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Thursday, December 6, 2018

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## PV NEIGHBORS:

# In an age of 'fake news,' PressFriends mentors the youngest of journalists

By **Mary Jo Hazard**

Contributing writer

Since its inception in 2008, PressFriends has been helping elementary schoolers produce student newspapers. The nonprofit has trained more than 700 middle and high schoolers to mentor younger aspiring journalists.

And it all started right here on the peninsula.

Five students from Miraleste Intermediate School and one from Dapplegray Elementary founded the Dapplegray Times and decided to share their love of words with other kids. They started mentoring Roosevelt Elementary students in Lawndale. The program has gone on to provide writing mentors for underserved students in Title I elementary schools throughout the South Bay.

PressFriends is a youth-led organization. And today, it has adult assistance from Monica Emmery, its volunteer executive director, under the advisement of Deborah Southwell, the executive director emeritus.

Emmery, her husband, Robert, and their three children, Marcus, Sophia, and Lucas, have lived in Rancho Palos Verdes in 2009.

"Volunteering has always been a part of my life," Emery told me. "I've been especially drawn to working with kids because I strongly believe in the importance of a child's voice. Collaborative efforts are the most rewarding to me as these are essential to strengthening our communities."

Emmery's children have followed her example.

Sofia, a sophomore at Palos



Monica Emmery (second from right), volunteer executive director of PressFriends, a nonprofit that mentors aspiring journalists, attends Family Volunteer Day at Peninsula High with her husband Robert and children Lucas and Sophia. (Photo by Mary Jo Hazard)

Verdes High, has been volunteering with PressFriends since seventh grade. In 2015, Sophia went through the PressFriends volunteer training and became a mentor. She learned how to use Editorial Guidelines to direct fourth and fifth grade students through different writing prompts—designing their school menu, reviewing their favorite books, movies, video games, and much more.

In addition to mentoring aspiring journalists, PressFriends throw publication parties to honor the students for their articles and to distribute the newspapers. Third graders are invited to the party in the hopes they will want to join the next year.

PressFriends participants are also invited to attend an annual Symposium for Kids, co-sponsored this year by University of Southern California with a spe-

cial presentation by the SoCal Vocals. The students listen to graduate journalism students and later write about what they learned in the USC Kids News publication.

Emmery is impressed with the program's positive impact on her daughter.

"Sophia is an avid reader with a passion for writing, who feels more at home delving into a great work of fiction," said Emmery. "However, when she began mentoring fourth and fifth graders, I not only saw how responsive her students were, but I noticed the effect that being a mentor had on her personal growth, particularly as a leader."

As their students respond and write good articles for their newspaper, mentors are able to see immediate results, said Emmery.

"This fuels the mentors' confidence in their leadership skills,"

she said. "Mentoring is a clear example of a win-win relationship!"

What does Sophia like best about the program? "I like seeing the smiles on the kids' faces when we come," Sophia said. "They really do remember us and are usually dedicated and motivated to write and that just makes me happy!"

Although PressFriends is a youth-led organization, parents volunteer and provide oversight during the mentoring sessions. They coordinate transportation, plan for annual events, track volunteer hours and fund raise.

PressFriends has become a family affair. Inspired by his sister's success in the program, younger brother, Lucas, became a volunteer. The 12-year-old has mentored after school writing programs, summer programs, and has provided much needed tech support during the workshops.

"I've been pleasantly surprised at how naturally Lucas took to mentoring," Emmery said, "especially since he's just a few years older than the students he works with."

Lucas enjoys mentoring students "because it's great to be able to share what you know to improve someone else's life."

During a recent Family Volunteer Day at Peninsula High School, parents, teens and other volunteers ate from box lunches and shared their experiences with PressFriends. They also assembled 180 holiday goody bags for the fourth and fifth grade students involved in the program.

Journalism is alive and well on the peninsula.