

Monday, March 8, 2010



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**Volunteers Make a World of Difference at  
The Opportunity Project Early Learning Centers**

WICHITA, Kan. – There’s a common thread among those who give freely of their time at The Opportunity Project (TOP Early Learning Centers). That thread is compassion for children, especially those in need. Three volunteers are currently making a huge difference in these children’s lives. Elizabeth De Leon, Paul Black and Mary Rohleder are making valuable contributions to the centers and the children they serve.

A brand new library opened at TOP north last week, largely due to the work of De Leon who spent countless hours organizing, cataloguing, computerizing, and displaying hundreds of donated books. Her face lit up like a Thomas Kinkade painting when the first wave of children passed through the door. For many, it was the first time they had ever been inside a library and they had to be taught that books need to be checked out; they can’t just take them. De Leon gently showed them how and gave them each their very own bookmarker along with some big hugs.

De Leon became familiar with TOP Early Learning Centers in 2006. TOP north’s director, Jeannene Schweitzer had worked with her son, Everett when she was the playgroup coordinator at McConnell Air Force Base. “When Everett was old enough for preschool, I knew I wanted him wherever she was. Even though there is a TOP center in Derby, I still drove him to the north location because of her,” said De Leon.

Black began volunteering at TOP in December, after the company for which he was working downsized. He became aware of TOP through a contact at the East Wichita Rotary Club. Since he had newfound time on his hands he wanted to volunteer with an organization that he could see made a difference. His Rotary contact gave TOP Executive Director Janice Smith his phone number and very soon they had established a long “To Do” list for him.

With nearly 30 years of business experience, Black jumped right in and began analyzing the utility bills from both centers, determining if there was any money to be saved. He immediately noticed the centers were not set up with the utility providers as not-for-profits or in the correct class and were paying sales tax or could utilize special meters to decrease their costs. Then he began putting together a case to submit to Westar to allow TOP reimbursement for some of the expense incurred due to a water leak last summer. So far, he has volunteered up to 20 hours a week at TOP and has saved the centers enough money to feed 36 children two meals and a snack for a month.

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“When you break it down to how your work affects the children, it makes you feel like you’re really contributing something,” said Black.

Next on Black’s list is a review of the centers’ information systems, including identification of current and future needs.

The third volunteer making a tremendous contribution to TOP is Rohleder who began volunteering in November.

“I met Mary at a luncheon and found out she was looking for something to do while between jobs. When I found out she had worked for Walmart as the head of human resources for 12 stores in the region and that she had more than 18 years of human resource experience – seven with non-profit organization, I knew immediately we could use her,” said Smith.

Since then, she has donated 5-15 hours a week performing various tasks such as auditing the personnel files to make sure they meet human resource standards, updating the staff handbook and designing an employee performance evaluation process that allows every employee to get appropriate feedback on the performance and assistance meeting their career goals. She has also conducted a time management class for employees, offered center directors creative ideas for incenting staff with non monetary rewards and recently prescreened applicants for an open executive position at TOP.

“The thing I like best about volunteering at TOP is the people, including the children, the directors and the executive director. The people in not-for-profit are not there to get rich; they are there to feel the rewards. It is so different than the private sector where people are there to make money regardless of liking what they do,” said Rohleder.

All three of these volunteers have filled large voids at the centers this year. “We are incredibly fortunate to have such skilled volunteers willing to invest in TOP. They have been invaluable,” said Smith.

*TOP is a 501c(3) charity based in Wichita, Kansas. TOP Early Learning Centers provide educational day care and preschool in some of Wichita’s poorest areas; Oaklawn and north central Wichita. Dedicated to creating school readiness for at-risk children, TOP’s mission is to improve life outcomes for Kansas’ children in poverty and to collaborate with educators elsewhere to improve early education for all children living in poverty.*

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