

## Dinner with friends: Brunswick teen's mentoring program thrives in Port Chester

By Emilie Munson Published 11:33 am, Sunday, December 17, 2017



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Don Bosco Center youth service award winner Sebastian Cobb, 18, a Brunswick School senior, right, with Destini Furman, 10, left, and Katelyn Valenzuela, 9, during the "Dinner Buddies" program at the Don Bosco ... [more](#)

GREENWICH — When Sebastian Cobb walks into the Don Bosco Center in Port Chester N.Y., children run to him for hugs.

A tall Brunswick senior with floppy hair and tortoise-shell glasses, Sebastian, or Sebi as he's known, is the founder of the Don Bosco Dinner Buddies Program, which connects Greenwich teens with Port Chester youth. For the past year, he has come to Don Bosco — which serves children of low-income and working families — two to three nights a week to eat dinner and play with the children.

"We are kind of the role models for them," he said. "We're an older friend to them."

Each weekday evening, Don Bosco feeds 50 to 60 Port Chester students in fourth grade through high school. Before dinner, Sebi will shoot hoops with the kids, kick a soccer ball or play dodgeball in the brightly-colored Don Bosco gymnasium. At dinner, he will sit with the children at long cafeteria tables chatting over Styrofoam trays of food. After dinner, they might go to the game room to play computer games or work on homework. Some nights they blast hip hop and dance together.

"At first, it was names and birthdays and stuff," he said, "but now, its more playing games with them and hanging out with them."

He's recruited other Brunswick and Greenwich Academy teens to join the program, too. On Thursday, four Greenwich students participated in the Dinner Buddies Program. About eight or nine volunteer at Don Bosco on a regular basis.

"After that first time, (the kids) were so nice to us and when we came the second time, they were so happy," said Sofi Viola, a Greenwich Academy senior. "It's good to be able to put a smile on their face."

Both Sebi and Sofi have started clubs at their schools to encourage more students to come volunteer.

On Nov. 10, Sebi was honored by the Don Bosco Center with the Youth Service Award for starting Dinner Buddies.

"They really are big brothers, big sisters, and because the buddies are here maybe an hour at a time, they really give the kids great attention," said Ann Heekin, executive director of the Don Bosco Center. "Somehow when they step inside here, all of the differences — race, economics — all of the differences sort of melt, and it's true for our kids and it's also true for the students

from Brunswick and GA. I think that is the magic of the program. I know our kids are transformed, but I know the older kids are too."

Heekin said the program caught on quickly at Don Bosco with children eagerly anticipating the arrival of the teens. Other students from Rye Country Day School have expressed interest in joining too.

"I don't see it ever ending," she said.

For his part, Sebi will hand off the program to two Brunswick juniors upon his graduation. But he says that won't be the end of his participation in Dinner Buddies.

"I'm going to definitely come back during breaks," he said.

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