

## "Knock, knock." "Who's There?" "Leaf." "Leaf Who?" "Leaf me alone."

### "Mr. LUNCH"

By Bob Ingram

His name is John Lynch and he's director of sales and entertainment at the Wildwoods Convention Center - but to the pre-K kids at Glenwood Elementary School in Wildwood, he's "Mr. Lunch."

Lynch got that handle because of the "Lunch With Lynch" program now in its third year at Glenwood. It all came about because of a phone call to Lynch from Kathy Haas, the longtime pre-K teacher at Glenwood. She knew that he'd been involved with the Dr. Seuss Read Across America program where he'd gone into schools to read to mostly upper grade students.

"Hey, would you come in and read to my kids?" Lynch remembers Kathy Haas asking and he readily accepted.

"It was the most unbelievable experience that I've ever had in my life," Lynch says. The twenty kids in the class were a mixed ethnic group, and were "the most gracious kids I've ever met," he goes on. He doesn't even remember what he read - "I think I made half of it up," he grins - but the kids didn't want him to leave, hugging him and asking for more.

That incredible reading was toward the end of the school year, and Kathy Haas and Lynch were on the beach over the summer and she asked, "Why don't you take one lunch hour a month and come over and read to the kids?"

That was no problem for John Lynch, who usually eats at his Convention Center desk, and thus was Lunch With Lynch - named by Haas - born. "I started reading to the kids and the more I got to know them, the more I knew I wanted to do something for them," he says. "After two or three times, it was like I was family. It was remarkable."

Lynch decided to ramp up the fledgling program, and brought in former Wildwood policeman Tony Robinson, who now works for Cape May County, to talk about safety, and Jody Del Gordon of Crest Savings Bank to speak on the value of money and saving.

At that point, Glenwood Elementary principal John Cummings gave Lynch carte blanche to proceed with Lunch With Lynch, and "that's how it kind of snowballed," Lynch says.

"This will be our third year," he goes on, "and I try to bring them something every time I go. I needed some money to do this, and the Gia Chiarella Foundation, for whom I do the auction that allows them to give \$1,000 to every school on the island, gave \$1,000 toward Lunch With Lynch."

Beyond that, Lynch approached the Cape May County Fraternal Order of Police with the idea of making Lunch With Lynch a foundation with all the money going through the F.O.P., "and they immediately jumped on it," he notes. Thus the Lunch With Lynch Foundation came into being.

Other community groups joined the parade, as well. The Elks sponsored a lunch and magic show at the Convention Center for both the pre-K and kindergarten kids, and the United Way took them to a movie.

When the foundation did a community day, the kids got to ride on the monster truck on the beach and play softball at Fox Park, which was a novelty because the Glenwood

schoolyard is asphalt. The kids liked softball so much that Lynch wants to sponsor a boy and a girl in Little League softball.

There is an honors program at Glenwood Elementary and Lunch With Lynch will be giving a V.I.P. package of gifts to each honors kid.

The program has expanded to the third grade now and John Lynch says, "Children really need what we can offer as a community through this program."

He gets his thanks in various ways. He says he was on the Boardwalk and a Latino family approached and a little girl pointed at him and yelled, "Mr. Lunch! Mr. Lunch!"

Another time he was taking the kids for a tramcar ride and Gigi - John Gigliotti - the tramcar honcho, was already at the school when Lynch pulled up. He got out of his car and the kids all flocked to him, happy and hugging. When they were all on the tram, Gigi said to him, "Geez, how many kids do you have in this school?"

"My motivation is driven one hundred percent by the administration and teachers at Glenwood Elementary," Lynch emphasizes.

A native of Stone Mountain, Georgia, John Lynch is deeply rooted in his adopted community. He and his wife, Vicki, came to Five Mile Island 22 years ago, and over the years Lynch has made himself a fixture at almost every community event, both as an emcee and an auctioneer, skills he has honed over the years.

He is on the board of directors of the Cape May County Chamber of Commerce, a member of the foundation board for the Special Services School District, is past president of the United Way, chairman of the Light the Night Walk, and has been strongly involved with the Make A Wish Foundation.

"I volunteer at about 32 events a year in the community," Lynch says. "Things like auctions, beef and beers, and bike rides.

"My dad, Hugh, was my role model," he continues. "He said, 'Your family comes first, your job comes second, giving back to your community comes third, and anything after that is a bonus.'"

The elder Lynch was recently named national volunteer of the year by Good Shepherds House and currently runs the Meals On Wheels program in Atlanta.

"We don't have children and I don't have a hobby," John Lynch says. "My community is my child and my hobby. My job at the Convention Center has opened up a lot of avenues for meeting people and organizations in the community."

Vicki Lynch, an accountant at Montego Bay and the Splash Zone, is with her husband every step of the way. "She has one rule," Lynch notes. "She doesn't care what I do Monday through Thursday, but whatever I do Friday through Sunday, she wants to be involved with it. She is extraordinarily supportive."

And they are extraordinary couple doing extraordinary things for a grateful community.

To find out more about the Lynchs' community involvement, visit [www.lunchwithlynch.com](http://www.lunchwithlynch.com) and [www.useus.com](http://www.useus.com)



Lovin' the tram car



Mrs. Haas and her kids



Little Millie & Mr. Lynch!



Stewarts treated the kids to free ice cream



Glenwood kids pose at the Wildwoods Sign



Mrs Haas painted Mr. Lunch's nose and gave him antlers as he read a Christmas story



School board member Ernie Troiano III, Lynch and Principal Kenyon Kummings



The PreK class, teacher and aids of Glenwood Avenue school all agree that Lunch with Lynch is better than recess!