

Mondays with Rich: BHS senior volunteers to read

By Keighla Schmidt, Staff Writer

A lively game of bowling outside the door is drowned out by Kaylee Snyder's steady voice. Rich Meuwissen takes short breaths, careful not to make too much noise. Nothing interrupts Mondays with Rich.

"I too had become a completely different person. The student of the Talmud, the child that I was, had been consumed in the flames," Kaylee read from Elie Wiesel's "Night," the fifth book the pair has tackled together.

The scene in a room at SarahCare is like most other Mondays: Some sunlight beams through the windows, Rich reclines in his wheelchair with sunglasses over his eyes and Kaylee is nearby with a book in hand. For the last year Kaylee has spent an hour or so each Monday reading aloud to Rich, who lost his sight about 10 years ago.



Like the author's words in the book, Kaylee and Rich have become different people.

"I really like reading to people and I really like being read to," the high school senior from Savage said, "I've always wanted to share that with someone else."

And Rich? He couldn't be happier to let Kaylee read to him.

"I love being read to," the 54-year-old said as he smiles, "You're my friend now."

Kaylee agrees, telling him: "Yeah, Rich, we're buddies."

Their time together is spent with a little banter, some teasing and a whole lot of listening and learning each week.

Their relationship started when Kaylee went to SarahCare a few times to work on craft projects as part of her volunteer work at BHS. She wanted more, though. Her passion for reading and natural curiosity made Kaylee and Rich a perfect match.

"I've always been fascinated by blind or deaf people, I thought this might be a good way to interact and help someone," she says.

While some high schoolers might be more comfortable around kids or animals, Kaylee is just as comfortable with seniors and people who are disabled.

Reading

Kaylee's time with Rich at SarahCare is far from her first brush with volunteering. She also spends time at other adult day centers, working with animals, and helping at elementary schools. Her dedication to volunteering and leadership earned her the Minnesota Hugh O'Brian Youth (HOBY) Outstanding Youth Leadership Award. She was given the prestigious award on March 6 at a banquet.

"Her commitment to services and volunteerism really impressed the judges," said Joe Fryer, community relations director for HOBY.

"HOBY's mission is to inspire and develop our global community of youth and volunteers to a life dedicated to leadership, service and innovation," according to its Web site. The organization also recognizes young people for unique leadership and volunteering.

Fay Finn, community education youth service specialist at Burnsville High School, nominated Kaylee. "Kaylee is always willing to jump in and say 'Yes, I'll do it'," Finn said. "She's a great volunteer. She has a real knack for developing those relationships that mean something – she's just really likable."

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Kaylee said she was really surprised to get the award.

"I never did any of my volunteering to strive for that award, that's not what it's about," she said. "But it's cool to be recognized for it."

Rich said he thinks so, too.

"I'm proud of her," he said. "She deserves it. She helps me out a lot with everything she does."

Even during the summer months, Kaylee made time to go see Rich. There were a few weeks they missed each other, but most of the time, she was there.

Book buddies

The two have formed their relationship in between chapters.

They know the names of each other's family members, celebrate birthdays together and "just talk."

Through those conversations Kaylee has learned how Rich lost his vision and why he spends his days in a wheelchair.

About 10 years ago Rich was running on an Air Force base when his heart stopped.

"I was dead, I went to heaven and I came back," he said. Raising and swinging his arms from his wheelchair, he adds: "and I'm still here."

After a few weeks in a coma, he woke up. He lost most of his vision, has sensitive hearing and sits in his wheelchair because of muscle spasms.

His mind, though, keeps up with each book Kaylee reads.

So far, they've read two novels by Nicholas Sparks: "The Notebook," and "A Walk to Remember," Mitch

Albom's "Tuesdays with Morrie," and "The Shack" by William P. Young.

Kaylee picked some of the books off the shelf at SarahCare; others she's brought in. Some have been more popular than others in the book club of two.

"You cried like a baby in 'The Notebook,'" Kaylee teases her friend, which is followed by playful laughs from both of them.

"Tuesdays with Morrie" was one they both liked.

"It was one I wanted to read for a while ... I found it in my room over the summer and decided to read it with Rich," Kaylee said.

She started reading "The Shack" on her own, but stopped a few chapters in thinking it would be a good one for them to read together.

"I didn't like 'The Shack,'" Rich announces. "It's too weird."

While the books may not always be hits, the companionship is.

"I don't know what I'll do without her," Rich said. "When she's not here, I'm sad."

Kaylee keeps the mood in the room light and reminds Rich of the other fun things he does during the three days each week he's at SarahCare.

But just mentioning her impending move to the University of Iowa in the fall for college makes Rich antsy.

"I'll still see you Rich," she reminds him. "I'll be home on holidays and breaks and long weekends. I'll still come and see you."

"Promise?" he inquires.

"Promise."