

From Seed to Table: A Community Rallies Behind the Family Relief Nursery

by Maren Symonds

In 1996, a New York Times best-selling book introduced the American public to a profound bit of African wisdom: *“It takes a village to raise a child.”* From their first 5 years of foundational development through adolescence and young adulthood, children need *all of us* to take responsibility for their well-being.

When children are at risk of abuse, neglect, or court-ordered separation from their parents, the Volunteers of America Oregon Family Relief Nursery (FRN) takes action. Their therapeutic classrooms, parenting education, home visits, and other forms of intervention provide a positive learning environment for children aged 6 weeks to 5 years while helping parents address issues that affect child welfare. FRN’s volunteer management program provides opportunities for caring adults to join their “village.”

Boomer Initiative Uncovered Fertile Ground for Action

Since 2009, FRN has joined with the Oregon Community Foundation and others to explore ways for the burgeoning collective of baby boomer volunteers to contribute to school readiness. While direct service in classrooms was an obvious avenue for engagement, the limited number of positions and scheduling parameters at FRN inhibited broad participation. FRN’s Volunteer Coordinator, Gary Marschke, had to get creative.

“A lot of boomers are still active in the workforce or can’t make the weekly commitment necessary for establishing trust and secure bonds with our vulnerable children,” Gary said. “But their hearts go out to these kids, and they really want to do something to help.”

As he canvassed their school grounds in August 2011, he noticed some fallow garden boxes. They were the product of an earlier effort for which an initial surge of enthusiasm waned in the absence of a formal program. Gary knew that if he lent his organizational skills and community connections to the project, FRN could realize a big vision that would “win” on many levels:

- A host of **volunteers** could participate in designing, constructing, and cultivating a garden at times and intervals to suit their schedules.
- **Teachers** could leverage a nature-based curriculum delivered by volunteers in 15-minute “drop in” modules.
- **Children** could learn about nature while having the experience of working with dirt, seeds, plants, and insects.
- **Parents** could learn about nutrition and food preparation as they receive fresh produce from the garden.
- **FRN** could develop a new cadre of supporters through direct engagement with the agency’s work.

Though gardening was a great opportunity, Gary knew very little about it. He had to find people to help him.

The Plot Thickened

Gary identified an underutilized portion of the play area as a promising spot for a garden and asked Mary Bedard, a boomer friend and professional gardener, for an expert opinion. A site visit affirmed the appeal of the space if FRN pruned the neighboring trees. Now all Gary needed was a plan.

An auspicious connection with the horticultural therapy program at Portland Community College helped Gary make the critical leap from vision to reality. This program has been used successfully at Legacy Emanuel Hospital to improve clinical outcomes, accelerate healing, and minimize surgical complications through the time-tested practice of using gardening to support recovery. Teresia Hazen, Program Director (*and baby boomer*) was interested in expanding the initiative beyond the hospital. The Family Relief Nursery proved a golden opportunity.

Teresia made the connection with Brian Bainson, landscape architect (*and baby boomer*), to develop the master plan. It included 11 raised bed planter boxes – 8 “singles” and 3 “triples” – and a fenced enclosure. She also enrolled several horticultural interns in making a planting plan, drafting the classroom curriculum, and securing feedback and input from the teachers.

Armed with a plan, Gary worked with Brenda Ketah of Home Builders Foundation to supply materials and coordinate assembly. A couple of boomer volunteers took on project leadership roles. Jim Fisher used the design drawings to create kits with pre-cut materials. Frank D’Agastino worked with volunteers from the Bank of America on construction and installation.



Fittingly, on Earth Day 2012 (April 22nd), Dean Innovation supplied the dirt that another set of volunteers used to fill several of the boxes. The following week, planting began using seeds and starts from Portland Nursery, courtesy of Peggy Acott, another boomer.

Seed to Table Blossoms



Genevieve Layman is one of three horticultural interns who served on rotation tending the garden and teaching classes. She has shown the kids how to plant seeds and starts. She has talked about the different types of plants and the flowers they produce. She has helped the children release lady bugs to minimize harmful insect infestations. And she has been there for the harvest and “tastings.” *[Kids will eat the vegetables that they helped grow!]*

“It is fantastic working with kids in this age group,” Genevieve said. “They get really excited when it’s time to go to the garden.”

Enthusiasm translates into positive behavioral change. The kids devote their full attention to each 15-minute gardening lesson. They ask questions, take turns working with the teacher, and share with one another. And their elevated moods help them take their outdoor behaviors into the classroom.

In addition to tending the garden, Genevieve and her colleagues (Maria Bruce and Melanie Wolf) have documented their coursework and made lists of supplies. Their efforts have made it easy for the pre-school teachers to factor gardening into an overall lesson plan. By contributing to FRN's work, the interns have the satisfaction of making a difference in the lives of young children while amassing clinical hours for professional certification.

Future Growth Planned

With Seed to Table proving to be successful on all fronts, Gary hopes to develop programming for the younger children and engage the parents. He'd like to send seeds and supplies home for window box plantings next Spring. He wants to hold cooking classes where families learn healthy ways to prepare the garden produce. And he'd love to create garden-based events in which kids interact with their parents.

All he needs is a village.



Boomers and Babies is a project of The Oregon Community Foundation (OCF). Additional funding for the project comes from The Atlantic Philanthropies, with additional support from the PGE Foundation, Knowledge Universe, the Juan Young Trust, the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette, and several OCF Donor Advised Funds.