

Senior volunteers score high as reading helpers
If only children had grandparents who would never die..and grandparents had grandchildren who would never grow up.



As it turns out, this is not a wish made for heaven but a volunteer program at Blackstone Primary School where residents from Clay's Rest Home come once a week to help children with their reading. Here, children who may have no one at home to read to and old people, who have no children at home to listen to, find each other and make perfect companions.

Started a month ago when Principal Ruth Horn called Clay's for volunteers, the program now includes five residents and is growing each week as the word spreads in the Rest Home. "Never mind that you've had heart and cancer surgery, and don't worry about being overwhelmed," say the returning volunteers who electrify the Rest Home with their news. "There are children out there who need us!"

On her first day at the school, Sarah Boisseau was paired with Erica Gardner, a 1st Grader, and they sat alone in the hall huddled as close together as their chairs would allow. As she read, Erica began to feel special as Sarah encouraged her and she tried

extra hard to get all the words right. And when she didn't, it was okay because this nice lady didn't get impatient.

And Sarah, whose own grandchildren had grown up, was once more feeling useful and active. Since her heart surgery, she said she hadn't kept busy and she missed it. Now she had found a way to fill both voids. "I love thee children. I sure do," she said as her face broke into a wide smile.

In the cafeteria, Mary Adams was listening to a group of 3rd Graders read. When she lost her place, the children patiently helped her find the line they were on. Bonds of friendship were being created and when Mary walked in the hall, the children held her hand. When it was time to go, they hugged her.

In a classroom Eugene Dille was helping Desiree Woodley with her reading. It didn't matter that the rest of the room was doing something else. These two were in a world by themselves.

Down the hall in a 1st Grade class, Evelyn Perkins was helping one child after another make a small snowman. "You never know what you'll be doing," she said as Tina Dick went back to her seat with the figure they had made together. Just those few moments of shared time added value to the object she had made with Evelyn.

"She's my recruiter," Mrs. Horn, the principal said of Evelyn, who has so far enlisted three residents into the program, which can be frightening to someone who has never worked with unfamiliar children before. Evelyn works at encouraging others to join the program, said the principal.

One reason the program works so well is its flexibility. "They do whatever the teacher wants: one-on-one reading, group reading, remedial reading, crafts—they're like general aids," said Mrs. Horn, who makes a point of asking each volunteer if they like what they are doing and what they'd like to try next. She said her only worry is that the volunteers might all quit and leave the children disappointed. But with her attention to possible obstacles, there is no hint of that happening so far.

And another reason for its success is transportation, which the school provides since the Rest Home can't. Each Thursday at 9:30, the residents are waiting at the door for the van, and if it's just a few minutes late, they begin to worry that something has happened to prevent them from going that day, said Mrs. Horn, who drives the van.