



Volunteer Grandparents Reap Many Rewards

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A flash of understanding comes with a victorious grin and warm hugs — these are the intangible rewards for local Foster Grandparent volunteers. Louise Ann Walter of Altoona and Barbara Baker of Duncansville are two of the 25 volunteers with the AmeriCorps Senior Foster Grandparent Program who work at various “stations,” sponsored in Blair County by Blair Senior Services. The volunteers, who have an average age of 76, provide one-on-one support to children ages infant to second grade in schools and daycares to improve the child’s academic, social or emotional development, said Angel Dandrea, AmeriCorps Seniors Supervisor at Blair Senior Services. AmeriCorps is a network of local, state, and national service programs that connects over 70,000 Americans each year in intensive service to meet community needs in education, the environment, public safety, health, and homeland security, according to its website. In Pennsylvania during 2022, the Foster Grandparent Program had 274 locations and 824 participants, according to the Pennsylvania’s Year in Review report, which covered January 2022 to January 2023. After being “on hold” due to the pandemic, the program returned to actively recruiting new

volunteers and is experiencing some success with eight to 10 new volunteers, Dandrea said. She also oversees the Senior Companion Program, which pairs AmeriCorp Seniors volunteers with older adults who need assistance with tasks or friendship. Both programs are federally-funded and volunteers receive a tax-free stipend and other benefits. To be eligible for the tax-free stipend, a single volunteer must receive income below 200% of federal poverty guidelines or less than \$2,430 per month (married is \$3,286 per month). Foster grandparents undergo rigorous background checks and extensive training before placement. Foster grandparents serve children in schools during the academic year and at community programs and camps during the summer. At Myers Elementary in the Bellwood-Antis School District, the school’s two foster grandparents “an amazing blessing to have. They help with academics and help the students relate to each other socially and emotionally. They build on the students’ skills. Our students gravitate to them,” said Principal Matt Stinson. The volunteers also share their life experiences and wisdom with the students — and teachers, too. Walter, 78, volunteers in the kindergarten classrooms at Penn

Lincoln Elementary School in the Altoona Area School District. She became involved when she accompanied a friend to an informational session nearly 12 years ago. “It is so good. I love the little kids,” Walter said. “When I’m teaching them to do their numbers or to write their letters I sit down with them and do it with love and affection because that’s what they need.” Baker, 77, has spent the past 50 years in education, primarily as a teacher’s assistant in grades kindergarten through fourth in the Lock Haven area. When she retired and moved to Blair County she looked into the program at the suggestion of a relative. “Three months after being retired I knew being at home all the time wasn’t for me,” Baker said. “I love the kids. I like being around them and they are unbelievably honest. I love supporting them and helping them with things they don’t understand.” She works in the first-grade classroom at Foot of Ten Elementary School in Hollidaysburg and has been a foster grandparent for four years. Often the children want to know how old she is, so she has them guess. “They say 19 or 12 — it’s so funny,” Baker said. “I like to help them become successful and independent students. To see the light bulb go on when they get

something we’ve been working on — it’s amazing how it makes you feel. It makes me feel very wanted and happy that I’m there to help them. Sometimes it’s just being a good listener. The hugs are wonderful, you can’t beat it.” Walter agrees. “The reward is when you have a little child who can’t write his numbers or they make a three backward,” she said. After several attempts and erasures, “the child makes it correctly and he yells, ‘Grandma, I did it’ — that’s what makes it rewarding. You know you helped a child and they are thankful. The feeling you get watching these kids learn and knowing you are a part of it is amazing.” She also helps the children learn how to cooperate with one another, how to share and how to be polite and well-mannered. At school during the lunch period, she makes sure they follow the rules, such as not eating food off of another student’s tray and “you eat your sandwich first and then the goodies,” she explained. During the summer, Walter spends six hours, four days a week at the Central Blair Recreation Commission summer camp for children kindergarten through sixth grade. She helps keep the children engaged in board games, card games and crafts, such as jewelry making with beads and yarn. Participating in

the AmeriCorps Foster Grandparent Program, the volunteers said, has brought structure and purpose back into daily life. “This program kept me going. I was so alone. This gets me up in the morning and I love it,” Walter said. Being with the children brings back memories of being with her own nine children — four whom she gave birth to and five she raised in her home. She has 26 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren with another grandchild expected in November. Baker said she talks about the rewards to other older adults. “This has really filled in some loneliness I had. I have met so many people and it has improved my social life. It’s really filled a void in my life. ... I help the children but they don’t know how much they are helping me. I love it and can’t seem to stop.” I keep saying I’m going to retire again but I haven’t”

Photo by Patrick Waksmunski