

'Grandparents' volunteering at nursery school

By Ashley Winchester



Grandparent volunteer working with children at Buckle My Shoe Nursery in Tribeca

Louise Rogers loves children, and dozens of them call her grandma. Every week, Rogers visits them in their "shoe," but this senior citizen isn't the old woman from the nursery rhyme. She is one of eight volunteer grandparents at Buckle My Shoe Nursery School, and her primary job is to play with and help nurture the 100 children in the school's infant, toddler and preschool programs. Through a partnership with the City of New York and the Department for the Aging, Buckle My Shoe is bringing seniors and preschoolers together.

"At Buckle My Shoe, the children are able to learn about diversity in terms of age and culture," said Linda M. Ensko, program director. "They are exposed to their young teachers, middle aged parents, and older 'grandparents' in an intergenerational environment."

Buckle My Shoe Nursery School, founded in the West Village in 1981, uses the Reggio Emilia

approach to early childhood education. This philosophy of teaching includes the use of an emergent curriculum cultivating each child's individual emotional, social and moral potential. Now in its fourth year of operation, the volunteer grandparent program coincides with the Buckle My Shoe philosophy by offering an interactive, intergenerational environment.

Volunteer grandparents work four and five hour shifts attending to children from age three months to five years, in either the West Village or Tribeca nursery school. On a typical morning, Rogers spends time in both the infant and toddler rooms reading to, playing with or pampering the children. Volunteer grandparents work with the teachers as members of the staff, and assist in all aspects of the day.

"The children benefit from extra attention and stimulation from the seniors, and staff and families benefit from their parenting and life experiences," Ensko said. "In turn, the seniors' interaction with the young children keeps them alive and active. They come in with a nice, calm, mature presence and are very loving and nurturing."

Some volunteers speak foreign languages, and delight in teaching the children new words in their native tongue.

"One volunteer, Tom, speaks Chinese with them. He loves to take the babies for walks." Thinking of another grandparent, she said, "Humphrey gets down on the floor with the kids and plays with the blocks." Ensko said. "The grandparents add such flavor to the curriculum. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved."

Volunteers are paid a small stipend by the school and city for their time, but, as Rogers admits, the chance to be around and interact with children is reward enough.

"I just love kids," she said with a smile as she waved goodbye to a room of infants. "I can't see my own grandchildren every day... but this makes up for it."

Seniors interested in volunteering can call the Foster Grandparent Program at 212-442-3117 or Buckle My Shoe at 212-374-1489.

Buckle My Shoe has two locations: 40 Worth St. in Tribeca and 230 W. 13th St in the West Village.