

A grandma's care

Two Foster Grandparent volunteers offer guidance and support to children at the Barlow Head Start

BY JANIE NAFSINGER ✉

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Grandma Carol and Grandma Marge know how to draw a crowd at the Barlow Head Start preschool on the outskirts of Canby.

From the comfort of her classroom rocking chair, Carol Luce — whom the children call Grandma Carol — plays games and works puzzles with her 3-to-5-year-old charges.

Across the hall, the other “grandma,” Marjorie Crawford, is the go-to expert when the youngsters need help making yarn crafts.

Even outside the Head Start building, the children instantly recognize Luce and Crawford. “Sometimes in the stores they see you and they run to you,” Crawford says.

Luce, 74, and Crawford, 77, who both live in Canby, are volunteers with the Foster Grandparent program run by Metropolitan Family Service, an agency serving Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties.

The Foster Grandparent program started nationally in 1965 to benefit two traditionally neglected populations: special-needs children and low-income older adults. Foster Grandparent volunteers serve as tutors and mentors for children at schools, childcare centers and other organizations. In return, the program gives the adults an opportunity to remain active and serve their communities.

“It keeps you young,” says Crawford, a former apartment manager who has five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren of her own. She volunteers Monday through Friday at the Barlow Head Start, and in August she will mark eight years with the Foster Grandparent program.

Luce — who raised four children as a single parent and now has eight grandchildren, two step-grandchildren and two-great-grandchildren — joined the program in 2001 after she retired as a health claims insurance adjuster.



Carol Luce of Canby volunteers as a Foster Grandparent at the Barlow Head Start outside Canby.

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"I was so happy with no schedule to keep that I kind of fell into a rut of no schedule," she recalls. Her daughter suggested she needed a schedule and suggested foster grandparenting.

Luce usually spends three or four mornings a week at the Barlow Head Start. "We're not there to help the teachers; we're there to help the children," says Luce. "Sometimes a child just can't integrate into a situation, so you help them be more comfortable and play."

Many children at the Barlow Head Start come from Spanish-speaking families, and though Luce doesn't speak Spanish, communication is never a problem.

"Children can always relate," she says.

An elder's presence

Ester Rendon, the Head Start teacher in whose room Crawford volunteers, says most of the children in her class don't have grandparents nearby, so they find it comforting to have a grandma figure in their lives.

"The kids really love her," Rendon says of Crawford. "They've gotten used to her being here. When she's not here, they ask about her. They ask, 'Where's Grandma Marge?'"

The kids also help Crawford, who walks with a cane, by cleaning up her table and bringing her books that have torn pages so she can mend them. "They learn to take care of older people and learn to help out," Rendon says.

Older children also benefit from the influence of foster grandparents. After spending their mornings at the Barlow Head Start, Crawford and Luce drive to Molalla to volunteer at the Police Activities League center — or PAL — which serves children ages 8 to 14.

"I talk with them, play games with them, try to instill ideas of right and wrong," Luce says.

Though Luce notices that many youth at PAL "don't know how to relate to adults other than someone in a supervisory capacity, such as a teacher," she also has seen changes in the children's behavior. She senses that the barrier starts to fall "when they tell you how well they did on their spelling test because you helped them study for it."

In addition, Luce volunteers one day a week at Clackamas County Family Court in Oregon City, teaming up with judges, attorneys, case workers and children's court-appointed advocates to help resolve conflict in troubled families.

"I think we don't know if we have an impact until years later," Luce says. "Maybe the only impact is a simple thing such as tying your shoes, learning how to wash your hands, learning to listen."

But it doesn't always take years to make a difference. Last year, Luce received a Christmas card from a family she had worked with at the Family Court. "Thank you for believing in us," the card read.

"That says a lot right there," Luce says. "If I didn't feel it was worthwhile, I wouldn't do it."

42 years of Foster Grandparents

The federal Foster Grandparent program began Aug. 28, 1965, as a pilot program under President Johnson's War on Poverty Act. The program

serves special-needs children by providing adult volunteers age 60 and older who act as positive role models in public schools, childcare programs and hospitals.

Foster Grandparent volunteers work between 15 and 40 hours per week. Those who meet income eligibility can receive a tax-exempt stipend (\$2.65 per hour).

Last year, Metropolitan Family Service Foster Grandparent, serving Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties, enrolled more than 80 older adults who provided more than 2,400 children in school and preschool with attention that included academic tutoring and classroom support. Foster Grandparents provided more than 60,000 hours of service in the tri-county area.

For more information, call Metropolitan Family Service at 503-249-8215, ext.22.

About Metropolitan Family Service

Metropolitan Family Service, an agency serving Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties, is dedicated to building stronger communities by providing services, connecting people with resources and offering volunteer opportunities.

It offers nearly a dozen programs, including Foster Grandparent, serving people of all ages, from children to older adults. Most people who use the programs are low-income individuals and families.

In addition to Foster Grandparent, programs involving older adults include the following:

- Experience Corps provides children with mentoring, tutoring, and community and family involvement primarily by older adults working in teams.
- Project Linkage helps older adults remain independent in their own homes by linking them with volunteers who provide in-home support and transportation.
- Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) connects individuals age 55 and over to volunteer opportunities where they use their life experience and skills to make positive contributions in the community.
- Senior Companion supports older adults who need assistance to live independently through companionship services provided by older adult volunteers.

For more information

Reach Metropolitan Family Service by calling 503-232-0007 or visiting Web site <http://www.metfamily.org/>.