

Watch D.O.G.S gets fathers involved at Prairie Ridge Elementary

By Jen Reeder
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FIRESTONE – On March 24, 1998, America was blanketed in grief at the news that two students at a middle school in Jonesborough, Ark., shot and killed four students and a teacher during a false fire alarm, wounding 11 others. One man’s response was to found Watch D.O.G.S. (Dads of Great Students), a safe-school initiative of the National Center for Fathering that involves fathers and other positive male role models to help create a more safe and secure learning environment in schools.

Since Jim Moore launched the first program in Arkansas, it has expanded to 760 schools in 33 states. One of them is at Prairie Ridge Elementary School in Firestone.

“It’s a way to get dads involved with the schools to provide security and support for our kids, an extra set of eyes and ears,” said Joe Wolfinbarger, the Top D.O.G. of the Prairie Ridge program. “You’re just showing up and being a dad.”

The fathers, uncles, grandfathers and other male relatives sign up to be at the school for the entire day, sitting in on classes and playing with the kids during recess. They wear a vest identifying themselves as the day’s Watch D.O.G., and their children wear shirts that say, “My hero is a Watch D.O.G.” Teachers try to involve them by having them read to classes or help students with math problems.

“It’s fun – the kids think you’re the best thing in the world that day,” Wolfinbarger said.

His daughter Brie is a third grader at the school, and he said it has been interesting seeing how she interacts with teachers and students compared to her behavior at home.

“Your kid’s a whole different person at school,” he said. “You get a whole new awareness of what they’re going through.”

Being involved at the school helps dads understand the differences between their time



Photo by Kelly Morgan

Rob Briggs, a volunteer with Watch D.O.G.S. at Prairie Ridge Elementary, goes to school with his sons Zach, a second grader, and Bryce, a kindergartener, on Halloween.

as a student and the challenges and stresses kids face in the 21st century, he said. Traditionally, mothers tend to volunteer at schools, so dads are less knowledgeable about what is going on.

“Society over the years has told us this lie that we’re going to be the breadwinners and mom’s going to go talk to the teachers and volunteer at the PTO. We’ve swallowed it hook, line and sinker,” Wolfinbarger said.

In America, 25 percent of children have no male role model in their home, and a study showed that if dads showed up to school just three times a year, math and reading scores improved, according to Wolfinbarger.

“They become better students,”

he said. “The whole community benefits from it.”

The goal of the program this year is to have a Watch D.O.G. at Prairie Ridge Elementary every day of the school year. Last year, they were able to fill 85 percent of the days.

Kelly Morgan, a coordinator for the Watch D.O.G.S., said that the pizza party kickoff this year had a huge turnout.

“We went through 50 pizzas and five cases of pop,” Morgan said. “There were about 160 dads and kids there.”

She said her husband Van loves being a Watch D.O.G. for their sons at Prairie Ridge, second grader Tyce and kindergartener Slater. On a recent visit to Slater’s class, “The little girls drew him a

picture and let him in their club.

“It’s an awesome thing to watch. Just to see the dads in there, they get such a different reaction than I do,” she said. “And grandpas get an even bigger reaction.”

Principal Kirsten McNeill said the program has been a “great success” at Prairie Ridge, which has 365 students this year.

“It’s great to see a male come in and volunteer and show how important education is,” she said. “They get to be the hero for the day.”

She said there are still plenty of opportunities for moms to volunteer at the school.

“We want as much volunteering as possible,” she said.

Students without male role models participating in the program don’t feel excluded, she said.

“They all feel included because those dads interact with all the kids in the classroom. It makes a great impact on everybody,” McNeill said.

To make it easy for Watch D.O.G.S. to participate, there is a calendar in the front of the school, where dads can sign up for the days they want to spend at the school. They almost always choose to attend their child’s birthday, bringing cupcakes and treats for the kids.

It’s obvious the kids aren’t the only ones getting something out of it. Joe Revielle, a construction superintendent whose daughters Averi and Josi attend Prairie Ridge, has been a Watch D.O.G. at the school since the program started. He said he enjoys being a part of the “great” program.

“My kids actually love it, which was kind of a surprise,” Revielle said. “When they’re in junior high, they probably won’t want to see dads at school, but now they’re excited to see me. You’ve got to take advantage of those times when you have them.”

For more information about Watch D.O.G.S., visit www.fathers.com.

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Free ‘chi’ at the Carbon Valley Regional Library

Photo by Jen Reeder

Robb Willingham teaches Tai Chi, an ancient form of Chinese meditation in movement, at the Carbon Valley Regional Library on Oct. 22. It was the first of four free classes; the others will take place at noon at the library on Nov. 5 and 19, and Dec. 3.