

Volunteers needed for school initiatives

The United Way of North Central Florida is seeking reading buddies and mentors.

By Stacy Fournier
Correspondent

As the summer comes to an end and students, schools and educators gear up for the upcoming school year, United Way of North Central Florida is putting out an all-call for volunteers to join forces and become part of ReadingPals.

Through this initiative, volunteers are paired with second- and third-grade students across the county who benefit from spending one hour each week reading with their "pal."

"We know we need to start working with children when they are very young so they have the tools to succeed," said Kim Faenza, director of communications and marketing for United Way of North Central Florida. "United Way provides the books, and volunteers will read with the child, talk about the books and practice reading comprehension."

The ReadingPals initiative, made possible through the support of Carol and Barney Barnett, United Way of North Central Florida and the Children's Movement of Florida, began in 2012 and has served more than 150 children with the help of 146 volunteers investing more than 3,000 hours of volunteer time, she said.

"The ReadingPal serves as a mentor and friend to the child," Faenza said. "A real relationship develops."

Once an adult volunteer successfully completes a background check with United Way, he or she is partnered with a student at a local school, the Boys & Girls Club of Alachua

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County or Caring and Sharing Learning School.

Volunteers can choose the school where they would like to serve, or, if no preference is shared, will be matched with a school and student in need.

ReadingPals volunteers are asked to commit one hour per week to the after-school initiative, helping students read from a selection of Dr. Seuss classics and well-known books like, "If You Give a Mouse a Cookie" and "A Dolphin's Tale."

"We really think this initiative is making a difference," Faenza said, adding that reading scores increased at three of the four schools where ReadingPals volunteers worked with students during the 2012-13 school year.

Anyone interested in becoming a ReadingPals volunteer can contact Ashley Williams at 333-0859 or awilliams@unitedwayncfl.org.

In addition to the ReadingPals initiative, United Way of North Central Florida also is looking for volunteers to become part of the Check & Connect Drop Out Prevention Initiative.

As part of a nationwide, \$10 million grant from AT&T, drop-out prevention specialists have been placed at Gainesville High School, Hawthorne High School and Eastside High School, and work with at-risk students and their families through the school year.

"The Check & Connect initiative is important because it helps increase graduation rates in our community, United Way's primary education focus," Faenza said. "Volunteers will serve as mentors for high school students."

Volunteers interested in joining the initiative, which began in 2012, are asked to commit at least one hour per week, and can contact United Way of North Central Florida at 331-2800.