

Roosevelt Middle School and Prairie Oak Community Church form Anoka-Hennepin School District, Faith and Community Partnership



When Melissa Durand attended a meeting about the Anoka-Hennepin School District, Faith and Community Partnership, she knew it was something she wanted to get involved with. A member of Prairie Oak Community Church in Andover, Durand volunteers with the church's community and compassion efforts.

"We have a very outreach and community orientated church," Durand said. "We try

to weave that into everything we do. We have some fantastic schools and the opportunity to encourage and walk beside our schools resonated with me."

Durand shared the information about the partnership with Prairie Oak Community Church's pastor and others. They agreed it was a good thing to participate in and chose to work with Roosevelt Middle School (RMS) in Blaine. The Anoka-Hennepin School District, Faith and Community Partnership is a collaborative effort of the school district, faith based organizations and broader communities to raise an awareness and understanding of compelling community issues and to mobilize people to help meet the basic needs of students, During a meeting with RMS Principal Greg Blodgett to discuss what the partnership would look like, Durand said she learned the RMS staff has huge hearts and compassion for families at the school. She was excited to help.

"Mr. Blodgett told me he has a wonderful staff that is very generous," Durand said. "While they have not hesitated to help when they see a need, this can get to be challenging. Our church wanted to help take some of this responsibility off their shoulders."

She had that opportunity when Nicki Magaard came on board as a school counselor at the beginning of the school year. One of the first things Magaard did was form a "Roosevelt Middle School Care Committee," which included Durand. Working together, Prairie Oak Community Church and the school staff have helped families who are struggling. They provided food baskets at Thanksgiving and the winter holiday. At Christmas time, Durand also worked with others to put together "pampering gift baskets" for mothers. The partnership has assisted families with gift cards and other donations, such as an alarm clock for a student.

During these difficult economic times, Durand said so many people are struggling in isolation. "The students are important, but we also want to support and encourage their families," she said.

The Care Committee has been working to make RMS families aware of the partnership and the assistance available. Magaard added a form on the school's website where people can anonymously recommend those who need assistance. Teachers also identify students who need help. In addition to helping families, the church was asked by the school to provide healthy snacks for a student leadership conference and church members have been collecting coins for the Care Committee.

As they move forward, the Care Committee will continue to make sure they are utilizing their resources and time well. The group has been talking about the possibility of including members of the partnership in the school's mentoring program. RMS has identified students who need additional positive adults in their lives. The students and adults meet twice a month for activities such as a lunch, and all the students and mentors get together four times a year for a large group activity. Durand is interested in matching members of the church with the students. Magaard said the partnership with Prairie Oak Community Church has been positive in many ways.

"Providing our students with basic needs helps them to be more able and ready to learn," Magaard said. "And staff likes to know that when they see something in the classroom that is causing them concern or is a barrier to a student's learning, they know they can refer that to me and I will take care of it. The partnership is an opportunity for us to better provide for our students and do things we might not otherwise be able to do for our students."

Durand said working with the school is truly a partnership for Prairie Oak Community Church members and she looks forward to see how it evolves. While she didn't know what the partnership would look like when it first began, Durand said Magaard, who is on the front line of working with students and families, has taught church members so much.

"There are so many families who are struggling with financial and emotional stress," Durand said. "It's easy to sit back and think that these things are not happening in our community, but they are. We have a very generous community who wants to walk with people as they go through these challenges."

Photo caption: Members of Prairie Oak Community Church in Andover are working with Roosevelt Middle School (RMS) as part of the Anoka-Hennepin School District, Faith and Community Partnership. Working on the partnership are Melissa Durand (left), a representative from Prairie Oak Community Church, and Nicki Magaard (right), a RMS school counselor.