

Inspire your students at

Inspiration Café



By Joseph S. Pizzo and
Dr. Kenneth Piascik

As classroom teachers, we get frustrated when our students don't seem to be willing to invest in their own successes. Often, they stop trying when a problem becomes challenging. Our students don't always value determination. Sadly, many of them have given up when facing a difficult problem, not using the strategies we adults use. Is there a way for us to give our students the chance to learn about the power of grit, determination and resilience from those inspired by these traits?

We wanted to give our students the best opportunities to be inspired by their hopes and dreams, but our goals didn't seem to match theirs. Is there a way to inspire our students to formulate their personal visions, retain their own resilience, and move forward with a determined passion so they know they are not the only people who struggle?

An idea is born

While traveling to the June 2017 National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (Schools to Watch) Conference in Arlington, Virginia, we began chatting about our vision for our students and our struggle of having an "inspirational" event that would not pull our Black River Middle School (BRMS) students out of their classes. At the conference, we attended a workshop that would serve to be our professional inspiration.

In its session, College Park Middle School in Ladson, South Carolina demonstrated how its career day program is conducted during lunch times. Immediately, we had a vision. We already have a successful career day program. Many schools do. Instead, we would design a program where our students could bring their lunches and listen

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Slam poet Taylor Mali was among the many speakers to headline Black River Middle School's Inspiration Café.

to speakers talk about challenges and adversity while pursuing their careers.

Inspiration Café, a yearlong program, could help us inspire our students and light the fires within them. Our excitement bubbled over as we discussed our plans to create Inspiration Café.

The planning process

There was an important step to take before we could begin creating Inspiration Café. We needed to secure administrative approval and funding. We are fortunate that as a School to Watch, we are encouraged to innovate. Without hesitation, our principal gave his enthusiastic approval, and our idea was ready for development.

Funding is a challenge for any school, including ours. One day we were discussing our idea with a supporter who became so excited that they gave us a start-up grant. Materials including two banners, tablecloths, frames, certificate paper, labels, envelopes and the first year of commemorative plaques were acquired with these funds.

We created a list of speakers for our café, placing these in a contact list along with any potential speakers for the future. We hoped to have a diverse group of presenters so students with varied interests would be inspired by someone working in a field that appeals to them. To organize our procedures for each event, we developed a flowchart to facilitate the process.

To have speakers with local and global perspectives, we needed to offer two types of presentation options. A featured speaker within commuting distance of our school would be invited to inspire our students in person. However, if the speaker lives far away, they would share their story in a Zoom conference. Please note: a high-quality webcam is needed so the speaker's image is clear, and the sound is run through a public address system with wireless microphones. This helps balance the sound and eliminate feedback.

Our café must be held in a quiet room without foot traffic during the program. We use the media center since we can close the center to students for a few periods on Fridays. Most importantly, the library remains open during the morning and late afternoon to serve our students. The librarians support our efforts, and we make sure the students thank them upon entering and exiting.

All attendees sign up online through a popular ticket app that is free as long as no event fee is charged. We accommodate up to 30 students and 10 VIPs, and tickets are on a first-come, first-served basis. The students are seventh graders because we all have lunch at the same time, so class coverage is not needed. The VIPs have included our board of education members, PTO members, interested parents, NJEA Vice President Steve Beatty, SCEA Vice President Henry Goodhue, and our building faculty and administrators.



Joe Pizzo and Ken Piascik interview Rick Wormeli about going to the ocean's depths to film the elusive giant squid.

The event must be professional on every level from communication to appearance. Every table has a tablecloth, cookies, bottled water, and a set of expected behaviors and protocols to follow. Students may either bring their lunches to the café, or they may buy lunch in the cafeteria. Those buying lunch receive priority status by showing their e-ticket confirmation to the cafeteria staff. We also provide water for all attendees and an appetizer plate for our VIPs.

Finally, we have created an Inspiration Café website, allowing us to maintain a historical record of past programs while allowing future events to be posted. We also use the website to gather information about each speaker. The website can be found at brmsinspiration.weebly.com.

Our history, so far

To contact potential speakers, we send a letter of inquiry that provides an overview of Inspiration Café, as well as our rationale for inspiring our students. We encourage the speakers to share their struggles as they have worked their way toward their career goals.

Challenges, barriers, and disappointments are part of every journey to success. By sharing these stories, our speakers encourage our students to expect roadblocks along the way as they someday will negotiate their journeys to their own successes. Failures are seen as learning opportunities rather than reasons to quit pursuing their dreams. Every speaker inevitably stresses the importance of grit and resilience.

We run between four and five programs a year with speakers covering a wide range of talents and professions. Since the 2018-19 school year, the debut of our café, our guests have underscored the importance of both inspiration and determination.

Our guests represent a wide range, including Steve Piascik who is tax advisor to professional athletes and extreme high net-worth clients, radio personality Jim Monaghan and three-time Caldecott Award winner David Wiesner. We also featured Dr. Jocelyn Chadwick, a former NCTE President, Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor, and Mark Twain expert. We continued in 2019-20

with choreographer and former Rockette Jaclyn Ford and Rutgers University head women's soccer coach James McElderry.

Our plans were unceremoniously put on hold when schools were closed because of COVID-19. The logistics of continuing to run Inspiration Café during the pandemic were too much to overcome. As the world changed its priorities and put many activities on hold, we were forced to do the same. Interestingly enough, negotiating our way through COVID-19 became a true test for all who gave their best efforts to survive and flourish.

With great excitement, we channeled our energy and reopened Inspiration Café for the 2022-23 school year. Taylor Mali was our perfect first guest. His natural energy and poetic flair were felt by everyone in attendance. Christina Seckar is an international human resources professional who appeals to students interested in the world of business involving travel. Emiko Oye inspires by sharing her "can do" attitude when combining her artistic vision with making a living. We concluded with Sean Conaty, a professional filmmaker who has shared the rewards of producing films while also worrying about finding opportunities for his projects.

This year, we have continued the momentum that has been built in the past. We began with former U.S. Olympic bobsledder Jean Prahm, who continues to be a role model. She gave our students insight into the importance of training daily and accepting hardship and even failure as opportunities to become stronger while working to improve their performance.



Rutgers University head women's soccer coach James McElderry speaks at the Inspiration Café.

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Those also visiting Inspiration Café during this 2023-24 academic year include businessman and broadcaster Professor Richard Allen, along with educator, author, and thought guru Rick Wormeli, who was excited to tell the tale of his family's pursuit and eventual success to gain film footage of the elusive giant squid in the ocean's depths. We are scheduled to end the season with a famous movie and television actor.

As you can see, our list of guests at Inspiration Café includes authors, business leaders, artists and sports figures. We are always looking for outstanding professionals from a variety of fields to inspire our students. Please forward to us any potential speakers you may be aware of. Most importantly, our "New Jersey" goal is to have Bruce Springsteen ("The Boss") visit Inspiration Café. If you know of a sure-fire way to contact him, then please let us know.

Feedback

Inspiration Café has been very popular in our school. From our board of education, parents/guardians, students and the community, everyone is excited when they attend. They go on to express their anticipation for the next event.

As a parent stated on Facebook, "A huge thanks to Dr. Piascik and Mr. Pizzo for their fabulous Inspiration Café series. Some BRMS students were lucky enough to attend today's presentation to hear Caldecott Medal-winning author David Wiesner give a truly inspiring talk about his work. We are so lucky to have educators who put these types of programs together."

"Inspiration Cafe is one of a kind," says Chester Board of Education President Sarah Shultz. "This is an



Inspiration Café

Where Dreams
Are Made

Black River Middle School
Chester, New Jersey

extraordinary program that brings experts in their fields to the Chester School District. This program is truly a gift that opens our students' eyes to the endless possibilities ahead."

"The program plants a seed at a pivotal age for middle school students," observes BRMS Principal Andrew White. "The goal is to aid them as they navigate their own journey with the hope that they will someday pay it forward and impart their own individual wisdom to the next generation. I have witnessed the pure joy, excitement, and validation that their dreams can come true even if the students have to struggle first."

Even with all the positive feedback from adults and school leadership, the best reward is witnessing the students' piqued interest and desire to move forward with their dreams. "It was really nice to know that I'm not the only one that had no idea on what they wanted to do at my age, because I don't, and it was nice to have some reassurance," shares one student. "And that's why I really love this café!"

"Inspiration Café, as it states in its name, is really inspirational because as we talked to the speakers, we could see that they are just ordinary people," shares another student. "It was really cool to see how they were able to turn their passion into something as great as they did and into a great achievement. And that inspired me!"

At the end of every Inspiration Café, our students sign a certificate and write a short note to the presenter. They highlight what the talk meant to them. Their comments and reactions exemplify the impact of Inspiration Café. That is truly inspirational!

Please visit us

If you wish to visit one of our Inspiration Café presentations, please reach out to us. We have been able to accommodate up to 10 VIP guests for each presentation. As a member of the national Schools to Watch program, we are also able to have a team from a middle school visit us to learn about our exemplary middle school curricula.

We are hoping to set aside a day early in the 2024-25 school year to run a special Inspiration Café program. This will be followed by a more detailed presentation of how Inspiration Café began and how you can start one at your school. There will be plenty of time for questions. Please email us if you are interested in attending our special program, and we will send you an invitation when the date is finalized. Furthermore, should you wish to have us share more details with your school, please reach out to us. 📧