

Speaker 1:

I'm excited to be here today with John Mika, the director of what's known as The Teacher's Desk in Western New York. Now I got here about four years ago, and this ministry, this organization was probably one of the most exciting things I had ever heard about coming from an inner city background. So, we've invited John to come share with us today a little bit of the why and the how and the who his organization is getting a chance to minister to.

So thank you, John, for spending a little time with us, sharing why there's a need for The Teacher's Desk here in Western New York. Actually, I'm sure there's a need for The Teacher's Desk across the nation, but I'm glad it's here, and the integrating biblical principles that you're also trying to put into the lives of both the students and the teachers in unique ways. So, share again with me why you even started The Teacher's Desk.

John Mika:

Sure. It's a God thing, but for me, I spent 30 years at GM, retired from GM, hooked up with a Christian ministry called Kingdom Bound. Worked with Donna and Freddy and the wonderful group there for eight years. Left Kingdom Bound, started subbing in the Buffalo Public Schools and in a lot of Catholic schools in Williamsville where my wife and I live.

But when I went to the city schools, and this is where God always comes in, you either have to stand back, you have to do something, or you have to run. Something's going on with everything we do when God puts these things in front of us. For me, it was going into the city schools and seeing three kids with pencils in a classroom, five kids with paper and everybody hovering around the kids that had the stuff. Class after class, day after day, school after school.

This lasted about six months. Went back to the suburbs and taught at those schools and relaxed with 20 pencils on the floors at the end of the school day. Kids didn't know it wasn't their fault. So that was my moment where, for me, I had to make a decision, either be all in for an idea for school supplies for teachers. I was a decent teacher, was not a great teacher. A wonderful sub, because they could do anything they wanted and I loved them through it.

So I learned compassion for teachers when I was there, especially in the city schools, and certainly compassion for the students that I had no idea didn't have anything. When I needed pencils when I was growing up, my parents were auto workers, I was an auto worker, when I needed pencils, supplies, I had them. When I didn't need them, I had them. Most of the schools that we serve, the 250 schools that shop at The Teacher's Desk, those supply lists don't even go home.

Speaker 1:

You spent several years subbing, you recognized there's this need.

John Mika:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Speaker 1:

How did you get poked by God to start looking at supplies?

John Mika:

Absolutely, he was relentless. The more he put it into my heart to do it, the more I said, "I've got to do this." So the first thing I did, obviously the first thing any good husband does is talks to his wife about it.

Speaker 1:

Good for you.

John Mika:

So Brenda said ... and she brings this up at least once a month that I said it was only going to be a two day thing.

Speaker 1:

Sure.

John Mika:

I've never been this busy in my entire life and never loving it more, God's all over it. So, I went back to Kingdom Bound with the idea to open a teacher free store. True story. Donna said, "Of course, come on back on staff. Go under 501 for a couple years till you can start your own." Went home that night, had a dream. Dreamt about a building on Main Street in Buffalo. I saw the clear picture of this building while I was sleeping. Woke up, sent a three line email to the owner of the building who I knew.

God has used so many folks to bring The Teacher's Desk where it is, and we all had different gifts that we can contribute. For Bill Hine it was and Diane and the foundation. I asked him if I could have that building rent free, I asked him if I could have the building utility free. He would be very embarrassed right now if he heard this, but he said yes. Because he said yes, with the gifts God's given him, it enabled me to run and chase pencils and not rent money.

We've been there 11 years now. 150,000 students being served by 250 schools. Teachers come, 6,000 teachers. We have curbside shopping, we have shopping that's in the store every Saturday, and it really is a miracle.

Speaker 1:

I mean, I drove by there the other day and I watched as teachers were able to pull up, they opened up the back of their trunks and a team of people, volunteers I'm assuming-

John Mika:

Volunteers.

Speaker 1:

Are loading up their truck with what kind of supplies? What's-

John Mika:

\$1,000. Every teacher gets a minimum of \$1,000 in school supplies, all the core items, binders, three ring binders. All new, nothing used.

Speaker 1:

Every year.

John Mika:

Sometimes we put in a little bit of used books, but they also get new books, 10 new books. Disney books for the younger kids and different titles for the older kids. Hygiene items, toothbrushes, toothpaste, all that kind of stuff. Magazines, they get the core items, they get fun stuff, they get little poncho footballs, they get all kinds of items for the-

Speaker 1:

So when you say fun stuff, teachers so often need incentives-

John Mika:

Totally.

Speaker 1:

And oftentimes it comes right out of their own pocket. They go to the Dollar Tree, they find something to encourage a student, "Hey, learning your A, B, Cs, learning how to do your math, this is an incentive if you get it right." How many volunteers do you use?

John Mika:

265 weekly volunteers, 265 different people. The thing that encourages me is when God gave me this vision to do this. I had no problem with believing that he would give us product, I had no problem that he would give us the funding, but I was on my face for volunteers. I knew the magnitude that this would grow to, and if God didn't provide, it wouldn't happen.

So we have a mix of 265 weekly volunteers, different people, not including businesses, non-for-profits, church groups, corporations, hockey teams-

Speaker 1:

Not including.

John Mika:

Not including. Volunteering weekly at The Teacher's Desk. It's really a miracle.

Speaker 1:

Wow. It would almost sound like they're fighting over the opportunity to volunteer-

John Mika:

Yeah, we have over 100 special needs groups that volunteer, 100 special needs students and adults that volunteer as well. 18 different groups.

Speaker 1:

So, you're a seed planning ministry. Not only are you getting people to be able to come in and use their gifts in distributing things and putting them in boxes and putting them in Ziplocs. Because for example, I went in the other day and I think you might get a crate full of pens, but you need to separate that out. Somebody needs to do it.

John Mika:

Right.

Speaker 1:

So you're getting volunteers using their hands, putting them in Ziplocs, and then a teacher gets X amount of pens for their kids.

John Mika:

Correct. We give away 20,000 pens per week, so those have to be packed, and we have our incredible volunteer team do it. Three things happen there. You're delivering hope to students in need, that's the gospel. Then you're encouraging educators, teachers, and then you're providing purpose. Providing purpose for volunteers.

The one thing I knew we were doing at the beginning was providing for students, I had no idea that would be so encouraging to educators. I should have assumed it, but I didn't. The thing that I love about The Teacher's Desk is out of our 6,000 teachers, we have thousands of teachers that are in love with Jesus, thousands of teachers that are believers.

Speaker 1:

How do you know that?

John Mika:

They tell us. I mean, we get notes, we get letters, they come in, they're all over it all the time.

Speaker 1:

I mean, one of the questions I had is, how do you even know you're making an impact? I was there, I've been there a couple times. A car pulls up, opens up the trunk, it's real easy. You've made it easy for teachers. Put a big box of \$1,000 worth of supplies in the back of their trunk, or they come in, they come in with a shopping cart, they're able to select what they need, they walk out with it. But then it could be, oh, I'm just shopping. Teacher picks up all these things, he gives it away for free. But how do you know they're making an impact?

John Mika:

I mean, I've had volunteers come in, I've had teachers come in that have said ... in fact, there's several of the ... I have no idea of names, it's just teachers that talk to me.

Speaker 1:

Sure.

John Mika:

Because of The Teacher's Desk, their children are believers now.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

John Mika:

Because they were educators, their children were educators and they didn't trust the church until they saw the church in action at The Teacher's Desk.

Speaker 1:

Mm-hmm. Through these tangible physical items that they can use.

John Mika:

Yeah, but that's all up to God, I don't worry about any of that. I'm very open with who I am, we're very open with who we are at The Teacher's Desk. There's signage everywhere talking about who we are, but the one thing that everybody has to do, whether you're curbside shopping or in-store shopping is sign a waiver. At the bottom of that waiver where they put the date and their signature, it says right below it in large, bold letters, Jesus said let the children come to me. It's why we do what we do. Every teacher, believe it or not, gets to see that truth.

Speaker 1:

Truly people need to know through gifts, through love, through the helps of The Teacher's Desk, that it's a Christ-like direction, rather than just always I'm going to tell you about Jesus, now you're actually showing them Jesus through the gifts that Teacher's Desk is providing through the hands of the people who are distributing through the smiles.

I mean, I got huge smiles from people. I just walked up to pick up a few PanchoPacks, which I'll ask you about in just a second, but no one knew who I was, they just knew they were giving me something that was going to be used well. They greeted me, they asked me how my day was going, they talked a little bit more. Even one person asked, "Can I pray for you today as you leave?" I was in shock, it's like, "Wow, now I'm a believer." I wasn't in shock that someone wanted to pray, but I was encouraged probably better to say that they would do that.

You're in the city-

John Mika:

Yep.

Speaker 1:

So, how far does Teacher's Desk reach?

John Mika:

Oh no, we're in all eight counties in Western New York, from Ripley, the Pennsylvania border, all the way to Rochester. So all the groups that are within that, Niagara Falls going north, Jamestown going south, those areas. Any school district that has 70% of the students getting free reduced lunch, that's who we target. So, we can't be all things to all people. Jesus said, "You're going to have the poor with you all the time, but what are you doing with what I've called you to do?"

Speaker 1:

Okay, so here's another little nugget to be able to share. They've created over 17,000 PanchoPacks, and PanchoPacks are just a backpack full of supplies for students. Share with me how that even started and why you're using PanchoPacks.

John Mika:

Yeah, it really is quite a miracle. Four years ago, I used to be somewhat of a Bills fan, not huge. Now a mammoth Bills fan.

Speaker 1:

Sure. Good, good. Glad you fix that.

John Mika:

Love the Bills. Go Bills. Viva los Bills as Pancho would say. Ezra Castro was a fellow down in Dallas, Texas who was a mammoth Buffalo Bills fan. They call them super fans. He had cancer, he was 39 years old. Just before he passed, Jonah Javad, who was a newscaster here in Buffalo, Channel two, moved to Dallas years ago and they became close.

So, last thing he said to Jonah Javad was that he was a mortician by trade. He said he didn't want flowers at his funeral. He hated flowers, and he said, "But I would love school supplies to be given to kids."

Speaker 1:

No kidding.

John Mika:

Makes you cry thinking about it, right? He could have asked for anything. He could have asked for give it to cancer research, because he had cancer, which had been fine, but he said, and this was God, he said, "Give school supplies to kids in need."

Speaker 1:

Wow.

John Mika:

So Jonah calls Del Reid, who attends the temple as well, founder of the Bill's Mafia, to ask him, "You know anybody in Buffalo that does school supplies?" Right? So he calls me and says, "John," he says, "I know you do school supplies." He said, "Can you do anything in memory of Pancho?" So, it was within a millisecond I said to him, "Yeah." I said, "We do a backpack program, very small program just for international students coming into Buffalo, under 1,000 backpacks a year to give to refugee children."

Speaker 1:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. That was the start?

John Mika:

It was called A Good Start. The O was a different shape, so it was really a God start. That was on the back of the backpacks. That was sponsored by Five Star, one of our wonderful partners. Anyways, I said to Del, I said, "We can do it." I said, "We'll call it PanchoPacks." It was just like that.

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Speaker 1:

Yeah, right on top.

John Mika:

Before you know it, funding started pouring in. We asked for a \$10 donation to support \$100 in supplies in a backpack. I normally don't ask for funding for anything, but the reason I had to for PanchoPacks, it was taking away from our mission, which was the store. If I was going to take product from the store and buy additional product, I couldn't take away from the heart of who we are, and that's our teachers and students and volunteers.

Speaker 1:

Sure. Still, what a great avenue to be able to supply packs, pens, pencils, everything that a kid needs. All [inaudible 00:13:04]

John Mika:

I mean, everything imaginable. Everything.

Speaker 1:

Yeah, and not sacrifice the rest of the school system that you're trying to work your way into.

John Mika:

Yeah. Yeah, we're very blessed. It's been four years now. We started with 10,000, went to 12,000, went to 15,000, and there was such a need. The groups that normally get them, they ran out in sometimes minutes.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

John Mika:

So we went up to 17,000, we made the last 200 this morning. We are not making another. Anyways, we're done for this year. That's 17,000 backpacks, \$1.7 million in backpack supplies.

Speaker 1:

All right, so my last question here is what are some of the key things that The Teacher's Desk has been able to help with that might surprise people?

John Mika:

Hygiene is a mammoth item that I wasn't intending at all to get involved in, but every teacher gets toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, things that they turn into the nurse's office at all the schools and the nurses hand them out to students.

Speaker 1:

Wow.

John Mika:

Deodorant, some of the other things that they're always asking for, I'm looking to get. We don't get those things donated for the most part, we purchase them.

Speaker 1:

Okay.

John Mika:

Facial tissue, things like that, that I was surprised that there were such a need for that kind of product. Books. There was no plan at The Teacher's Desk to have literacy at the forefront, but for me, if you can capture a child, they always say by third grade for a love for reading.

Speaker 1:

Oh yeah.

John Mika:

You have them for education, but you have a love for reading for life. For me, that day when they pick up a track or a Bible down the road and they don't struggle with what this means, God can use that to instill. So, those are a couple of the surprises. My biggest surprise, obviously, is the incredible amount of volunteers we have. It's such a blessing, such an honor.

Speaker 1:

What's the website that they would go to to consider volunteering?

John Mika:

Theteachersdesk.org. www.theteachersdesk.org. If you want to volunteer with us, it's volunteer@theteachersdesk.org. If you're a school that needs to shop with us, that wants to shop with us, it's shopping@theteachersdesk.org.

Speaker 1:

What are the grades that the teachers come from to receive supplies?

John Mika:

Yeah, we serve any school pre-K through 12th grade.

Speaker 1:

So, we need at least three things that God has laid on your heart that we can pray for.

John Mika:

First and foremost, obviously prayer always for God to have his way there with all of us, with the staff that's there and with protection for the building. We had a donor come through, but he wanted to tour the desk, and his question to me at the end, his first question was what's the plan for succession? God has me at The Teacher's Desk until I die, until he takes me home or until I'm unable to perform the way

he wants me to. There is no replacement for me yet. That I would put on anybody's ... that's to me, one, two, and three.

As far as product, as far as volunteers, as far as donors, as far as trucking, as far as teacher shopping, as far as kids, all of that is they're in abundance. God is truly out of control it goes like to those things. But more Jesus obviously, but somebody that he can bring up alongside me.

All I really am looking for is somebody in love with Jesus, that's all I need, and somebody who has a gift, not like me, but a gift to be able to do what I do. So if they love the Lord, preferably younger so they can take over. I'm 68 now.

Speaker 1:

Still young-

John Mika:

If God gives me 20 more years, I'll be happy to.

Speaker 1:

Yeah.

John Mika:

I'm happy to do it as long as he allows me to and Brenda's on board.

Speaker 1:

Okay, that's right.

John Mika:

But yeah, prayer for succession, that's a huge thing.

Speaker 1:

That's a big prayer. That's a big prayer. Okay, we'll pray for that.

John Mika:

Nothing else really concerns me.

Speaker 1:

Well, that's what's on your heart right now.

John Mika:

Yeah, for sure.

Speaker 1:

Well, thank you John. Thanks so much for sharing your heart, sharing some of the history of The Teacher's Desk. Once again, what's the website?

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John Mika:

Theteachersdesk.org. Everything's on theteachersdesk.org. Volunteering, shopping with us, donating, everything imaginable is on that website.

Speaker 1:

Perfect. Thanks so much, I appreciate your time.

John Mika:

God bless you both. Thank you for your time. Appreciate it.