Detroit Area Meijer Teams Support Friendship Circle

Volunteering is one way our team members demonstrate our purpose of enriching lives in the communities we serve. One group recently had an opportunity to help students with developmental disabilities learn the valuable life skills of shopping and money management.

West Detroit Market Director Joe Chandler's leadership team participated in a volunteer event at Friendship Circle, a nonprofit in West Bloomfield in suburban Detroit. The organization's Weinberg Village is a "mini-city" that serves as an environment to teach children with disabilities about budgeting resources.

Centered in the heart of the 20,000-square-foot Ferber Kaufman LifeTown, Weinberg Village comprises a quarter of the space for its true-to-life cityscape where students from more than 200 schools representing more than 50 school districts annually participate in the Lessons for Life program. The program fills the gap between classroom learning and real-world experiences by teaching life skills and providing the opportunity to confidently assume responsibility and independence in the outside world.

Our store directors each had an opportunity to run a retail operation, working with the student customers who were each given $12 to budget. Some got their nails painted, others visited the ice cream cart and others rented bicycles. The Meijer team's enthusiasm for their roles made an impression.

"We loved having them," said Shayna Shemtov, Adult Volunteer Coordinator at Friendship Circle. "The Meijer group was so fun and got really into it. They were very proactive and engaged. They wanted to learn and came with a positive attitude."

The volunteer project stemmed from Natalie Stacey, Store Director of the Waterford Township, Mich. Meijer.

"We each played the part of a community professional or shop owner in the Friendship Circle's mini-city," Natalie said of the nearly three-hour volunteer shift. One store director even dressed as a police officer to help students learn how to safely operate their rented bicycles and follow traffic signals.

For some students, it was the first time they ever held real money in their hands – an experience that flooded many with emotion.

"The kids were just amazing," Natalie said. "We helped them make their own choices and count out their own money."

In that short period, the team made strong connections with the children.

"They kept coming back to our stations, holding hands, asking us to take a walk with them to the pet store," Natalie said. "The lessons are intended to help promote self-sufficiency. It's really rewarding to be able to help people do that."

Friendship Circle was founded in 1994 by Bassie Shemtov and Rabbi Levi Shemtov, who continue to serve as Co-Directors. The nonprofit provides assistance and life-changing support to 3,000 individuals with developmental disabilities and their families through recreational, social, educational and vocational programming.

The curriculum teaches essential life skills, such as money management, following directions, problem solving, communication, time management, socialization, safety and employment.

"The mission of Friendship Circle is based on the belief that every person possesses an infinite soul, and we value each other based on that internal soul as opposed to external qualities," said Shayna, who is also the Founders' daughter-in-law. "When someone comes into Friendship Circle, their soul is shining and we're seeing them for that infinite potential."

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