

# Portland**Tribune**

## Reading for their lives

*At 92, Grandma Cherry just can't stop helping kids*

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON ✉

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**Nine-year-old Charity Quaschnick is a good reader but needs help with the tricky words — like “thought,” “gopher” and “Caleb,” the little boy’s name in her book “Sarah, Plain and Tall.”**

When she stumbles on a word, her reading mentor, Cherry Hendrix, helps her slowly sound out the word. After every few sentences, Hendrix pauses to ask a question. “Do you know what a gopher is?” she interjects.

“Like a chipmunk?” Charity responds, sticking her front teeth out and raising her hands like paws.

Hendrix laughs out loud, and smiles. “Yes, kind of like a chipmunk. Let’s go on; you’re doing really, really great.”

Three days a week, five hours a day, Hendrix — known as “Grandma Cherry” to all — helps Charity and six other students with their reading skills at Northeast Portland’s Woodlawn Elementary, one of the most city’s diverse schools, and one with 76 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch.

Grandma Cherry’s volunteer work might not sound that exceptional, unless you consider that she is 92 years old.

She came to Portland alone from Birmingham, Ala., in 1944, she says. She worked in a shipyard, married twice and had three children: a son who is 70, and daughters who are 53 and 45. She has nine great-grandchildren and three great-great-grandchildren, one of whom attends Woodlawn and peeks out the door to wave hello every time he sees her pass by. “Hi, Grandma Cherry!” he exclaims.



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**As part of her volunteer work at Northeast Portland’s Woodlawn Elementary, Grandma Cherry — otherwise known as Cherry Hendrix — helps Charity Quaschnick, 9, read, as she does with six other students for a total of 15 hours a week.**

After both husbands died, she moved to this neighborhood 30 years ago, when it was infested with gangs. She'd hear the bullets and cars and shouts during the day and night.

"But I was never afraid," she says. "I don't know why. ... I'd just go and stand on the porch, just look at them. They never said anything. After a while, they moved. I said, 'This is my house.' "

### **At 77, more work begins**

For 15 years, Hendrix worked as a teacher's aide at King and Jason Lee elementary schools until retiring at age 77.

Yet she still wanted to work with children because she saw so many who needed extra help in the classrooms. "So many of the kids need it," she said. "So many of the parents don't read. Some cannot read. Some don't speak English."

So she started volunteering to help kids read at Woodlawn, 7200 N.E. 11th Ave., just across the street from her home. Five years later, she became one of the founding members of a new program called Experience Corps, run by the Southeast Portland-based nonprofit Metropolitan Family Service.

Primarily funded by an annual grant of \$130,000 from the Portland Children's Investment Fund, Experience Corps pairs older adults with elementary students from low-income families who can benefit from a tutoring or mentoring relationship.

Lemil Speed, Woodlawn's principal, said Hendrix's longtime presence in the building has been a blessing. "She has instilled a love for learning in the children of Woodlawn with her very laid-back, confident instruction," he said.

In all, there are 47 Experience Corps volunteers — most are seniors age 55 and up — who work in eight low-income elementary schools throughout the district, and two others outside of Portland Public Schools (not covered by the children's fund).

The volunteers receive a monthly stipend of around \$250 for 15 or more hours a week, to help make ends meet and cover transportation costs.

Ten volunteers work at Woodlawn, which has a population of 450 in preschool through sixth grade. The students know them as "Grandma King," "Grandma Milton" and others, but Grandma Cherry is the most senior.

"There's something about Grandma Cherry," says Stefana Sardo, program manager of the older adult program at Metropolitan Family Service. "When she talks, you listen. She's of an era that you just respected your elders. She commands — in a very gentle way — attention. She gently tells the kids, 'You need to sit down,' or 'You need to wait your turn,' and they listen to her."

### **Every week, there's bowling**

With her perfectly coifed curls, champagne-colored power suit and tasteful gold jewelry, Grandma Cherry can easily pass for 20 years younger than her age. That's not by accident.

She takes pride in her health, having no serious health concerns since the knee replacement surgery she had when she was 80. She doesn't drink, has never smoked, eats well and bowls in a senior league every Friday morning at Hollywood Bowl.

It's a hobby she took up about 25 years ago, when she was in her spunky 60s, to motivate her kids in class to do good work. She'd take them bowling.

Over the years, she's racked up at least a dozen league trophies, and she's hit a score of 200 twice. She's modest now about her skills.

"But when I was younger, I used to bowl 10 games by myself," she says. "If I was frustrated, I'd just go bowl by myself."

Nowadays, she keeps her mind sharp with crossword puzzles, other puzzles she finds in the newspapers and, of course, reading to kids.

She has spent a lifetime devouring books of her own — everything from the Bible to "chapter books," to children's books.

"I used to read books that thick," Hendrix says, holding her hands a good 4 inches apart. "I'd take the lamp under the covers. My mother said we had to be asleep at 9. I'd read the whole book before I went to bed. To me, reading has always been someone talking to me, telling me something."

### **Television too often wins**

Hendrix says she doesn't want to fault parents who struggle to raise their kids, but she fiercely believes that children can get a lot more out of their education and life if they're taught early to read books rather than watch television.

"I like to read anything that's written," she says. "I don't care what it is. Don't tell me not to read it. If I don't like it, I'll put it down. I need to know what it says. I don't even remember when I didn't read. ... I was 7 when I went to school. I was reading. I don't remember who taught me."

As much as she loves seeing the kids get ahead in their reading skills due to her help year after year, there are those days, Hendrix says, when it's hard to muster the energy for another full day of work.

"At my age, sometimes I have to force myself to go," she says with a laugh. "But I receive, too. I can't explain what I do receive because it's too much for me to say. When I meet kids I worked with in grade school, they have children in grade school. They say to me, 'Hi, Grandma Cherry, you still at Woodlawn?' And she looked at the other girl she was with and said, 'That's my Grandma Cherry.' Right there, that puts two, three more years on my life."

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