

Raise Me to Read's Knudsen seeks to foster student growth and well-being

By Kyle Christensen

Kathleen Knudsen understands the importance of a positive engaging influence on a child. As the facilitator for the Metro Omaha chapter of the Raise Me to Read initiative, she works to ensure that young children are participating in activities that engage their brains and contribute to their development.

Knudsen's work is multifaceted. She conducts research regarding early childhood development, meets with partners and allies in the community, and raises awareness on the impact adverse childhood experiences. One of the most important contributions is her data compilation: creating a base of information regarding resources and tools that will be a valuable resource for children in the Omaha metro.

All of her endeavors within Raise Me to Read stem from a passion to help young children reach their potential. Knudsen knows how impactful early experiences are from her own childhood.

Music was an integral part of her life. "I was raised in house full of music," Knudsen says. Her family helped fuel her passion for music.

Her father sang in a barbershop quartet and



her mother played the organ for "everybody's wedding."

Knudsen's childhood experience eventually led her to major in music at the University of

Nebraska at Omaha. But it wasn't just music that influenced her future. She also played catcher on her school's softball team.

Knudsen says she became aware of her ability to "see the field" and to develop her competitive edge as a softball player. This motivated her to eventually earn master's degrees in music and educational administration from UNO.

Early in her career, Knudsen enjoyed many different roles from teaching Honors English at Valley High School to conducting the choir at Duchesne Academy. She later became a school administrator at Carter Lake Elementary.

During this time, she more fully realized the difficulties young children often face outside of the classroom. She is still haunted from the death of one of her students due to child abuse. This led Knudsen to search for alternative ways to engage the community.

"I was looking for the Rosetta stone of teacher and student support for trauma," Knudsen says.

She took steps to learn more, including hosting a conference to inform school administration and staff about handling student trauma and adverse childhood experiences. This helped her to understand that teaching and working with students is more than just education.

"How great of a teacher you are or the rigor in the classroom,"

Knudsen says, "none of it matters if you don't have a good relationship with the kids."

A lack of awareness regarding these issues motivates Knudsen in her current role at Raise Me to Read, an initiative supported by the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC). Her ability to "see the field" helps her focus on the students as whole persons, rather than simply pupils.

Knudsen's experiences both as someone who grew up in an involved family and as an educator have equipped her to foster students' growth and well-being.

Despite challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, Knudsen says she still focuses on the future and its potential to better serve children and their families.

"My goal is to make connections in the community, to find a way to make data come alive," Knudsen says. "I want to make an anthology of initiatives and services for the community."

In her free time, Knudsen enjoys reading, writing, and tending to her garden.