

Portland Public Schools — Portland, Oregon



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After 2½ decades volunteering at Vernon K-8 School, Betty Messenger sees no reason to stop doing what she loves: helping children learn to read.

Popularly known as “Grandma Betty,” the 86-year-old Messenger began volunteering at Vernon in 1990 after a friend at church suggested it. She no longer lives down the street from the school, and she moves more slowly now with a cane, but Messenger continues to spend 20 to 40 hours each week helping Vernon students read.

“It’s enjoyable to continue doing what I’m doing,” Messenger says. Asked if she has plans to retire, she only smiles.

Messenger is one of four individuals who volunteer at Vernon through Metropolitan Family Service’s [“foster grandparent” program](#), which helps people older than 60 to stay active while also providing a positive role model to children in public schools, child care programs and hospitals.

“It keeps seniors engaged in the community and provides intergenerational experience to kids,” says Kathleen Kennedy, a volunteer coordinator with the agency.

Messenger’s long tenure is unusual; just one foster grandparent has volunteered in Portland for a longer period of time during the program’s 45-year history. Most of the 44 current foster grandparents are nowhere close to matching Messenger.

To honor her long service, a small group of colleagues, former colleagues and friends held a surprise party at the school Feb. 24. Principal Tina Acker says the entire school benefits from her presence.

“She is the sweetest lady, always smiling. And it’s fitting that we’re the Vernon Owls: We like to think her wise,” Acker says.

David Rogers, who has worked closely with Messenger as an instructional specialist at Vernon, says that students – and adults – benefit from her presence.

“I think all of us can learn something by working with someone with her level of experience,” Rogers says. “It helps expand your view of the world and develop empathy.”



With Vernon School Principal Tina Acker at her side, Betty Messenger (right) responds to a celebration in her honor.

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