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Senior volunteers go back to school



GI volunteer Ruby Howard, 67, with two Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School first-graders, (L to R) Liyah Cacho and Iyanna Raymond. (Fran Cronin photo)

By Fran Cronin

A gaggle of 5- and 6-years olds clomped down a flight of linoleum-covered stairs on their way to their school's basement-level cafeteria.

It was the Monday after Thanksgiving weekend and the children were still energized from turkey, late nights and few demands. It was hard to tell if they were just coming in or on their way out: their knitted hats, unzipped jackets and unnecessary boots were askew.

But there was no mistaking their delight in seeing "Ms. Rose," smiling at them from the bottom of the stairs. They waved, calling her name to get her attention as they continued their giddy march to lunch.

Ms. Rose, aka Charlotte Rose, 77, would agree she is gray-haired and seemingly grandmotherly toward these Dudley Street Neighborhood Charter School students, but she is also a tough and determined woman with a mission.

For the past nine years, Ms. Rose has been a Generations Incorporated classroom volunteer working with GI's senior literacy program to help young readers in the greater Boston area.

"You come [into a kindergarten class] and some kids can't read. Next year they are. I just like seeing how the kids progress," says Rose.

As Rose's almost decade-long stint as a GI tutor has taught her, helping is not always about reading. Some students do need help making sense of phonics; others may want a reading buddy or someone to snuggle up against when a story is being read aloud. Sometimes, they just want someone to listen as they talk.

"We've found kids love to read because of the relationship," said Mary Gunn, GI's executive director.

After all, Rose is retired, more grandmother than teacher, as are the seven other GI senior volunteers at Dudley Street. A total of 132 students are evenly divided across the school's four kindergarten and two-first grade classes. Two GI volunteers are assigned to each class.

This school and neighborhood is also Rose's home. She grew up attending local Roxbury public schools and now lives in Mission Hill, a two-bus ride from her home to Shirley Street in Roxbury where the new in-district Dudley Street charter school is located.

Three days a week Rose takes this 30-minute bus ride, puts on her forest green GI-emblazoned jacket, and volunteers as a one-to-one tutor or in-class support with struggling young readers. She volunteers 15 hours each week.

Her experience and commitment have also catapulted Rose to team leader of GI's senior volunteers in the school. GI follows the "five-star" national core standards for literacy training and Rose mentors her fellow senior volunteers as well as her young charges.

Dudley Street opened its doors this past September. It's a new school for Boston and it's also a new school for GI's senior volunteer program.

As the largest affiliate with AARP's Experience Corps, GI now manages 250 GI-AARP volunteers with a goal of 300 by the end of the year, said Katie Klister, GI's director of volunteer management.

GI's success is dependent on recruiting, training and retaining senior volunteers to its literacy program. Of equal importance is the recruitment of participating schools. Of the 65 elementary schools in Boston, GI volunteers in 10. In total, GI volunteers work in 13 elementary schools and four after-school programs in the greater Boston area.

To address what Gunn calls “slippage” — especially for young, at-risk students — during the summer months, GI launched its first summer program last year. Forty-five students attended a four-week program with a one-to-one tutoring ratio. Gunn said the goal is to include another school this summer and double the number of students in the program. Under development is a “Young Achievers Program” in Mattapan.

Of the GI-AARP partnership, Gunn said, “We’re part of a national program but still have our independence. That’s rare, and we’re proud of that participation.”

As a nonprofit, GI is not funded by AARP but applies for the bulk of its funds through the federal grant programs that AARP sponsors. GI’s budget this year is \$2.7 million, a third of which is allocated as stipends to its senior volunteers.

A good tutoring program, however, is not free. Rose, like the other GI senior volunteers in the school, may not be paid for their time, but schools participating in GI’s literacy program do pay a sliding fee. For Boston schools, the fee is between \$5000 and \$10,000 a year. Revere, Gunn said, pays \$25,000.

With singular dependence on the quality and enthusiasm of its volunteer corps, Gunn said, “We are as interested in our older adults as we are in our young children. We want to be the best place for seniors to serve.”

Along with dispensing stipends, GI has launched its “Act of Aging Initiative” to help its seniors make time to connect and socialize. Volunteers meet once a month to plan activities from knitting to bowling, or just to have a cup of coffee.

When Rose was asked about being a volunteer and GI’s senior outreach program, she said, “I’m always talking about how much I love the work.”

In 2009, after volunteering for her fourth year, GI presented Rose with its first John McCullough Service Award for her outstanding role as a reading coach at the JFK School in Jamaica Plain. Rose said she keeps the glass award “on the bookshelf where I can see it.”

An original member of the 1950’s Doo Wop group The Tune Weavers, promoted by Dick Clark and inducted into the Doo Wop Hall of Fame in 2003, Rose still performs as a lead singer in shows up and down the east coast.

“She’s a busy woman with a busy life. We are lucky to have her,” said Gunn.