

Volunteers Produce Real Impact at Gladstone Center for Children & Families

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Roughly 8,000 Baby Boomers will turn 65 every day between now and year end 2029. While some media pundits sound the alarm at the burgeoning ranks of “seniors,” this generational cohort is not content to rest on its laurels. They’re ready and able to leverage their vast stores of knowledge, skills, experience, and passion to make a positive impact on the communities in which they live.

The Oregon Community Foundation seized upon this unprecedented opportunity for civic engagement by launching *Boomers & Babies* in 2007. This 6-year initiative provided funding and other avenues of support to link Boomer-aged adults with programs and services that educate and nurture children from birth through age 5. The effort produced a “triple-bottom line”: (i) measurable improvements in kindergarten readiness; (ii) highly meaningful life experiences for the volunteers; and (iii) increased community awareness for the challenges faced by our most vulnerable citizens.

Because high impact volunteerism requires an investment in staff time and energy, it’s fair to ask whether or not the benefits outweigh the costs. For the Gladstone Center for Children and Families (GCCF), the answer is a resounding YES! This paper provides the detailed analysis to support this claim.

The Gladstone Center for Children and Families

Gladstone, Oregon is small residential community twelve miles south of Portland. For 40 years, it was home to Danielson’s Thriftway grocers, a mere stone’s throw from Gladstone High School. When Thriftway closed its doors for business in 2003, the cavernous facility represented both a physical and emotional void for the surrounding neighborhood.

Fortunately, visionary community leaders seized upon the opportunity to transform the space into a vibrant learning and support services center for young children and their families. Since January 2009, GCCF has offered a warm, welcoming, and secure environment to address family needs from pregnancy through kindergarten.



The Center supports Healthy Start, a Family Relief Nursery, Head Start, blended pre-school, all-day kindergarten, Clackamas Community College (*GED courses*), LifeWorks Northwest (*prevention, mental health, and addiction services*), and the Oregon Department of Human Services. By co-locating multiple agencies under a single roof, they've reduced barriers to entry for early intervention services while increasing inter-agency collaboration. These integrated services give young children the best possible opportunity to thrive.

GCCF joined the *Boomers & Babies* Learning Community in 2010 to engage the broader community in the Center's important work. With seed funding and technical support, GCCF grew its volunteer program from 2-3 casual helpers to a vibrant collective of 112 adults who contributed over 3,000 hours of service during the 2013-4 school year. Volunteers provided vital services in the following areas:

Classroom Assistance	Learning Zones	Meal Preparation
Reading Intervention	Play Groups	Special Projects
	Lunch Buddies	

Classroom Assistance

GCCF's relief nursery, Head Start, and kindergarten programs help young children develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills to prepare them for success in school and in life. When committed volunteers join trained staff in serving young children:

- Children get extra help in the classroom environment where they learn to pay attention, carry out tasks, and interact with others cooperatively.
- Teachers have the flexibility to address discipline problems and other special needs while their assistants support the classroom routine.
- Children receive individualized attention that intensifies their learning experience and delivers valuable feedback and encouragement.
- Teachers gain able assistance with classroom set-up, meals, and clean up. They also profit from the additional insights into their students' developmental growth.
- Children establish relationships with compassionate adults who instill confidence and affirm each child's worth and potential.



GCCF has also developed a cadre of Art Project Assistants who support programmed enrichment activities with set-up, in-class assistance, and clean-up.

In the 2013-4 school year, volunteers provided 2,757 hours of classroom and related support. At the prevailing market rate for early childhood classroom assistants (\$13.40/hour), their service carries a valuation of \$36,943.80.

Reading Intervention

With 20 or more young children in each kindergarten class, it's virtually impossible for a teacher to provide the individualized attention that some students need to develop literacy skills. Dr. Don Brown, GCCF's Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment decided to address this situation by leveraging volunteers to administer evidence-based literacy intervention to a small group of young children whose capabilities were far below benchmark.

"We used a scripted program that could be adapted readily for use by persons without special training," Brown said. "As it turned out, three out of four of our volunteers were retired educators. They were incredibly conscientious. They arrived early, reviewed the day's lesson(s), and asked questions about their students' needs. I was really impressed by their level of commitment."

The pilot program called for delivery of half of the full set of sixty 20-minute lessons. The results were encouraging. The 10 students in the pilot group showed double the improvement in reading ability compared to a control group as measured by the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) scoring system. But perhaps the best testament to the efficacy of the program comes from thank you notes written by students:



"Thank you for making me smarter and reading with me. You are awesome. I love you. You are the best."

Thank you for helping me. I know I could not do it without you."

Thank you for helping us and you are my friend. I like reading with you."

"These children saw themselves as being successful in school. They were carrying around their books and asking me to give them their progress charts with all of the stars on them," said Susan Trone, Volunteer Coordinator. "And I think parents made the extra effort to ensure their children were in school since they knew we were offering a special program for them."

The reading intervention specialists provided 70 hours of literacy development support. Their service carries a valuation of \$938.00.

Learning Zones

Children at the other end of the developmental curve also had issues in the classroom. They tended to get bored and disruptive when the teacher slowed the pace of instruction to benefit their classmates. GCCF Learning Zones presented an opportunity to get them fully engaged in learning.

Volunteers came to the Center twice a week to deliver Reggio-inspired¹ curriculum in 4- to 6-week increments. This year's offerings included the Full Option Science System (FOSS) from UC Berkeley which proceeds from the assumption that children learn science best by doing it. A series on Dramatic Play helped students learn to transcend the bounds of the scripted dialog from familiar children's stories and improvise using hand puppets. A retired music teacher delivered a program in which students learned to sing, read lyrics, and practice rhythms using popular songs.



As children reveled in these enrichment activities, they made improvements in literacy, language development, and social skills.

Learning Zone volunteers provided 116 hours of service valued at \$1,554.40.

Play Groups



GCCF opened its doors twice weekly for unstructured play groups. These two-hour sessions give community members an opportunity to establish a connection to the Center long before their children are ready for pre-school or kindergarten. It continues to serve as a family connection as their children enter school. The level of comfort established through years of visitation creates a supportive relationship between the families, agencies, and school district.

Volunteers create a welcoming atmosphere and offer able assistance to parents and their children. Play group volunteers provided 432 hours of service in 2013-4 valued at \$5,788.80.

Lunch Buddies

A large body of research gives witness to the value of mentors in a young child's life. At the most basic level, a mentor provides assurance that there is someone who cares about them. Mentors listen to their charges and devote their undivided attention to them during regular get-togethers. They help build self-esteem and strengthen communications skills.

While all nearly of GCCF's volunteer services incorporate some aspect of mentoring, the Lunch Buddies focused exclusively on this relationship with selected students. They ate lunch with their students and stayed on to spend recess with them. Two volunteers served as Lunch Buddies in 2013-4 and provided 35 hours of service valued at \$469.00.

¹ The Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education beholds each child as "beautiful, powerful, competent, creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires." Rather than being seen as the target of instruction, children are active co-creators of knowledge akin to the role of an apprentice.

Meal Preparation

Meal preparation and the associated clean-up is a big job at GCCF. Fortunately, the kitchen staff can count on a handful of dedicated volunteers to help them do their job. The volunteers' 180 hours of service in 2013-4 helped staff stretch their modest resources to get the job done. At the prevailing minimum wage of \$9.10 in the State of Oregon, this volunteer service carried a valuation of \$1,638.00.

Special Projects

Earth Day always provides an opportunity for young children to learn something about the world in which they live. In April 2014, volunteers supported delivery of a nature-based curriculum that talked about soil, the role of worms, planting seeds, and nurturing crops. They read stories about the earth and helped the children create "Dirt Sundaes" consisting of Oreo cookies and gummy worms. *(The volunteers were not required to eat them!)*



GCCF also takes advantage of a modest amount of administrative support to prepare and distribute the volunteer newsletter.

Special projects volunteers donated 37 hours of time valued at \$495.80.

Volunteer Management

Volunteerism isn't something that "spontaneously combusts" at GCCF or any other high quality learning center. It takes the dedicated effort of a capable Volunteer Coordinator who combines strong organizational, program design, and interpersonal skills with an unwavering passion for the work. GCCF was fortunate to find this stellar combination of skills in Susan Trone.

Susan works with the Center's staff to design programs and positions that can take advantage of volunteer talent. She plays a critical role in adapting evidence-based curriculum to a volunteer setting. Having identified program needs, she goes into the community to build awareness for the Center's work and encourage interested citizens to be a part of it. Susan ensures that each volunteer is matched with a position that suits his or her interests, experience, and skills while meeting the needs of the program and staff members. She provides orientation and training, and stays in close contact with staff and volunteers to make sure that all parties find the "match" rewarding.

Susan also manages a master schedule that Director Don Brown deems "mind boggling." She floats volunteers between classrooms to provide able assistance at the exact moment that teachers need them while taking full advantage of every minute of volunteer availability. She leverages substitutes to accommodate planned vacations and unplanned sick time. And she spends a healthy percentage of her time communicating with parents to provide opportunities for engagement.

GCCF invests approximately \$27,240 to support its volunteer management program annually. As noted in the chart at right, the dollar value of volunteer service far exceeds the cost. The impact that these caring adults had the on the children and families is priceless.

Through volunteerism, a group of community activists gain an appreciation for the needs of high-risk populations and the impact that the Center has on their lives. They become the means through which others learn about GCCF and get involved.

Classroom Assistance	\$ 36,943.80
Reading Intervention	938.00
Learning Zones	1,554.40
Play Groups	5,788.80
Lunch Buddies	469.00
Meal Preparation	1,638.00
Special Projects	495.80
GRAND TOTAL	\$ 47,827.80

The Call to Action

The most important work to be done in communities in the next 15-20 years is early childhood development. With 40% of our children at risk of entering kindergarten unprepared, we need to field evidence-based interventions with children and families to give them the best chance for success.

The State of Oregon has made a significant investment in its early learning system to build capacity and bolster the professional training for the educators who serve them. Volunteers complement these crucial interventions by providing program support in and out of the classroom as well as individualized attention to children with special needs. Their service *improves outcomes* while building a cadre of community activists.

Some of the citizens of Gladstone may reflect longingly on their long-lost neighborhood grocer. But through the dedicated efforts of supporters, staff, volunteers, and families, the Gladstone Center for Children and Families has become the gemstone of the community.

Boomers and Babies is a project of The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF). This cross-generational program supports efforts by early childhood organizations to engage Baby Boomer volunteers in activities that are known to contribute to school readiness. Principal funding for the project comes from The Atlantic Philanthropies, with additional support from the PGE Foundation, Knowledge Universe, the Juan Young Trust, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, and several OCF Donor Advised Funds.