

# Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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**For Immediate Release**

Feb. 1, 2022

**Contact: Kevin Lyons**

815.337.3071



## Life Connections students get slice of independence

Antioch Pizza had all the right ingredients for Woodstock Community Unit School District 200's Life Connections program, and the dough is still rising.

The program provides 18- to 22-year-olds with developmental disabilities opportunities to learn vocational skills and job market preparation. Life Connections students have already been working with Walgreens pharmacy, Read Between the Lynes bookstore and a few other local businesses and agencies.

Woodstock North High School graduates Rachel and Justin spend two hours, twice each week, at Antioch Pizza's Woodstock location, weighing dough for the evening's pizza orders, measuring out chicken wing orders and other duties.

Store manager Dylan Hernandez says he's enjoyed working with his new interns. "They're doing a great job. They're super ambitious. It seems that they like it. They learn great lessons. They help me learn lessons as well."

Karen Wicklein, who owns Antioch Pizza with her husband Art, said she helped develop similar internship programs with their other pizza stores in Fox Lake, Antioch and McHenry and is excited about the new partnership in Woodstock. Antioch Pizza also donated all team meals for the Woodstock Blue Streaks football games, donated pizzas sold in the concession stands and hosts school PTO fundraisers.

"I am a teacher by trade, by education and heart and soul. It's in me. We love connecting with the community. We love connecting with schools and giving back," Wicklein said.

She approached District 200 educators with the internship program based on the success they'd had at other schools. "I thought there must be a need for this at more high schools, and sure enough there was," she said. "The kids in the transition group at every location have blown us away."

Jennifer Cellucci, who oversees the Life Connections program for District 200, said these vocational internships are a huge piece of educating young adults who also learn independent skills such as budgeting or looking for apartments.

"Antioch Pizza has been very attentive and accommodating with everything," Cellucci said. "They're really invested in helping the kids develop the skills they need for work."

Both Cellucci and Wicklein said the ultimate goal is for these young adults to become gainfully employed. Wicklein said they have already hired one person who completed the transition program at another store and is hoping for similar results in Woodstock.

"It's being able to provide an experience for these kids to learn, grow, and become independent in our community," Wicklein said.