

“Love Thy Neighbor: Spotlight on Rainbow Village Volunteer Mike Wessel”



*Rainbow Village Volunteer Mike Wessel
"Then"*

During this month associated with the celebration of love, we can think of no better embodiment of the concept of pure love than our dear friend, Mike Wessel. After nearly 20 years serving the families of Rainbow Village, Mike is less a volunteer and more of a treasured part of the framework of our community of transformation. As the brainchild behind our Big Recess – an evening devoted to letting the children of Rainbow Village just be kids by playing games, taking part in arts & crafts, breaking bread together and sharing fellowship – Mike is a celebrity of sorts on our campus among all of our staff members, volunteers and – most importantly – Rainbow Village families. Boasting a colorful resume that includes everything from a very long stint in Corporate America to 13 happy years as a special needs bus driver for Gwinnett County Public Schools, the twice-retired Mike now devotes a great deal of his time to cooking, maintaining his physique at the gym, going to Studio 87 in Norcross for yoga classes, making memories with his wife Barbara and volunteering at Rainbow Village.

Having grown up in a low-to-middle income family, Mike learned early on the value of a dollar. He also learned that the harder he worked, the more money he could make. Unfortunately, that sentiment is simply not true for everyone. As he climbed the corporate ladder, Mike believed that the Lord had been charitable in giving his good grace to the Wessel family. Therefore, he felt compelled to pass that grace on to others. His heart for philanthropy is clear in the donations he sends to organizations like the ASPCA, Salvation Army, Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts and others. His first experience with volunteerism happened while he was working at ATT – a company that encourages community involvement. For several years, Mike tutored older children and teens who were incarcerated – having been forfeited by their parents to the county. Those children and their unfortunate circumstances had a profound effect on him early on.

When Nancy Yancey, the deacon of his church – Christ Church in Norcross – approached him to assist her in developing special programming for children at Rainbow Village, Mike did not hesitate. He called upon his years of corporate experience and developed a “business model” that Rainbow Village still employs today with our once-a-week Big Recess – a super-charged nod to summer camp that helps kids who’ve endured homelessness, poverty and domestic violence let go and have FUN for a few precious hours. Serving primarily minority children from households led by single mothers, Mike enjoys the opportunity to be a positive male role model to these



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children and bridge any gaps they might feel with regard to race. In return, he feels the kids keep him young. In his words, "Everybody wins!"



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"Now"*

"Going back to my corporate roots, I like to invest in programs that are going to grow at a substantial rate with a substantial yield," explained Mike. "81% of the families that graduate from Rainbow Village go on to be responsible, productive families in their own communities. I'd say that's time and energy well-spent."

Over the course of almost two decades at Rainbow Village, Mike has collected a lot of memories. A couple of recollections that stand out to him the most include the time he first introduced a young Rainbow Villager to the concept of salad and another where he got to decorate Easter eggs with a group of children who had never before taken part in that beloved holiday tradition. He finds delight in the little moments and the opportunities to introduce the children that Rainbow Village serves to new foods and experiences.

When asked what the phrase 'Love Thy Neighbor' means to him, Mike simply replied, "It means that you have to seek opportunities to be of assistance to people around you. A 'neighbor' is anyone you come into contact with – from all different walks of life, in all shapes and sizes. If you can be of service, it's your responsibility to help out where you can."