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A Denton teacher and a barber team up to get students to feel like a part of their city

By Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales Staff Writer
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Rivera Elementary School students marvel at the view from Sunago Bell, a venue on the top floor of the downtown Denton Wells Fargo building, on Dec. 9. Students gathered in the venue for hot chocolate and iced holiday cookies before they started their StoryWalk field trip, which took them around the Square. Murry Chavez/DRC

Correction

In an earlier version of this story, Rivera Elementary School's accountability rating was incorrect for 2024. The campus received an overall score of "F." Student Navaeh Statham's last name was also misspelled.

A group of third graders from Tomás Rivera Elementary School have formed a scrum at the elevator doors inside the downtown Denton Wells Fargo building.

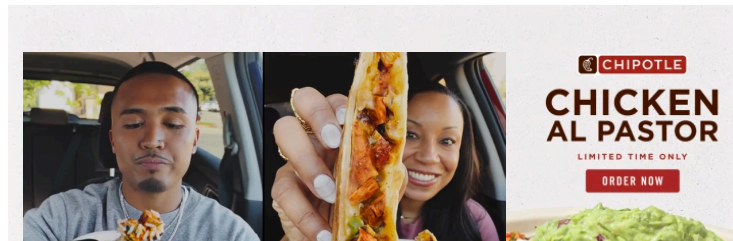
They've heard about the cookies and the hot chocolate — something one volunteer calls "schoolkid bait," with a laugh.

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But as soon as the student surge out of the elevator on the eighth floor, they are enveloped by the floor-to-ceiling windows of the cool, stylish venue, Sunago Bell. It takes a split-second for the third graders to realize they can see for miles, and a few sprint for a closer look.

“Walk! No running!” a teacher calls, smiling at their excitement.

One boy skips a few strides before a classmate grabs his arm.

“Sloooooow down, Marco!” she says. Now? Marco is speedwalking to the east-facing wall of windows.

They cluster next to a window, peppering another teacher with questions.

Where is our school, again?

How many miles did the school bus go?

Is this a skyscraper?

The teacher answers with questions. *Do you see the Denton police station? Can you see the roof of the school over there?*

The elevator makes dozens of trips up and down, letting third, fourth and fifth graders out in groups. Each time the elevator doors close, the noise volume bumps up again. Eventually, Rivera Principal Narda Harber gets off the elevator. She’s dressed in the spirit of a visit to a Denton that’s decked out for the holidays. She wears a bright red shirt with Will Ferrell as his title character from the movie *Elf*, hands thrown up in glee. Beneath Ferrell’s face reads the word “SANTA!”

As Harber looks out at her students, she said she sees a school that is reaping the benefits of dedicated teachers and a devoted community. Both have played a role in Rivera’s massive strides from struggling as an underperforming campus to celebrating high marks in the most recent state accountability ratings.

It started with a teacher

Many of the students who gathered at Sunago Bell have never been to downtown Denton before.

That troubled Stephens Elementary School teacher Ethan Bell, who had taught math at Rivera. Bell is also a dad of two children.

"I started teaching in 2021," Bell said. "My first school was Rivera, where I taught third grade math. I taught there for four years, and during the first two years that I was teaching there, I learned what a Title I campus was."

A Title I campus is a school that qualifies for federal funding to serve a student population that is made up of 40% or more students from low-income households.

On Title I campuses, a high number of students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. Denton ISD reports that 21 of its campuses receive Title I funding, with almost all of them being elementary schools.

"I learned that Rivera was the highest-percentage Title I campus in Denton ISD," Bell said



Ethan Bell, left, a teacher at Stephens Elementary School, shares a table with downtown Denton barber Gary Barnhart. The two men, who have children in Denton ISD, formed Deep in the Heart of Denton, a nonprofit that raises money and lowers the barriers — from transportation to the cost of a dinner — for students at Rivera Elementary School to visit downtown Denton. Rivera is the closest campus to the Square out of Denton ISD's 46 schools. But many students have never been to the historic downtown Square.

Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales/DRC

After he learned that none of his math students had ever been to the Square, Bell said he gave out gift certificates to downtown Denton businesses. Bell knows what all public school teachers know: School doesn't end when the last bell rings. Students learn from experience, from making connections and diving into the world outside of the school door.

"I was looking for different ways to incentivize them to go to the Square," he said. "At one point, I'd gotten 40 student discounts to go Recycled Books and get a book for \$5-off certificate. And none of them got used."

Meeting the right person

Bell told a friend about those untapped discounts at Recycled Books, Records & CDS, a sort of wonderland of a store on the corner of Locust and Oak streets. Recycled is famous for attracting shoppers to come in and spend an hour longer than intended, looking through the stacks of vinyl, the jewel cases of CDs, and the rows and rows of books.

"His friend is my client, and that's where I came in," said Gary Barnhart, the long-haired owner of Barnhart's Barbershop on the Square. "My client told him to meet with me — I guess gave you my number."

Barnhart is the sort of business owner who feels indebted to community. Barbering is an intimate business, after all, dealing in image and identity in a single cut or shave. He's also the dad of three, with his two oldest in Denton ISD.

The men reminisced about forming a new nonprofit, Deep in the Heart of Denton, at a table inside Jupiter House Coffee. They returned to the coffeehouse to talk about why they forfeited spare time to build a nonprofit to serve local schools.

"The families that are there, they're busy making ends meet and keeping up with things," Barnhart said, recalling the meeting and picking over the reasons so many of the children who lived near the Square hadn't visited.

Barnhart said they talked about what it takes to get to downtown.

"They may not have the time or access to the Square that some other people may," Barnhart said. "And so, would we be able to bring them to the Square?"

Bell asked: "You mean like on a bus?"

"And I went, 'We can get a bus?'" Barnhart said. "And he goes, 'Yeah, we just have to talk to the bus barn.'"

Bell called the Denton ISD bus barn and asked how much it would cost to load Rivera students on one and take them downtown.

"I said, 'OK, well, my business will pay for that,' because it was significantly less than I anticipated," Barnhart said.

"We realized we could just bring the kids, and that it was going to be during dinner time, but we also needed to give them something to do that wasn't going to cost anything, because there are lots of free things to do downtown — like tons of free things to do downtown," Barnhart said.

The more he and Bell talked about it, the more Barnhart thought he could tap into more support from downtown merchants. They found that downtown restaurants were willing to serve the students a meal, local police wanted to volunteer, and that the Denton public library already had a free program called StoryWalks.

StoryWalks are books that unfold over a tour of the Square or Fred Moore Park. Kids and families can walk around the Square or park and follow along with pages of stories, which are seasonal and change regularly.

Barnhart met the local StoryWalk coordinator, Denton Public Library outreach librarian Haley Nye Phillips, in 2021 when she was looking for local businesses that were willing to lend their windows to the library to post StoryWalk pages. Barnhart was all in then, and liked the idea of tailoring a StoryWalk to students.



Students from Rivera Elementary School gather outside of Free Play Denton for a piece of their StoryWalk field trip on Dec. 9. The students moved around the Square in groups, reading parts of a story about a character named Ethan and the feral cats he's trying to care for in Denton.

Lucinda Breeding-Gonzales/DRC

A Rivera StoryWalk

For the most recent field trip, which happened just after Denton dressed the Square in holiday lights and colors, the StoryWalk follows a character named Ethan who wants to keep three local feral cats healthy. Fresh from fueling up on hot chocolate and frosted cookies, the students went from window to window.

Sometimes, a volunteer read the story in Spanish, and each stop offered up new details about the feral cats and Ethan in both English and Spanish. Students circulated through downtown on foot with clipboards. They toted their worksheets, with questions in English and Spanish, and riddled through the text as they went.

The field trip feels like a reward — and it is. But it's also a supplement to Rivera's curriculum and culture.

"Visiting downtown Denton helps students see how their learning connects to the world around them," Denton ISD Superintendent Susannah O'Bara said. "It strengthens their understanding of local history, culture and civic life while fostering a sense of belonging in the community. Experiences like these show students that learning extends beyond the classroom and that they play an active role in their city."

Not long ago, Rivera was struggling across the board. In 2023, the elementary school scored an F in all accountability metrics monitored by the Texas Education Agency.

When the 2024 report cards dropped a few months ago, the school had soared to a B rating in school progress and closing the gaps. The campus failed the student achievement rating, but had made so much progress that its overall rating is now a B. Denton ISD and Rivera are still working hard to make academic progress.

Harber, the principal, said the students' greatest needs are the basics: good, nutritious food, clothes and things like transportation and attendance. Across the state, schools with a higher number of students who are underinsured or uninsured for health care suffer more illness and difficulty with chronic health conditions.

Photos: Denton ISD elementary students take a field trip downtown



Rivera Elementary School students marvel at the view from Sunago Bell, a venue on the top floor of the downtown Denton Wells Fargo building, on Dec. 9. Students gathered in the venue for hot chocolate and iced holiday cookies before they started their StoryWalk field trip, which took them around the Square.

Murry Chavez/DRC

Harber, who was recently named the principal of Rivera, is a product of Denton ISD. When her hiring was announced at a school board meeting, the news was met with cheers and tears, a rare happening at such announcements. She said district leaders and the campus have made use of "wraparound services," which help students get into the classroom ready to learn, meaning they have had breakfast and can count on lunch, have clothing and get what they need from their campus nurse.

From there, Harber said, Rivera's staff and faculty have stepped up.

"The school also focuses on delivering high-quality, data-driven instruction that accelerates students toward grade-level expectations," she said. "Faculty, staff and administration collaborate intentionally to meet these needs."

Teachers and specialists analyze data, plan targeted lessons and adjust their instruction, she said. Then they observe students, gather feedback and tailor personalized coaching to narrow gaps.

Harber said the campus has also paid close attention to behavioral needs so that classrooms run smoothly, and students who need support can get back to learning.

Students soak it in

Nevaeh Statham, a third grader at Rivera, has technically been to the Square before, when she was a baby.

As for the StoryWalk, Nevaeh has an easy favorite.

“Getting a cup of hot cocoa,” she said.

She did like reading, which is her favorite subject at school, and learning about the kittens in the story, and was reminded of her family’s calico cat. She wanted to get a closer look at the lighted trees on the Courthouse on the Square lawn.

Richard Hall is a fifth grader who will head off to Myers Middle School next year. He prefers math, and said he enjoyed the evening out. He and his group finished the StoryWalk and sat down to dinner at the Chestnut Tree.

“I like looking at what I see, on the lights and stuff,” Richard said. “And I had a good time. I think I’m going to look at the courthouse.”

Richard also planned to get his picture taken in the sleigh on the courthouse lawn to show his mother. He counts the field trip as a treat from a school he loves.

“There’s just a lot of nice teachers there for me,” he said. “They’ve been caring about me, well, since I got to Rivera.”

Beyond the walk

Bell and Barnhart said they hope to offer their programs to other Denton ISD Title I campuses. The Square has something to teach about Denton history through the Courthouse on the Square, culture through the busking, and lessons in how to navigate public spaces. Deep in the Heart of Denton can grow, Bell and Barnhart said.

“The first field trip, I think I called about 35 of the 60 families, and every single one said yes,” Bell said. “There might have been one that said, ‘Yes, but there might be a baseball game that we can’t miss’ — you know, something preventing it. So my end of it, I think, just mirrored that on the other end, with the local businesses.”

Barnhart said Denton folks adopt other Denton folks.

“I think the businesses down here, you know, they want to see people down here, naturally, but also, everybody in Denton loves Denton,” Barnhart said. “We have a knack for doing things for ourselves, and I think it’s really beautiful. It’s what’s kept me here for so long.”

O’Bara said the nonprofit shows that Denton supports its public schools and values them enough to serve students, even though it means working outside of their job hours.

“It reflects a strong, united commitment to our students,” she said. “When schools and the community work together, it shows that we share responsibility for student success and well-being. Partnerships like this demonstrate the health of our relationships and the importance Denton places on elevating opportunities for all learners.”

Harber isn’t surprised that the initiative started with a Rivera math teacher, though Bell is also in the district’s assistant principal residency program — a hint that Bell could one day end up in the front office.

“Tomás Rivera Elementary achieved significant gains in state accountability outcomes by implementing campus systems, enhancing teacher capacity and fostering stronger partnerships with the community,” Harber said. “Our focus was not on isolated initiatives but on creating consistent, predictable structures that supported both teaching and learning.”

You can take a teacher out of the classroom, but from Harber’s vantage point, the classroom and the students are forever part of a gifted teacher.

“It tells you that educators care when they see a problem, they see a solution, that they have that ‘whatever it takes’ mindset to bring whatever the kids need to them,” Harber said. “So it really speaks to the heart that every educator has, and that we’re willing to do whatever it takes to give the kids these opportunities.”

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