

Wayland High Volunteer Mentors 5th Graders at Wilson Elementary

By Donna Sussman



While most teenage girls spend their time texting their friends, shopping for clothes, or thinking about boys, Jill Pandiscio juggles school work and her volunteer work with the Wilson Wizards program.

Under the Wilson Wizards program, fifth-grade girls receive intensive mentoring in math and science. This afterschool program builds on the partnership with the Framingham School system and the success of the Wilson All Star program to focus on improving the achievement levels of girls in science and math. The All Stars program is for third graders (male and female) and focuses on a personal set of goals and completing kids' homework with the assistance they need.

"My mother [Jill's mother worked at JFS] was the first one to tell me about the Wizards program. I have always loved math and science, and was excited at the prospect of sharing that love with other kids. After volunteering for my first year, it became clear that this was something I was committed to seeing through, after seeing how it affected many girls in the program," said Jill, a high school senior at Wayland High School who has been a volunteer with the Wizards program for all four years of high school.

Jill said she knew that she really wanted to work with kids because of her three-year experience as a tennis camp counselor at the Hammel Tennis Camp (part

of the Longfellow Clubs), where she taught tennis to kids ages 4 through 12. “After my first year with Wizards, I thought about splitting my time between Wizards and All Stars, but ultimately decided that as a teenage female, my ability to connect with the young women in Wizards was unique, and something which I wanted to continue.”

The Wizards program emphasizes hands-on activities and ignites a spark of interest in the girls, she noted. “We strive to show the girls that science exists in their everyday lives, and isn’t merely a collection of abstract concepts bound in textbooks. The Wizards does a great job of exposing the girls to opportunities which they may have never considered.”

Jill added that as a high school student, she recognized that she was more enthusiastic when her teachers were excited about what they were teaching the class. She has translated that excitement to her mentoring by being continually enthusiastic and engaged with the material that she covers.

During her first three years, Jill mainly worked with three to five girls once a week. Last summer, however, she helped Lucia Carballo put together the curriculum for this year, and she now comes in twice a week, leading a small group of three to four girls and helping out with class lessons as needed.

Volunteering with Wizards has become part of Jill’s regular daily routine. She plans ahead to be sure that she does not leave a lot of school work for Monday and Tuesday evenings when she is teaching with Wizards. Jill said she struggled in terms of balancing her participation with Wizards and maintaining her own school activities, particularly fall and winter sports, but over time she found the appropriate balance.

“It’s all about the balance, but honestly I have always felt that my work with Wizards trumps any late nights spent on homework, or a lack of a winter sport. I really believe in the program, and have seen the way the girls change every year. So, in short -- it’s worth it!” Jill said.

She also said that working with the Wizards program sparked her interest in teaching. “Since I started Wizards as a freshman, I have taught at my middle school in an afterschool homework club and math extra-help program. All of these experiences have been absolutely amazing,” she said.

As for the future, Jill is planning to go to college and is thinking of pursuing neuroscience, particularly pediatric neurology. She is also interested in psychology and education.

If you are interested in volunteering with the Wizards Program please contact Diana O’Brien dobrien@jfsmw.org.

