

Students in Life Skills class enjoy holiday fun with seniors

BAYTOWN, TX — The students in Cindy Barny's Life Skills class for the intellectually disabled are like many of their Lee College peers: They enjoy using the computer and learning new things, love spending time with their friends at school and look forward to all the jingling bells and whistles of the holiday season.

For the last four years, their festive fun has included a holiday dinner hosted for the students and their caretakers by the Senior Adult & Travel Program. Both the Life Skills and Senior Adult & Travel programs are part of the Center for Workforce and Community Development.

"A lot of us know and love someone with an intellectual disability, so we thought this would be a fun thing to do," said program manager Lynne Foley. At this year's dinner, her team of volunteers decked the classroom in red and green decorations; served up plates of pasta, salad and garlic bread; passed out holiday gifts; and led several rounds of bingo for the excited students and their families.

"We take so much more from them than we would ever be able to give," Foley said.

After more than 20 years teaching the Life Skills class, Barny knows firsthand the positive impact that her students — whom she lovingly refers to as "friends" — can have on the lives of the people who know and care for them. It was Barny who started the program at Lee College, with the goal of providing post-secondary education and socialization for intellectually disabled members of the community.

"As people, they finish high school and want to go to college, too. They're so proud to be Lee College students," said Barny, who teaches the class how to use computers, navigate the campus, work with money, discuss current events and interact with others, among other skills.

"We've been a family together; they're a joy, and their hearts are so beautiful," Barny said. "We don't want them to just sit at home in front of the television — we want them to have something of their own. This class keeps their minds stimulated and gives them a little more independence from mom or dad."

That's just what Barry Hawkins discovered after enrolling his son, Jason, into the Life Skills program earlier this semester. Jason insists on attending class meetings by himself, leaving his father to his own devices for the weekly two-hour session.

"He loves it," Hawkins said. "He looks forward to coming to class and he's always happy when he leaves. This has been a great thing for him; he wants as much independence as he can get."

Annette Venegas has been one of Barny's students nearly as long as the Life Skills program has existed. Her parents, Rudy and Susan, credit the class and instructor for being a bright spot amid the challenges of their daughter's life.

"Annette was going through turmoil, but being here has helped her a lot," Susan Venegas said. "It's a blessing."