

Volunteers of the Finest Kind

Somerville Public Schools are lucky to have among their midst some treasures of the human kind. At one of our elementary schools, two retired doctors (with the same last name but unrelated), have been volunteering every week for more than four years to read one-on-one with students. Recently Dr. Sylvia Fine and Dr. Albert Fine spoke about why they chose to volunteer in a school, how their volunteering is going, and what they believe students gain when paired with an adult for individualized reading.

Dr. Albert Fine began serving in Somerville long before his volunteer career at the East Somerville Community School. He began his love affair with Somerville when he started his medical practice in the 1970s on Highland Ave, treating adults as an internal medicine specialist. During his 40 years of medical practice, Dr. Fine got to know his patients and their stories—many of them elders who had lived in Somerville their entire lives.

After Al retired one of his daughters convinced him to try volunteering with the East Somerville Community School, where she enjoyed serving through the [Greater Boston Jewish Coalition for Literacy](#) program. This program pairs volunteers with students for weekly one-to-one literacy intervention.

Reading with his own children had been a favorite activity for Al, and he welcomed the opportunity to connect with children again through reading. He also missed the Somerville community he'd grown to know so well. Dr. Fine was quickly matched with students for one-on-one reading, and has been volunteering every week since 2014.

When asked what keeps him making the trek every week at 80 years young from New Hampshire to Somerville, Dr. Fine replies without hesitation, 'the kids.'

'These kids are so fantastic. And I have a deep appreciation for the struggles that some families can face. Whether it's with learning, language, time challenges or meeting their children's nutritional and health needs, I think there are a lot of demands on families today. It's hard not to feel a little helpless in the face of some of these things. So I come back for the kids.'

Dr. Sylvia 'Siva' Fine served in Somerville as an Obstetrician-Gynecologist for 20 years (and personal note, a great one at that!) Shortly after her retirement Siva reached out to ask about volunteer opportunities with the schools. She wanted to know what requirements were involved, and steps she needed to take so she'd be ready to begin in a few months, after she completed hiking the Appalachian Trail.

That was my first indication of the kind of volunteer Siva would be: truly committed to the task, reliable, organized, and a volunteer who knows what she wants. After a couple of false starts with classroom volunteering (not on her end), Siva requested to be matched for individualized literacy support. She realized that she and the students would benefit more by connecting regularly and individually.

With her knack for finding good literature that students love to read (and often bringing it in), more than four years later Siva is working with the same students at the East Somerville Community School. A testament to her relationship-building and connections made with these students—now in grades six, seven and eight—is their asking if they can work with Siva year after year. And, when one of her students tested so well that he no longer needed extra reading intervention, he asked if he could come in before school to meet with her and read. His wish was granted.

'It's been so rewarding to me to get to know these students,' says Siva. 'The beauty of working with the same students every year is that we don't have to start getting to know each other in September. I know where they are, what subjects and genres they love and we can just get going with it.'

Interview January 3, 2019
SPS Volunteer Program, Jen Capuano
www.somerville.k12.ma.us/volunteer



Dr. Sylvia Fine and Dr. Albert Fine, East Somerville Community School