

Family Provides Furniture To Make Home A Bit More Like School

There has been no shortage of people using their talents to help others during the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut things down in mid-March, including schools.

And regardless of certain areas of life opening back up and “returning to normal,” that generosity of spirit remains.

One of the hardest adjustments most families have faced is helping their kids learn virtually these past few months. So many factors have either made this a success for families or a challenge. And there are aspects that might not immediately arise to the foreground when considering virtual learning.

One of those small but big things is the physical environment in which kids are sitting behind devices day in and day out and being asked to pay attention and learn. Laura-Paige Keller, a teacher at Smithland Elementary School, was talking with another teacher and remarking that so often they observe students laying on their beds during Zoom lessons or laying on the floor. They clearly lack a proper desk with which to learn.

Keller mentioned this to her father-in-law, Robert Keller, who decided to use his woodworking skills to create simple but useful desks for students who need them.

Smithland teachers put out a survey to students to see who might need one. Forty-three surveys came back with a need.

Robert Keller contacted Lowe’s to see if it could assist with the cost of plywood, which runs about \$48 a sheet. After waiting for word from Lowe’s, Keller decided to revamp his plans to get the most out of each sheet and bought enough plywood to make 14 desks.

“One of my grandsons came and stayed with me for a week and helped me cut up everything,” Keller said.

The first batch of desks was delivered to students. Seeing their excitement, and the improvement in attention span after having a space that felt less like home and more like school, motivated Keller to create more.

And it was around that time that Lowe’s contacted Keller and donated nine sheets of plywood for the project. In total Keller has been able to create 45 desks for students at Smithland Elementary School.

“It was very rewarding,” Keller said. “All that hard work, it was all worthwhile.”

Because it became very much a family undertaking, Keller's son called Wednesday and asked what the next project would be.

"So, we're making little stools to go with them," Keller said.

On Wednesday, students swung by Smithland to pick up their new desks, Laura-Paige Keller said. And it was a joyous occasion.

"It was so sweet to see their smiles," she said. And it wasn't just the students — the parents were also touched by the kindness. "They are the ones I'm feeling for right now, having to figure all of this out."

New Voters Relish Chance To Cast Initial Ballot

It would have been an exceptionally weird and challenging year even if there wasn't a presidential election looming. But this is 2020, and that's what's happening.

And for first-time, 18-year-old voters it's an exceptional year to be casting their first ballot.

Liza Churchill, a senior at Broadway High School, has already cast her vote early at the Rockingham County registrar's office in Harrisonburg.

"Voting is an amazing opportunity to me," Churchill said. "It allows me to actively participate in our democracy and show my dedication to our country. The idea that my vote could lead to the betterment of our country is inspiring."

There are few issues pertaining to this election and in general that led to Churchill's decision — climate, equality and unity.

"It is our duty to protect this planet and restore what we have carelessly used," she said. "While there are simple changes an individual can and should make to protect the planet, I believe that, as a nation, we also need to support and expand the use of sustainable energy options like wind and solar."

Olivia Kauffman plans to cast her vote on Election Day. Like her Broadway High School cohort, there are a few issues that are informing Kauffman's choice of who she would like to see as president.

COVID-19 is a big one.

"One issue that is important to me is how the candidates plan to address COVID-19. Social justice is another issue I find incredibly important as a young person voting for the first time, as is climate change," Kauffman said.

Kauffman said that being politically active and voting is important because it impacts other peoples' lives, whether directly or indirectly.

Kaylin Howard has also already voted, but said there are no particular issues that informed her vote for president.

"Honestly, I am not very big into politics, but when I agree with something, I agree with something, and that is the end of discussion," she said.

Howard said exercising a right, like voting, that some people don't get, is what has motivated her to get registered and to vote this year.

"2020 has been a circus to say the least, so getting to vote for the first time at age 18 is so important to me as a citizen," Howard said.

Pod Learning Helps Parents Balance Work, School

It's a situation most parents never thought they'd be in — facilitating their children's education while balancing work.

When the decision was made by Harrisonburg City Public Schools to pivot from a blended learning model to a virtual-only model for most students, Nicolle Drugo knew Rockingham County wouldn't be far behind.

Drugo works from home full-time for Wells Fargo and her husband is a police officer. They have two daughters, Ellaina, 8, and Alli, 7.

Although Drugo works from home, which may seem ideal for handling a virtual-learning school year, her job requires the entirety of their internet in the county in order to stream meetings.

While mulling over how to handle the situation, the family of Drugo's daughter's best friend, Chloe Villeda, 9, announced that they were going to homeschool.

"In that moment, I flipped," Drugo said. "And then I thought 'what if we do this together?'"

The Drugos and the Villedas decided after much discussion to adopt a version of the learning-pod model that has been cropping up across the country in response to many school divisions going to all-virtual learning models. The idea is simple: get a few families together and have children gather at a central location where they can be taken care of while completing their virtual school work, while allowing families who have to work the flexibility to go to their jobs.

Drugo decided to take the concept a step further and "co-op family learning." Two days a week the Drugos go to the Villedas and stay the night, Wednesday both families are separate, and on Thursday and Friday, Chloe comes over to the Drugos, spending Thursday night there.

"They have two days there and we have a night alone," Drugo said. "They get socialization and stability."

A lot of consideration went into the decision the two families made. To start, they both were on the same page in terms of social distancing and mitigation, but at the same time realized the importance of socialization for their children. Secondly, it was the best way for both sets of parents to be able to do their jobs while also doing the best for their kids, Drugo said.

"I am a reluctant homeschool parent," she said. "I would rather have them in the classroom, but since that's not possible, this is the best thing for our families."

Like Drugo, Gina Sprouse was looking for a solution for her family to handle the virtual learning situation.

“I was speaking to some of my girlfriends with kids the same age and asking ‘What can we do to make this work?’” she said.

Sprouse decided to reach out online to see if she could drum up interest in a learning pod.

“We have a really great space in our basement, it’s 850 square feet and finished,” she said. “The idea was to bring kids here and get a facilitator to help with school work.”

Sprouse said she wasn’t sure if the plan would work, but to her surprise and excitement they were able to find families with like-minded attitudes and a former teacher with 15 years experience to be their facilitator.

There will be 10 kids between second and fifth grade at the Sprouses on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m.

They will follow the Rockingham County Schools’ virtual learning schedule with play and art enrichment in the afternoon.

“It’s the concept it takes a village,” Sprouse said. “We found this small middle area where we can go to our jobs and know our kids are taken care of and that their education is being facilitated by someone who knows what they’re doing.”

Sprouse said she never dreamed that this would be their reality. But when it became clear this wasn’t changing any time soon, she changed the way she looked at the situation.

Laura Evans decided that a small pod with three other families would be a good fit for her kids. She said she trusts that the other families are doing what needs to be done to mitigate any chance of the kids getting COVID-19.

“I made the decision to have both of my kids go virtually before they mandated it because I do not feel safe sending my kids to school with children from families I have no idea what they are doing social distancing wise and how safe they are being,” Evans said. “Especially, as I look around Harrisonburg and Rockingham County at many who are not following guidelines and masking up. My kids are with a few kids we know whose parents are socially distancing and being responsible. If one of the kids gets sick in one of these pods, we are talking about a few kids and families versus hundreds.”