

The Magic of Giving

Talbot Elementary Staff Lounge Gets a \$25,000 Makeover

BY ANITA WEBSTER // PHOTOGRAPHY SUBMITTED BY ANITA WEBSTER & JOHN SLOAN

GIVING CAN WORK MAGIC.



Every day at my children's school, Talbot Elementary, I watch the magic of giving. I watch teachers give their patience and love to children who don't always make it easy to do so.

I watch a custodian in the cafeteria stop in her work to give restless children, finished with their meals, a game of Simon Says to help the time pass.

I watch a paraprofessional give an ESE child the magical glow of inner pride during a difficult lesson.

I watch the busy kitchen staff give motherly smiles and freshly made meals to a line of impatient, hungry children.

And all this giving worked its magic in me.

The day I first stepped into Talbot's 30-year-old staff lounge, I knew I found a gift I could give.

When Talbot opened its doors in the early 1990s, the lounge provided a place for staff — totaling almost 100 — to eat a quick meal and recharge with peers during the hectic workday.

Thirty years later, the room was largely abandoned. The smell alone was infamous among the faculty: an aroma of fresh moth balls with an undertone of formaldehyde. Despite regular cleaning, the rotting laminate cabinetry, rusted refrigerator and wobbly wooden chairs sent most staff looking for anywhere else to eat.

Where did they go?

I watched them retrieve their lunches from mini fridges, and microwaves they'd purchased themselves and tucked into their small supply rooms. I watched them eat alone in their classrooms, surrounded by papers to grade instead of fellow teachers with whom to share their day.

I watched this for a year as I volunteered across campus, and I had seen enough.

As a Talbot Parent-Teacher Association board member who voted on funding requests, I knew the PTA's budget was already stretched supplying essentials such as laminating film, teacher training and new classroom technology.

I also knew the school itself could not afford to renovate. Because Talbot's top priority is supporting its students, any funding the school receives goes directly to improving classrooms. Consequently, a room like the faculty lounge fell far down on the list of priorities.

So, one day in fall 2014, I emailed the school principal at the time, Lina Burklew, and asked her if I could explore a lounge makeover through outside donations.

"The timing of your email is absolutely amazing!" she wrote. "In the past couple of days, I have been in the lounge for maintenance reasons and thought that we needed to do something."

And this was something I could do — with a lot of help from my family and the community.

Fortunately, my husband, Matt Webster, is a builder and a man with a generous streak. Matt, the executive vice president of Charles Perry Partners Inc., is also the kind of person who follows through on his word, so I knew that if I got him into that awful lounge and talking with the principal, then I'd have him hooked.

Less than 30 minutes after the meeting, he called: "I've got you a new laminate floor, new ceiling framework and tiles and new light fixtures."

The folks at Teal Tile Carpet One Floor & Home, Acousti Engineering Company and Midstate Electric Co. had just worked their magic, donating all materials, including installation — a collective value of about \$5,000.

Now all I had to do was conjure a new kitchen, a new refrigerator, two new sofas, table seating for at least six and some decor for the walls.

With no money.

Then, in February, I got a call from McCullough Family Granite. Lee and Jean McCullough are a husband-wife team of custom cabinet makers who'd worked with CPPI and knew about our project. One of their clients, a homeowner in Ocala named Patrick Helm, was upgrading the



The Webster family
From left: Phoenix, Anita,
Matt and Arabella.

kitchen in his freshly-built suburban home and wanted to donate the original cabinets, sink and granite countertop.

The McCulloughs suggested our project, and — presto! — Helm gave the staff of Talbot Elementary a \$10,000 kitchen.

The Talbot PTA and the Talbot administration worked their magic, too — the PTA purchased two sofas and partnered with the administration to finance a new refrigerator.

CPPI and John C. Hipp Construction, my family's business, teamed up for the demolition, and my grandmother, Mary Hipp, and mother, Virginia Johns, bought the dining set, the wall art, two side tables and a shiny new Keurig, bringing the remodel to a value of \$25,000.

The School Board of Alachua County facilities folks pitched in, too, buying the wall paint, handling the plumbing and reworking the electrical to support the new appliances. Additional support came from Talbot's own custodial staff, who offered a helping hand whenever we needed it, despite their own, very long, to-do list.

To keep the remodel a surprise from the faculty, we renovated during summer break. For my daughter, Arabella, 10, and my son, Phoenix, 8, this meant giving up half their vacation. Instead of playdates and pool days, they spent five weeks combing home supply and furniture stores and waiting at their empty school every day for their mom to have time to play.

When the lounge was finished, and Vice Principal Deanna Feagin thanked the children for their sacrifice, Phoenix replied, "It was totally worth it."

When I began this project, I intended to work my magic on a tired, old room, but I realized the room had worked its magic on me.

For a year, I was part of a gift.

For a year, I was part of a team that celebrated every layer of old material torn out, every layer of new put in, every stroke of fresh paint and every new furnishing put into place.

When you watch people giving — to a dream that isn't even theirs — you realize what magic really is. Magic is not a force beckoned from a wand or a spell. Magic is a force wielded by the human heart. ■