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On a Quest



PHOTOS BY DOROTHY EDWARDS / STAFF
Executive Director Susan Zumstein works with students at the Quest College Success offices in Naples on Oct. 12. Quest is designed to help high school students prepare for college. Inset: Zumstein, left, works with Naples senior Amanda Theobald.

How one woman helps hundreds of students succeed

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Editor's note: This is the latest story in the "#SWFLstrong" series, profiling individuals making a positive difference in the community. These articles will be featured on a regular basis in the Collier Citizen, Marco Eagle and The Banner.

Graffiti fills the walls of Sue Zumstein's office, but it's not spray paint. Instead, scores of high school students have signed her walls, leaving a short note, proudly stating what college they're attending thanks to Quest for Success.

The nonprofit organization, started back in 1994, has one goal — help high school students prepare for their college or university career.

"We started out 24 years ago helping poverty-level children getting to and through college," Zumstein said. "Every year, we talk to the eighth grade counselors, and we try to find their best and their brightest, but who are also on free or reduced lunch. There is really no way that they're going to go through this college application process on their own, but at the same time, they also aren't going to be able to pay for college."

Now, 921 students have been through the program with another 381 currently enrolled. Students from every walk of life are accepted. Those who can afford it pay a fee for the service. However, about 40 percent of students cannot and need some help.

"Our non-fee students are either sponsored by our Quest Foundation or by local people in the community," Zumstein said. "So while we don't hand anyone a college scholarship, we hope that, while they're here, we're giving them the tools to find ways to pay for college."

After being selected normally as high school freshman, employees work with students to find where they want to go in life, Quest for Success Chairman Tom Grady said.

"We try to figure out what their strengths are, what they're interests are so we have some idea what their career choices are," he said. "The end game is a good job and good lives for these kids."

Since Zumstein started as a volunteer 20 years ago, she and the staff at Quest have become one of the reasons the nonprofit has become so strong, board member Rick Mellon said.

"Sue is titled executive director, but she's not their boss," he said. "She's their co-worker — a mentor, someone to go to, as well as for students. At this point of time, without Sue Zumstein, I don't see Quest being as successful. It'd be like a ship without rudder. She's the thing keeping Quest moving forward."

Most of this success isn't necessarily the years of experience working with recruiters or knowledge of college preparation tests — it's much more personal.

"She develops very personal relationships, and she's a key ingredient for our success," Grady said.

A United States map hangs on Zumstein's wall, pricked with dozens of needles, each one marking a place graduates are going to college. Pins spanned the country from California to New York and everywhere in between.

When asked about a few locations, Zumstein named every student who attended that specific institution. She recounted how a student who went to the University of Richmond had an internship with the Virginia Secretary of State's office; how an Albanian immigrant opened a bank in Costa Rica and how a girl went to the University of Wyoming because of her love of trout fishing.

The story of Ruben, who emigrated from Cuba when he was 4 years old, stands out in her mind.

"(Ruben) and his mother lived in a friend's garage for many years," she said. "He learned how to speak English by watching cartoons on TV. He's now at the United States Military Academy at West Point, serving in the military and giving back to this country that he says has given him so many opportunities."

"It touches my heart so much," Zumstein continued. "The day he was on his way up to the airport, he came in to give me a hug and say goodbye. Of course, when they're at West Point, (the military) takes their phones; they take the computers, everything. (Students) can



have no electronic communication. And Ruben says to me, 'Please write me letters.' So I did, and we wrote back and forth this summer. Then, he says, 'I miss my mom. I miss my mom so much. But I can't write her that, because then that will even be hard for her, and it would make her miss me even more.' Those are some of the high-achieving students we have."

After our interview, she stepped out of the office into the work area. A few dozen students sat at tables or lounged on a sofa, chatting or working on a college application. The room went silent — the high schoolers were a little intimidated by the press.

"Alright, who needs help," she said to the quiet group.

"I do," high school senior Amanda Theobald said immediately.

The talking and typing started again. The two worked on one of Theobald's college essays. After 20 years, Zumstein knows what a college recruiter is looking for in an application.

"I sent her my essays for college, and she's revising them and cutting them down so they fit in this application," she said. "It's a lot of work, and there's a lot of us. And I'm applying to 11 schools."

Zumstein does this check for every single essay for every single student.

"Not an application goes out without me or Amy reviewing it," she said. "We help edit every essay. They can have an

English teacher do it, but I don't know the last time an English teacher talked with a college admissions officer and found out what they're looking for."

Going a step further, she gives every student her cell phone number — all 921 of them.

Theobald started her time with Quest her freshman year and has spent scores of hours working with the staff. She came to the center at 10:30 a.m. on a no-school Wednesday and stayed past 3 p.m., working on essays and applications with her friends and a little help from employees like Zumstein.

"I'll typically come in for 2-3 hours at least once a week," Theobald said.

And the time that students come in is the most important to Zumstein, and has the most profound effect on her. She began volunteering soon after her first husband died in a car accident, and Quest for Success soon became a central part of her life.

"This program and my ability to affect the lives — which I always hope is in a positive way — of these kids has personally, for me, made sense out of something that I could find no sense to at all," she said. "When I said it was my third child, I wasn't kidding. At all. I will continue to do this until I can't do it anymore because I feel so deeply about it."

To nominate an individual for the "#SWFLstrong" series, contact reporter Thaddeus Mast at 239-263-4764 or thaddeus.mast@naplesnews.com.