

## **Volunteering: 'It's like medicine'**

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Prairie Heights Middle School students help members of the Gray Panthers gather Easter baskets that were delivered to the elderly and shut ins in the community. From left, Claude Walsh, Lily Jagoda, Janet Grabill, Dakoda Smith and Zach Cowling gathered to make Easter cheery for others. It was the last gathering of the Gray Panthers for the year. Photo by Jennifer Decker



Logan Hatton, 9, a third grade student at JE Ober Elementary School in Garrett reads a book with Helping Our Pupils Excel volunteer mentor Sally Shoudel in the school library during a mentoring session recently. CHAD KLINE



Volunteer mentor Ethel Yoder, left, with Helping Our Pupils Excel in DeKalb County reads a book to first grade student Jasmine, 7, in the library at JE Ober Elementary School during a recent session in Garrett. CHAD KLINE



Jasmine, 7, a first grade student at JE Ober Elementary School, sounds out words with the help of Helping Our Pupils Excel volunteer mentor Ethel Yoder during a recent mentoring session in the school library in Garrett. CHAD KLINE

IvanBen Brown, 12, left, reads through a library book with the help of his volunteer mentor Christian Otterstedt in the McKinney Harrison school library on the last day of school in Auburn. Otterstedt works with the Helping Our Pupils Excel program in Auburn. Brown, who moves on to sixth grade in the fall, was adopted from Pampanga Philippines. CHAD KLINE



Volunteer mentor Christian Otterstedt, with Helping Our Pupils Excel program in Auburn, assists in word pronunciation to IvanBen Brown, 12, left, during a recent mentoring session a in the McKinney Harrison school library on the last day of school in Auburn. Brown, who moves on to sixth grade in the fall, was adopted from Pampanga Philippines. CHAD KLINE

BRUSHY PRAIRIE — Ask any administrator and they will say volunteers are the backbone of a school.

Brenda Rummel, principal of Prairie Heights and Milford elementary schools, won't argue. Her district has the Gray Panthers, a group of volunteers, most of whom are retirees. To reward them for volunteering, the district gives members of the Gray Panthers passes to athletic events.

"I think they're instrumental in helping students with learning and life," Rummel said. "The intergenerational grandparent is critical."

This spring, 60 Easter baskets were compiled by Prairie Heights Middle Schoolers. The baskets were delivered to shut-ins and the elderly in the community by the Gray Panthers.

The 15 to 20-member Gray Panthers help in many areas. Iretta Hanna of Hudson, has been a volunteer since 1995, after teaching 37 years — some of that time at Salem Center High School.

"It seems like the logical thing to do," she said. "I work with the sixth graders listening to book reports once a week. When they do ISTEP I come help administer it. I like being around the kids and helping. Some of the kids — I had their moms and dads (as students). The kids are polite."

Lily Jagoda of Mongo has been a Gray Panther since the 1990s and said she loves her time with the kids. "It feels like such a huge fellowship with the children. It's fulfilling. We have a short meeting on how we'll help the teachers. The teachers have a list asking for us to volunteer, read and do projects," Jagoda said. "(Recipients) are so touched by (Easter) baskets. Some are teary eyed."

Janet Grabill of Nevada Mills has been a Gray Panther since 2004. An elected member of the Prairie Heights Schools Board of Education, Grabill is also a retired teacher. "It's a public service and I believe in helping. We sign up," Grabill said and added it's nice to receive passes in return to cheer on the Panthers in sports. "Gray Panthers is open to anyone who wants to help. At Christmas, we deliver baskets."

Lois Booth, 90, of Orland, has loved helping teachers the last 10 years as a Gray Panther. "I love children. My mother taught at Collins School," Booth said. "We go through a list to see if there's anything to help with. One year, I helped a little girl and I enjoy it."

The last four years Jo Gunthorp of Brushy Prairie has been a Gray Panther, she has loved every minute of it. She usually helps on Fridays getting together homework folders and newsletters. "I like intermingling with neighbors. I help in the classroom and the kids call me Grandma Jo. It's like medicine for you," Gunthorp said.

Over in DeKalb County, the Helping Our Pupils Excel program has long thrived with putting volunteer mentors in public schools with a goal of helping pupils excel.

Christian Otterstedt, of Auburn, a retired chemical engineer, is a HOPE volunteer who started mentoring two or three years ago a boy who is now in the fifth grade. Otterstedt started mentoring after reading about it in The Star. "I'm 65 and our kids are all grown. It's a way of staying around young children once a week," he said.

Otterstedt said he and his student are familiar with each other. "I think any child needs to get comfortable. I've got to remember to act slightly serious," he said. "Half the time we work on reading and the rest of the time we play games. One thing I've learned is to try to be a friend to the child. You're the child's friend and mentor first."

Sometimes, Otterstedt said he gets upset with parents who seem uninterested in how their child is doing in school. He said he was glad his student's parents are involved with his school life. Otterstedt said it's also difficult, as he said basic arithmetic is taught differently than how he knows it. In all, Otterstedt said he'd recommend more adults becoming mentors. "The only qualification is you have to love kids," he said.

Judy Sorg, DeKalb County Community Foundation Learning Link director, also is a Hope volunteer. "I got involved many years ago in 2006 through Terra Firma, an early literacy initiative. We do volunteer mentoring in the DeKalb Central Schools, JE Ober in Garrett and Riverdale Elementary in St. Joe for kindergartners through eighth grade."

Sorg has been working with a second grade-boy for the last three years. "(When he started) he did not know his letters of the alphabet and their sounds. He's now a proficient reader," Sorg said. As a team, she works with her student often on reading comprehension.

"He's excited about reading and works on things he wants to read. I meet with him once a week. He knows more about dinosaurs and it makes me feel good to know I'm helping a child in a way that will make a difference," she said. "He looks forward to it."

Sorg said HOPE is treated as a positive program with some mentors who work with advanced students. "Some fifth graders are bored with math at the classroom level. We have engineers work with them," she said.

HOPE is currently recruiting volunteer mentors for fall in hopes of doubling their numbers from the current 70 mentors to 140. Some 100 children are mentored. The volunteer opportunity is open to any adult who wants to be a positive role model with one hour per week to spend with a child. "We do a background screening and there is a required 90-minute orientation," Sorg said and added HOPE would like to start mentoring DeKalb Central High School students in the fall through career development. "(Mentors) come back and thank us with the opportunity to mentor."

HOPE is funded by individuals, businesses, board members and the Dekko Foundation.

For more information, visit [hopedekalbcounty.org](http://hopedekalbcounty.org) or call 925-0311.