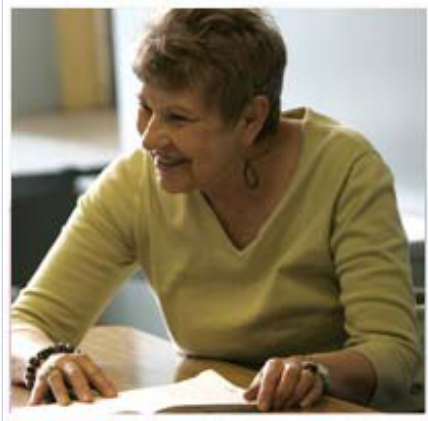




Meet Claudine Paris



At 71, Claudine Paris feels like a “rock star” every day she walks through the hallways of James John Elementary School in Portland, Ore., where she volunteers as a literacy tutor.

“I’m appreciated and I’m needed,” says Paris, who’s called “Auntsy” by the children. “It’s wonderful.”

Retirement didn’t quite suit Paris, a former management consultant. A self-described optimist, she says that even though she continued to lead an active life and maintained a “glass half-full” attitude after she stopped working, she felt something was missing. “There was an emptiness. I wasn’t ever quite satisfied.”

That changed after Paris started volunteering at James John through Experience Corps, a group that partners with schools and local community organizations in 23 cities throughout the country to create meaningful opportunities for adults over 55. Now Paris feels a sense of fulfillment that she didn’t have before. “I’m a healthier citizen because of my involvement with children,” she says. “I have a purpose.”

Plus she’s more active. On the three days each week that Paris volunteers, she walks a mile from her home to the light rail station, where she catches the bus that takes her to the school. Going home, she walks a mile back.

“I’m getting more regular exercise than I used to,” she says. “I don’t need to push myself to get the quality of exercise I need, because it’s built into my routine.”

These days, Paris walks with more of a “spring” in her step – a boost that she says comes from both physical activity and emotional satisfaction.

She’s not alone – research shows that meaningful work, either voluntary or paid, has positive health outcomes. In addition to increased physical activity, Experience Corps members report having increased strength and cognitive ability, which are important predictors of health outcomes later in life. Nationwide, Experience Corps has matched about 2,000 adults over age 55 with schools to serve 20,000 children and youth; most volunteers work about 10 hours per week in exchange for a small stipend.

Many of the children Paris works with are in the first, second or third grades. Initially, Paris had asked to work with older students and was disappointed when she was assigned to an elementary school. But now she realizes it’s the perfect place for her. Her own children and grandchildren are all grown. “The thing about children this age is that they’re all pretty eager learners and they hold me accountable for showing up: ‘Where were you yesterday?’ Or, ‘You’re late!’ Never mind that ‘yesterday’ wasn’t a school day for me, or that I was detained on my way to the classroom. It’s very funny.”

They’re caring, too. Paris says that one day on her way to school she fell and scraped her hand. Her accident did not go unnoticed. “One of the kids asked me, ‘What happened, Auntsy? Are you all right? Was there anyone to help you?’ He then proceeded to tell his classmates to come look at my hand, and with grave concern related my story.”

Paris says she likes having a reason to get up in the morning. “Especially during the winters in Oregon, when it’s rainy and dark, going off to school is a very good thing.”

Experience Corps requires a commitment of 450 hours over a 10-month period from its adult volunteers. Paris has completed her first commitment of 450 hours and is now starting her second year and an additional 450-hour commitment.

“Why stop?” she says. “You’d have to work hard not to feel really good about this and I like feeling good.”