

## Boomers Form a Caring Community at NeighborImpact

by Maren Symonds

Every day for the next 16 years, ten thousand Americans will reach retirement age. Some will leave demanding careers to pursue leisure activities and long-standing interests. But for folks like Tony Montoya, retirement creates opportunities to leverage a lifetime of skills, wisdom, and experience in service of others. Tony works with NeighborImpact as a volunteer in the Food Bank and Head Start classroom.

“When I left the long hours and unpredictable schedules of the retail grocery business, I gained the freedom to make a difference in other people’s lives,” Tony said. “I love helping kids learn new things and find positive ways to channel their energies. It means a lot to them to have someone care enough to provide structure and discipline in their lives.”

Tony is not alone. Since joining The Oregon Community Foundation’s *Boomers & Babies* Learning Community, NeighborImpact has built the organizational capacity to place Boomer-aged adults in a variety of volunteer roles. Many work in Head Start classrooms as teacher’s assistants and reading tutors. Some lead enrichment activities with the children – e.g., art, music, drama, math, and science projects. Others administer story time at child care centers, provide staff support, assist with facilities maintenance, or serve on the agency’s Board of Directors.



Shari McCall came to NeighborImpact after 25 years in K-3 education. “As a teacher, I know that when kids do not do well in school, they disengage,” Shari lamented. “Head Start gives young children the tools they need to be successful. They learn to sit quietly and give their full attention to the teacher. They develop language, reading, and math skills. And they learn how to get along with others in play groups. School becomes a place where they feel that they belong.”

Sally Morton, NeighborImpact’s most seasoned classroom volunteer, enjoys supporting young children *and their teachers*. “It’s really challenging for two paid staff members to attend to the demands of 18 to 20 high needs children,” Sally noted. “I’m happy to provide an extra pair of eyes and ears to take in all that’s going on, and to offer an extra pair of arms to give hugs.”

Volunteer work parties routinely help teachers translate story books into pictorial format for use on felt boards. Visual aids captivate attention during “Circle Time” and give children tools with which to learn to tell stories independently. It also enables them to connect the pictures with the printed words when they go back to their storybooks.

“It’s nice getting together with other volunteers and chat while we color, make cut outs, and laminate,” said Paige Porter, a classroom volunteer and regular work party participant. “I’m happy to take projects home and work on them.”

Volunteers often bring good ideas for contribution to the table. For example, an enterprising group of seamstresses designed and installed attractive curtains to conceal the contents of a classroom’s open shelves. And an experienced woodworker built “light boxes” to provide the means for enhanced tactile and sensory experiences at a fraction of the cost of comparable retail offerings.

“Our volunteer community has grown steadily through word of mouth. Folks get excited about the work that we’re doing, and they want to be a part of it,” said Kathy Pawelski, Volunteer Coordinator. “They’re also genuinely interested in best practices for early childhood development as well as the range of wraparound services that we offer children and their families.”



Kathy fosters her volunteers’ hunger for knowledge by hosting bimonthly Lunch & Learn programs. These sessions offer an opportunity for sharing experiences while deepening an understanding of NeighborImpact’s work and clientele. Topics from past discussions include brain development, neurological factors in learning, wellness screenings, mental health services, and pro-social behavioral guidance in the classroom. A core group of volunteers attend regularly along with interested community members and prospective volunteers.

“It is truly gratifying to see so many members of our community embrace our work and find personal satisfaction through volunteerism,” said Betty Shuler, NeighborImpact’s Early Care and Education Director. “As we continue to reach out and find creative ways for folks to advance our mission, there’s no telling what we will accomplish together.”

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