

FOSTERING GREATNESS

Best Foot Forward Foundation Ensures No Student Is Left Behind || BY EMILY J. MINOR

It began back when their kids were young and Donna Biase and Debbie Ellman helped run the grade school PTA. They worked great to-

body knows they're failing Spanish. "Through the years, we just became aware that there was a huge gap," Ellman explains.



SHOWING CLASS: (Left) Shari Kline, Lisa Cohen, Debbie Ellman, Donna Biase and Laura Reiss (Above) Hilary Fried, Mrs. Morelli, Luz Chandeck and Donna Biase



gether and the Donna-Debbie team survived well into middle school, when their children—now in their early 20s—began working with foster children as a public service project.

One thing led to another, and the two Boca Raton moms began to volunteer almost exclusively with foster children. It was necessary work since until this past January, foster kids aged out of the system at 18 (there's now an option where they can remain in the system until age 21 with certain conditions). Often they attend schools where teachers and classmates are oblivious to the many layers of a foster child's life.

These kids might go home to a group dorm where everybody knows their name, but probably no-

Of course, all foster kids can use a helping hand, but the need to help older students dawned on them about six years ago when Ell-

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— Donna Biase, co-founder, Best Foot Forward Foundation

man's daughter was a high school senior. Ellman knew a foster care boy, also a senior, and she began thinking about all the help she'd give her daughter that year.

What about him?

Who would help him keep his grades up? Rent a prom tuxedo? Fill out his financial aid paperwork?

So in 2010, Biase and Ellman created the Best Foot Forward Foundation, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) that collects volunteers to work with foster children.

Call these volunteers what you will—life coaches, mentors, tutors, saints, BFFs (for Best Foot Forward)—but they meet with students about once a week and just let them decompress. Like a parent might do.

Together, they might clean out the child's backpack, talk about upcoming exams, discuss the fact that birth mom was a no-show for last week's visit. Sometimes the BFF

might even call a teacher or a counselor if there's something derailing the student's focus.

Today, the BFF Foundation has about 61 students in the program. (They're trying to expand into grade schools.) Overall, they've reached about 100 students. Every one of those kids has graduated high school and a half dozen or so have made it to college.

Want to help? The foundation always needs money, since they assist with everything from school supplies, to work shoes, to a cute outfit for the dance. Most of all, they need volunteers who are dependable.

"That was the big thing when we started," Biase says. "Every relationship these children ever had has been broken. It's critical they know what consistency is."

And isn't that what BFFs are for? ○

For more information about the Best Foot Forward Foundation, call 561-470-8300 or visit bestfoot.org. The mailing address is 21441 Boca Rio Road, Boca Raton, FL 33433.