

Foster Grandparents Discover Pleasure In Volunteering

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— Some people may call them old. Some may call them retired but more than 500 grandmas and grandpas packed the Marriot ballroom on Monday and shared their enthusiasm for a job that keeps them busy at least 20 hours a week.

Called the Foster Grandparent Program, participants are 60 years or older and volunteer 20 hours per week serving as grandmas or grandpas to children and teenagers who have special needs.

"I feel like I'm doing something worthwhile," said Marjorie Deitrich. After years of helping her husband George on their Union

County farm, Marjorie felt bored after they retired from active farming.

Through the prodding of an acquaintance, Marjorie attended a foster grandparenting seminar.

"I was really scared," Marjorie said of her assignment to a school that she describes as a place for wayward boys.

But, it took only one day for Marjorie to fall in love with the boys who range from 11 to 18 years old.

"I'm really attached to them. At least five of them are really special to me," Marjorie said of the boys who seem just like normal grandchildren to her.

She helps them with their home-

work and assists the school teacher in whatever needs to be done.

It's her relationship with the boys that increases the value of her time spent as a tutor. The boys affectionately call her Grandma Marge.

While Grandma Marge thinks it is her duty to help the boys, she found that by letting them help her may make the relationship healthier. She said that one day she had difficulty walking but was reluctant to ask for help. Finally, she asked one of the boys if she could hang onto his arm while she walked.

"I thought you'd never ask," he said as he eagerly offered his arm. "My grandma always holds onto my arm and you remind me of her."

Since then, he waits outside for her to arrive each day and accompanies her around the school.

While some retired people shied away from joining the program because of the time commitment, Lillian Werley of Topton counters that the sacrifice is well worth it.

"This (being a foster grandma) is my first option. They need me. If I can help someone along the way then my living is not in vain," she

said.

Lillian works as a volunteer aide in an elementary school. "They just call me Grandma. And I call them all 'Honey,' because I can't remember each student's name and I don't want to show partiality," she said.

Although Lillian said she is hesitant to drive on bad roads and it is not required of "grandmas," she is also reluctant to skip any days.

"If you want to do something, do it correctly or not at all," is an adage her father taught her to live by. She knows the value of helping others, she said, because her husband died in a 1951 farming accident that left her a widow with three preschoolers.

"People took time out to help me. I got so much help," Lillian said.

Her whole life is now devoted to helping others, not only as a foster grandparent but as a volunteer in other areas.

Lillian has three sons, nine grandchildren, and three great grandchildren. "I just love them all to bits," she said of both her natural born and foster grandchildren.

Unlike Lillian, Fern Adams has no children or grandchildren by birth. But she volunteers as an aide at a Hamburg-area elementary school five days a week.

"I'm new. I just started in September, but I like helping children learn to read," she said.

"The foster grandparenting program is very educational, rewarding, and fulfilling," Lillian said.

Just like the students they serve, foster grandparents also are graded on the help they provide.

Recently Lillian was thrilled that her annual review showed outstanding and excellent marks for her help in the classroom.

Not all grandparents received the same verbal affirmation that Lillian does, but that doesn't make their services less rewarding.

Rachael Hess, who with her husband Arthur made a living shipping milk in Berks County, offered to help at the Hamburg Center for the mentally handicapped.

She said, "I take care of two girls that I don't want to give up. One just wants to hold my hand and won't let go. She can't talk or anything, but I talk and fuss over her all the time. And I'm sure she appreciates it because she never lets go of my hand."

Rachael said that she applied for the job because she wanted to better herself. That was six years ago. Rachael said that she never gets tired or discouraged from going to the center five days a week.

"I don't know anything better that one would want to do," she said of her responsibilities at the center.

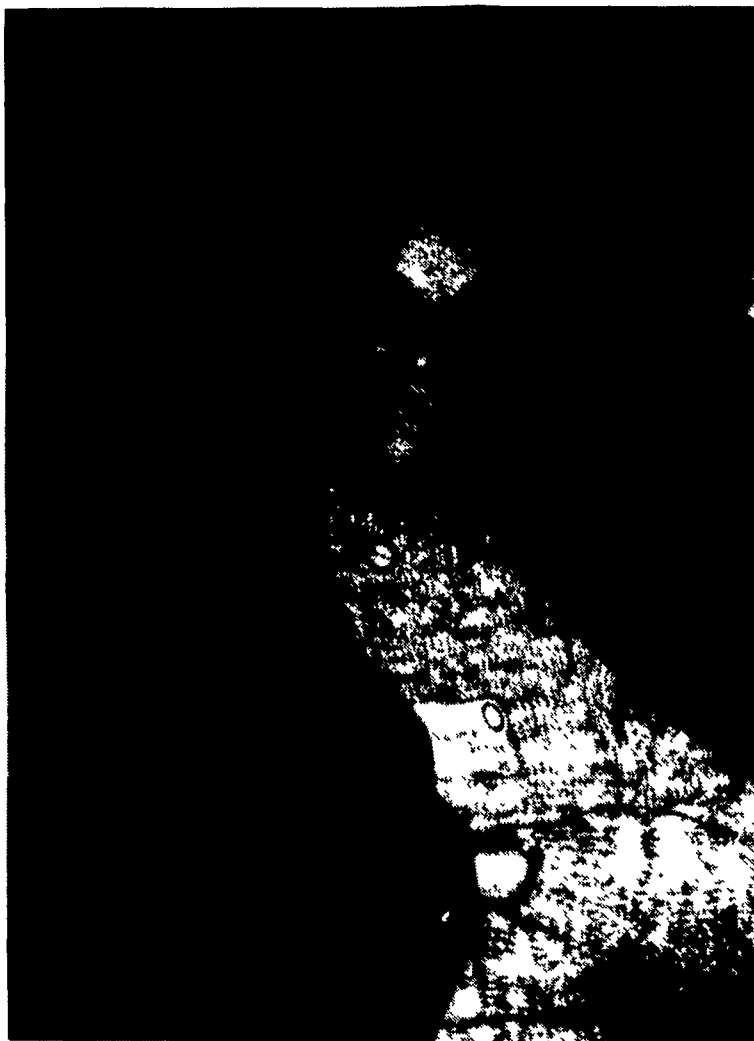
The needs of the children served by the Foster Grandparent Program include school dropouts, teen runaways, babies born HIV positive, children coping with abandonment, homelessness, abuse and neglect, AIDS, chronic or terminal illness, physical, mental and emotional disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, illiteracy, learning and developmental disabilities, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy.

Pennsylvania has more than 900 foster grandparents who assist more than 80,000 children with

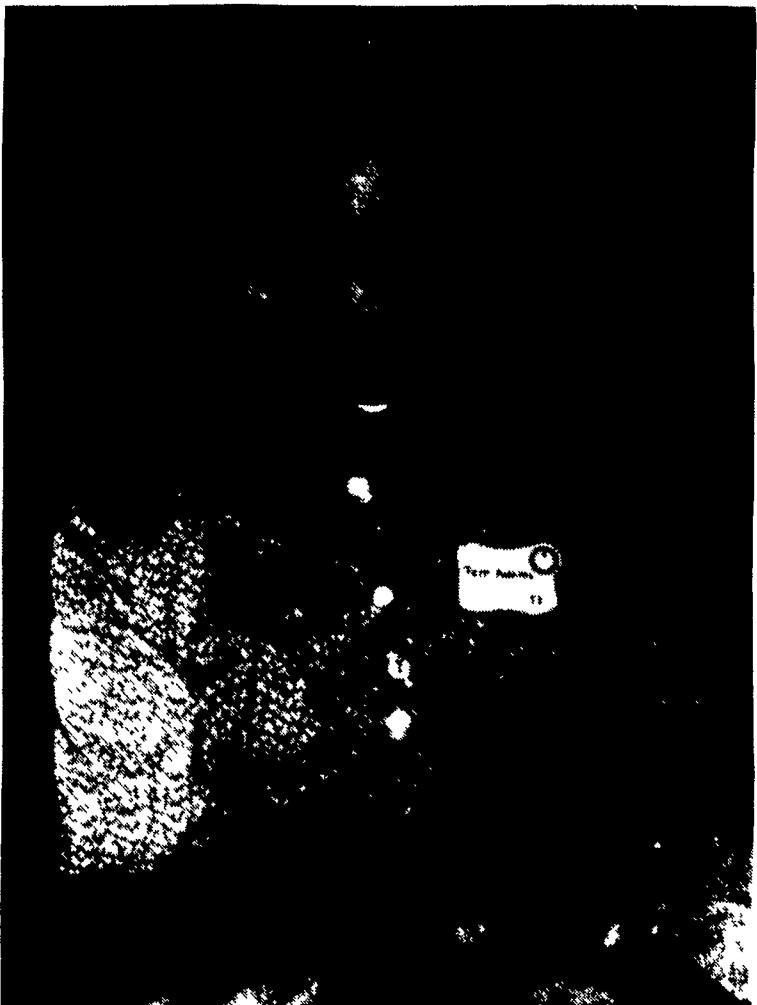
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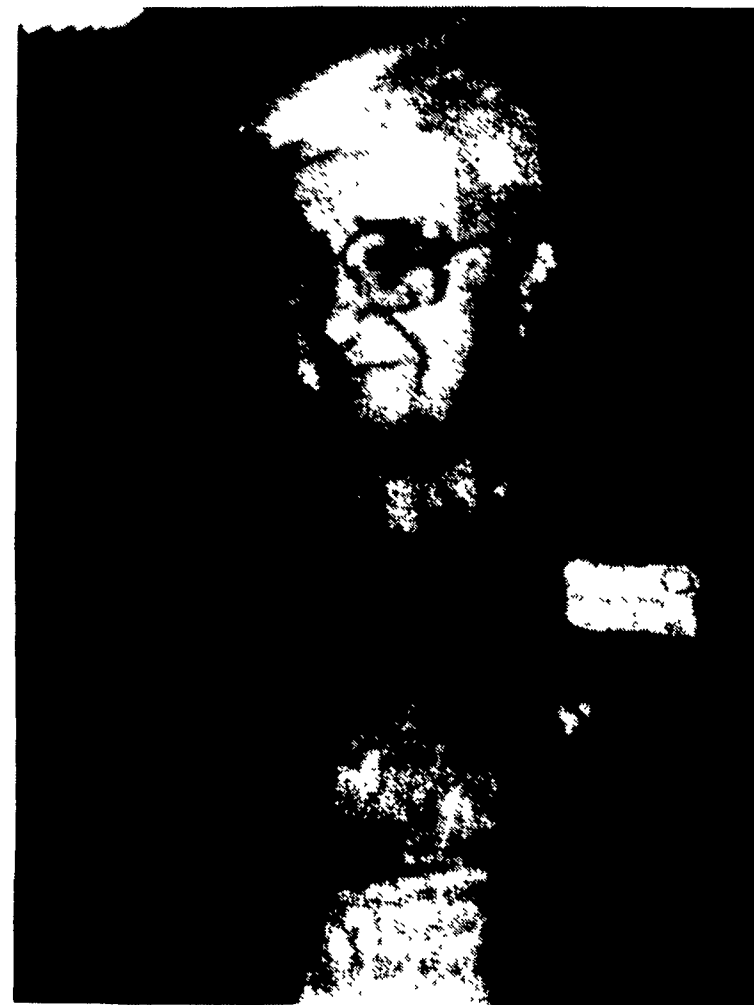
Rachael Hess of Lehartsville cares for a girl who can neither talk nor walk. "She just wants to hold my hand and never let go. She needs me. I don't ever want to give her up," Rachael said of her charge.



Marjorie Dietrick of New Columbia is known as Grandma Marge to troubled youth. It took a lot of prodding to convince her to give foster grandparenting a try. Now she doesn't want to stop.



Fern Adams is one of 900 foster grandparents who serve special needs children in Pennsylvania.



"I just love them all to bits," Lillian Werley of Topton says of her natural born and foster grandchildren.