

A helping hand

Social worker Tonya Monnier discusses the rewards and challenges of her job

By Nyah Mathis
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School social worker Tonya Monnier speaks with a student.

Photo by Nyah Mathis

Students grapple with many things: homework, jobs, sports and many other things that can make their schooling complicated. But for some students, these things are the least of their worries. These students deal with homelessness, depression, suicidal thoughts and more, which make their lives incredibly difficult. They not only need someone to guide them through their personal struggles but to also provide emotional support. And for many students, this person is Pike High School social worker Tonya Monnier.

Ms. Monnier started her job at Pike in 1999 after being a home-based therapist.

"I have always been a caring person," Ms. Monnier said.

As a kid, Ms. Monnier said she was always striving to help her friends, family and others.

"She probably has the biggest heart in our entire township," said Benjamin Csikos, a Pike assistant principal. "Ms. Monnier is such a caring listener who gives sound advice to the students and even adults. She is the biggest advocate for all of the students at Pike."

Assistant superintendent Maggie Bishop agrees.

"Working with Mrs. Monnier is wonderful. She is committed to her students, families, and the Pike community," said Ms. Bishop.

Despite having a passion for helping people since she was young, Ms. Monnier didn't set her sights on social work until a later age.

"I didn't know about social work until I got to college. My advisor suggested I take an intro to social work class and I loved it," said Ms. Monnier.

The decision in college would lead to 22 years and counting of helping families at Pike.

Ms. Monnier's work has impacted many students' lives. She has worked with homeless families, suicidal students, families with financial difficulties and more. One case Ms. Monnier deems as successful is a time she worked with a female Pike senior who had accumulated a high GPA while dealing with homelessness.

"She had about a 4.5, like a really high GPA," Ms. Monnier said, "and she was concerned whether or not she could go to college. She didn't think she could go to college because she didn't think she could afford it."

Ms. Monnier worked with this student during her senior year to secure housing and to complete her FAFSA and college requirements.

"She ended up getting into IU [Indiana University] on a full-ride scholarship," Ms. Monnier said.

These successful cases have earned Ms. Monnier recognition amongst her colleagues. At the end of the 2020-2021 school year, she was named the school's Teacher of the Year.

"She has wonderful ideas and provides ongoing feedback to support our students, families and staff," Ms. Bishop said.

Of course, not all cases that Ms. Monnier takes end well.

"One of the parents I was working with died of a drug overdose," said Ms. Monnier, remembering a case that negatively impacted her mental health. "I worked with this family [for] several years and grew close to the parent and her children."

Ms. Monnier said that it's always difficult to see homeless families that she works with struggle.

"It's hard to see families struggling. I've seen a lot of families that were homeless living in hotels or in their cars get housing, but then after a year or two, they're back to where they've lost housing again," she said.

Ms. Monnier has expressed these hardships to her colleagues.

"Mrs. Monnier has shared that her work is rewarding and, at times, difficult," Ms. Bishop said. "However, she would not trade her work to do anything else."

Upon seeing depressing and difficult things at work, personal mental health is important to Ms. Monnier.

"Social workers definitely have to utilize self-care, because we do see a lot of things," she said.

A good mental mindset can be difficult to sustain in Ms. Monnier's field of work, which is why she takes time to enjoy the people and things in her life that make her happy.

"I like to hang out with my friends. I like to laugh. I have two dogs at home. I love my family and doing things with them," said Ms. Monnier. "I've just learned over the years that when I leave work, I have to leave everything at work. I can't take it home with me. Because if I did, then it would eat me alive."