

THE PHILANTHROPIST

A PERSON WHO SEEKS TO PROMOTE THE WELFARE OF OTHERS, ESPECIALLY BY THE GENEROUS DONATION OF MONEY TO GOOD CAUSES.



SPARTAN SPIRIT

Darlene Plummer

Community Involvement Specialist, Southridge Senior High School

BACKGROUND

When Darlene Plummer joined the team at Miami Southridge Senior High 10 years ago, one of her first orders of business was to work with the newly created Project Up-Start, an initiative aimed at helping families in transition as a result of economic hardship. Plummer attended the meeting at the behest of the school principal but was unprepared for what she learned when she arrived. "After the meeting I returned to work, walked into my office and closed the door and I wept," she says. "I had just found out that our school had 78 homeless students. It was something I had heard about but never knew was happening in our own school." Today, the school has close to 100 homeless students, with about 90 percent of the student population on free or reduced lunch. "The [homeless] students range from families who are doubled up with family or friends due to lack of affordable housing to some who live in shelters, hotels or even cars," she says.

ADOPT-A-SPARTAN

Seeing her students with unstable housing and sometimes no food, Plummer reached out to colleagues at Southridge to "adopt" a student in need, providing them with food, toiletries and gift cards and was blown away by the "overwhelming" support. "Seeing my first success inspired me to want to do even more and I stopped getting support for just our students," says Plummer. "I began calling the parents to see what they needed as well." She also worked with co-worker Michelle Williams (herself a Southridge graduate) to reach out to alumni, who immediately jumped on the opportunity to help the students and families. "People started giving donations to support the program," she says.

COMMUNITY UNITY

It was when Williams passed on a phone number for a contact at Miami's Assurant office that the program took an even larger turn. The company was Plummer's first corporate supporter and she has since worked with everyone from Christ Fellowship and Old Cutler Presbyterian Church to Publix and Wal-Mart. "There are others that have supported me over the years and I appreciate everything and everyone," she says. "Their donations over the years have allowed more than 100 seniors to experience a normal senior year." Plummer says her proudest moments come when "34 of 38 seniors graduate and go to college," as well as when students support their own classmates and when she sees the students start the school year with clean uniforms and new backpacks filled with school supplies. "The list goes on and on," she says.

HELP WANTED

Although Plummer has made the program a success, she still struggles to find enough volunteers to help with all the work required. Vacations and breaks are especially tough for her, as she knows it means families must find a way to feed their children three times a day. To remedy the situation she does regular food drives and presents gift cards to students and families for hot meals. "We need monetary donations... and I need volunteers to help pack food bags. We need help," she says.

“What inspires me to continue to do this work is seeing how much the support given makes a difference.”