

Site Leader Spotlight

Linda Rice is the site leader at Little Lights' Central office location in Southeast Washington, DC. Ms. Rice has been a site leader for 4 years. At Little Lights, Linda has 35 kids and participates in both Kids Cafe and Weekend Bag. Little Lights runs a program at another location nearby. That program also participates in the Kids Cafe and Weekend Bag programs

How long have you been a site leader at Little Lights?

Ten years ago Linda began her time at Little Lights as a volunteer. After a short while, she was asked to be a part of the staff at Little Lights and has been there ever since.

What do you enjoy most about being a site leader?

Linda enjoys seeing the kids have a hot meal, especially knowing that some of the kids do not get nutritious meals at home. Many kids do not like their school's lunch so the meal the kids eat at Little Lights could be their only meal of the day. Linda takes particular delight in seeing the kids' faces before they go upstairs at their center to eat!

Linda likes to see kids trying new fruits and vegetables. In her time at Little Lights she has noticed that their kids are eating better quality food than ever before. At home or directly afterschool when the kids run to the candy bar man to get a quick "snack," kids are not getting quality food that nourishes them, so to see kids enjoying fruits and vegetables and chicken is a positive change to see. The kids are also willing to try new foods more than they have in the past.

What are some of the challenges you face at your site? How have you overcome these challenges?

Little Lights would like to take in more kids, but space is an issue at the Central location. They have 35 kids and already need to eat in shifts because they cannot accommodate 35 kids sitting down to a meal at once. Another challenge is not being able to give kids extra food when they ask for it. In these tough economic times, keeping a steady stream of funding is a challenge.

Funding is essential to an organization, but the particular funding Little Lights is looking for will help them have enough staff to stay with their kids at all times during their afterschool programs. Little Lights got involved with a website to help fundraise for additional funds to help pay part-time workers and teen workers who help serve kids food in the evenings and get sites ready for the kids to come in.

Do you have any best practices you'd like to share?

Making sure you have staff that can manage the kids. Linda shares that having food to feed is great, but having staff that can work with kids, control a crowd, maintain an orderly entrance into the dining area is essential. Little Lights has also been teaching their kids to get in the habit of not being wasteful with food. Staff are there to help kids try new foods, and follow rules already in place. They also talk to kids in a *compassionate* way, not yelling at them.

The kids are also told what the meal of the day is before they see it, so no one child has the chance to see something they aren't expecting, react negatively to it and have the other kids follow suit. Seldom does Linda find that she has kids who do not eat anything or won't try anything. Little Lights' staff have also found that mashing vegetables and encouraging kids to mix the veggies with their spaghetti or into a salad has been a great way to get kids to eat their vegetables and enjoy them!

What is your favorite snack or meal to prepare for the kids?

Since the kids love chicken, any chicken dish is great to prepare. Linda says there is never enough, the kids always want more! While Linda concedes that they aren't good for you, the kids love hot dogs too.

Some of the favorite foods that the Kids Cafe program has sent to Little Lights are the Italian entrees, especially lasagna.

How do you encourage kids to eat foods that they may not like?

Usually when a child says they don't like something, they are asked to try a fork full or two. The staff is great at explaining what the item is, what it tastes similar to (something they have had before and liked) so that they are encouraged to try it. Everything needs to be worded the right way so kids, ages 5-10, will try the food!

What impact has Kids Cafe and/or Weekend had on the kids at Little Lights?

In talking to some of the kids and getting to know some of the families, Linda knows this is the only food they'll eat in a day that is nutritious and is the only meal where they sit down to eat it. Parents may only have Cup of Noodles or hot dogs in the house because they are both cheap and easy to make. The kids look forward to a good meal when they come to Little Lights. Even when kids are sick, they want to come to Little Lights to eat and then go home. Prior to becoming a Kids Cafe site, Little Lights was purchasing food on a limited budget and could not give the variety the Kids Cafe program has been able to. Some kids have grown up in the program and Linda has seen them eat completely differently than when they started and were eating nuggets and hot dogs. The kids are now eating fresh produce and a wider range of foods.

Linda adds that these programs are vital to the community in which she serves. Over the ten years Linda has been at Little Lights she has seen so much hunger. She would like to see more organizations or people donating to the Capital Area Food Bank so that the programs the food bank has can continue to grow and grow strong to meet the need in the community.



Ms. Linda Rice, on right, seen here participating in the ice breaker activity at the Fall 2010 Community Forum.

Comment from the Kids Cafe Coordinator

What do you enjoy most about working with this site leader?

"Ms. Rice is a great person to work with. She is always very thoughtful and thorough in our conversations. I cringe a little when I get a call from her on Monday afternoons, knowing that she is going to tell me about something that was wrong with her delivery that morning! But I cannot stress enough just how much I appreciate these phone calls and the open lines of communication Ms. Rice and I share. She always checks with me before making meal substitutions or working menus around when meal items are missing from the order to ensure it is an approved substitution and complies with program standards. It is this thoroughness and well thought out way of doing things that make working with Ms. Rice and all of the staff at Little Lights Urban Ministries an absolute pleasure."

~Deirdre O'Connor, DC Kids Cafe Coordinator