

Foster grandparents give, receive love

By Deborah Kohen
Sentinel-Voice

At 76, Ellen Gurry is still full of vim and vigor; she's almost as energetic and enthusiastic as the children she cares for.

They're not her children, but judging by Gurry's gentle grace, you couldn't tell.

Gurry is part of the Economic Opportunity Board's Foster Grandparent Program. Seniors volunteer to mentor children in one of 43 locations in Clark County, including elementaries and three special education schools, Head Start programs, residential facilities for severely handicapped children and daycare centers in Las Vegas, Overton, Logandale, Moapa and Bunkerville.

Seniors are given a \$2.55-an-hour stipend that isn't considered a wage and is therefore nontaxable. The stipend doesn't interfere with government benefits like Social Security, Medicare, or subsidized housing.

Gurry donates her time to Variety Day Home, a nonprofit daycare center run by the Sisters of the Holy Family with corporate help from Norwest Bank, United Way and other civic organizations.

The center pools programs and services for young children and their families. Along with the Foster Grandparent Program, the center has a family resource center, a program broaching drug and alcohol abuse, a pilot parent literacy project and a room in the facility set aside for parent services called the Family Learning Center.

Ruby Collins runs Variety Day Home; the center cares for more than 200 children, up to 8 years old. A 27-year Variety Day Home employee, she runs a tight ship: the teachers are well trained and the facility is clean, nicely furnished and



Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Ellen Gurry enjoys coming to the Variety Day Home daily to be around the smiling children.

tranquil.

"We try to make the center a home-like environment for the kids," she said. "We have a lot of single parents and we offer affordable daycare. They can bring their children here and feel comfortable."

The senior volunteers bolster the homey feel.

"We love our foster grandparents," Collins said. "Even if they just sit here, we enjoy their presence. They can serve as grandparents to some of the children here, and they can offer that one-to-one (interaction) that the teacher is not able to offer all the time."

Some foster grandparents help monitor a class; others assist the teachers, participating in projects, reading stories and teaching songs.

Before she retired, Gurry ran her own daycare centers in Oklahoma City and Phoenix. They were open 24-hours-a-day, 364 days a year — closed only for Christmas. Essentially, the kids lived with her.

"I could dish out some best sellers on how people did their

children," Gurry said. The most extreme example: a little girl whose mother dropped her off and never returned. Gurry's daughter adopted the child.

Conversely, Variety Day Home children seem well adjusted, Gurry said.

"I think about them after I go home, I think about them on weekends," Gurry admitted. "I (eagerly) wait for Monday morning. To me, the Foster Grandparent Program is a lifesaver. All I was doing before I started here was sitting at home thinking about what used to be. But here, there's something to look forward to every morning. This morning I was up at 3 a.m. ready to come to work."

Catherine Fedorchak urged retired seniors in the community to check out the program.

"If they saw it, they'd never want to leave. They'd fall in love and make sure they were going to be there," she said. "There is no better place and no better people than in the Foster Grandparent Program and Variety Day Home. The

adults (teachers, administrators and other Grandparents) are just marvelous. Everybody is pleasant, very kind, generous, and if you don't know something, they tell you what to do and how to do it."

Fedorchak's face beams (See EOB, Page 9)

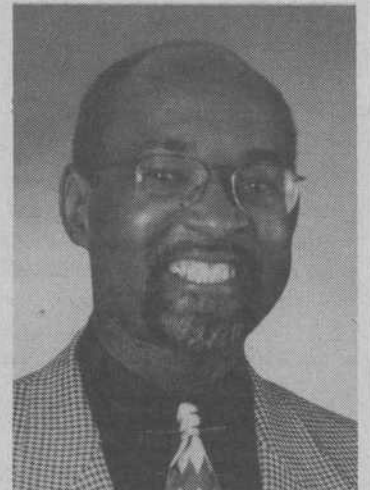


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Working with the students on their woodwork projects, Richard Henderson, is surprised at how fast the children learn the different tools to use.

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