

Gladstone Leverages Community Resources to Support Young Children

by Maren Symonds

Take a quick tour through the heart of Gladstone, and you'll know one thing for sure. *This community is serious about giving children a good start in life.*

When a long-time neighborhood grocer pulled up stakes a decade ago, visionary community leaders saw the opportunity to transform the cavernous facility into a vibrant learning and support services center for young children and their families. By co-locating multiple agencies under a single roof, they could reduce barriers to entry for early intervention services while increasing inter-agency collaboration. And with the right design, they could provide a warm, welcoming, and secure environment for children and adults.

Vision became reality in January 2009 when the Gladstone Center for Children and Families (GCCF) opened its doors. 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.

In 2010, the GCCF seized upon another golden opportunity. The burgeoning population of aging Baby Boomers combined with an influx of retirees opened doors for deepening the community's engagement with the Center's mission and work. By joining The Oregon Community Foundation's *Boomers & Babies* Learning Community, GCCF became part of an innovative group of practitioners who paved the way for Boomer-aged volunteers to participate in early childhood education.



“The little guys just need to have people around to encourage them, to give them a pat on the back,” said Karen Sprecker, a retired teacher and GCCF volunteer. “When you’ve got 25 or 26 little guys in the classroom, one teacher isn’t going to be able to see everybody for all the time that they need to be seen.”

Fortunately, the Gladstone community was ready to respond to the call to action. Since program inception, GCCF has been able to expand its volunteer base from 2-3 individuals to 75 committed adults who contribute more than 225 hours of service each month. They serve in a variety of roles including classroom assistants, tutors, enrichment activity leaders, and office assistants. They provision weekend food supplies as “Backpack Buddies” as well as lend their support to the Harvest Festival and Earth Day celebrations.

“Having literacy volunteers 4 days a week has been such a benefit for my class. I have a few students who still need lots of support with letter names and sounds. Being able to send them in

the hall to work with Baby Boomer volunteers has really benefited these students,” said Kristina Whitley. “Also, this has helped these students with getting one-on-one interactions and creating a relationship with these volunteers.”

Through Boomer volunteerism, the GCCF has had the capacity to create “Learning Zones.” In these small group settings, children focus on language development, gross and fine motor skills, problem solving, and creativity. They also enhance their social skills as they work on projects collaboratively.



“The children really look forward to their time in the Learning Zones and all the extra care and attention they receive,” said Susan Trone, GCCF Volunteer Coordinator. “And the volunteers enjoy bonding with the children in settings where the children’s initiative and imaginations are integral parts of the day’s lesson.”

Boomer volunteers are doing their part to raise GCCF’s profile in the community. As they become more deeply engaged in the work, they can’t help but share their enthusiasm for the Center’s commitment to support healthy babies, stable families, and school readiness.

“Most of my new volunteers come to the Center through word of mouth,” said Trone. “It’s gratifying to know that people see the value in their contributions and think highly enough of their volunteer experience to commend it to others.”

Boomers and Babies is a project of The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF). Additional 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.