture a love for reading and literature among its current students.

The volunteer group has been one piece of stability in a school that has seen its share of turmoil. Stewart said the building is not in the same physical shape as it was when she was a student. Sometimes the heat does not work and the school is closed. There have been eight different principals in 14 years. In 2009, when Detroit Public Schools placed the school on the closure list, Friends of MacDowell fought hard to keep it open.

In 2012, DPS relinquished administration of the school to SABIS Educational Systems Inc., a charter school corporation. Through all the changes, Stewart and her fellow volunteers have adapted and done their best to meet the needs of the changing administrators and educators, all the

while trying to serve the students to the best of their abilities.

“No matter the changes, from different principals to different teachers, the classroom volunteers are always shown a great amount of appreciation,” Stewart said.

Friends of MacDowell started after Stewart and some classmates reunited 15 years ago and brainstormed ways to help their faltering school. Since then, they work with teachers in the classroom or take children out of the class in small groups to read and work on literacy projects such as creating books. They work on phonics skills with the younger grades and spelling, reading comprehension and more advanced literacy projects such as book making with older children. Over the years, Stewart also organized visiting authors and book collection drives.

Reflecting on the current crisis in DPS, Stewart said that MacDowell, still in a relatively stable neighborhood, “is one of the few lucky ones.”

Still, Stewart remarked there remain struggles with high turnover rates for teachers, but she does see the school is improving in its charter status.

No matter who is in charge, Stewart said she and her fellow alumni tutors always enjoy being with the children and sharing memories of their own school days at MacDowell.

“The kids really get a kick when some of us point to houses across the street from the school, and we tell them that we or our grandparents used to live there,” said Stewart, 68.

Stewart said she is always looking for volunteers to join her. Those interested in giving their time can email her at hste157045@aol.com. *

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