Good afternoon and thanks for joining us, I am Judy Simpson. In the United States today an estimated 84,000,000 adults volunteer in some capacity. Their contribution is worth nearly $248,000,000,000 to those they help. Volunteerism has a long legacy in our country. In 1763 Benjamin Franklin founded the first volunteer fire house. About 100 years later the United Way was founded. Tens of thousands of volunteers are now coordinated through United Way chapters across the country. This afternoon we're going to learn and promote some of the volunteer opportunities across the state of Vermont through the United Way of Chittenden County's volunteer connection. Joining me to begin our program are two United Way staff members. Mary Pelkey and Phet Keomanyvanh. Mary is the Foster Grandparent Program Coordinator in Franklin County and Grand Isle Counties and Phet is the coordinator for Chittenden and Washington Counties, in addition Phet is the coordinator for the RSVP program as well. I want to thank you both for joining me. Before we get started on some of the specifics tell us a little bit Phet why you are highlighting these particular programs.

Phet.: Sure Judy. Thank you we're really excited to be here to talk about this. Why 55 plus? Because nationally they are the largest group to be volunteering today. They have a lifetime of skill and experience to give back to the community and may be due to having more time being retired or they are having more control of their professional schedules or grown kids whatever the case maybe they're giving back. United Way recognizes this and we also support the mobilization of 55 plus of volunteers.

Judy.: Let's talk about the specifics about RSVP what does the program offer?

Phet.: RSVP is a personalized referral and matching service. What we do is work with volunteers to be able to match them to opportunities in the community that meets their interest their availability and their skill set. We do that by working with hundreds of organizations. Nonprofits public sectors around what that these are and it's a broad range of what volunteers can pick from. It's great to have that personalized experience so that volunteer experience is meaningful and that volunteer continues. It also means better results in the and for the community. United Way also works with specific areas of education income and health and we do have specialized signature programs around that too. Those are for example working in the school systems. We have RSVP’s that are our school buddies and they work with children one on one and the teachers have identified the students as needing academic support. We have
RSVP's of pictures showing some RSVPs at the statehouse working with the nonprofits that support their organization. Right there we have a volunteer RSVP through the read to me which is an excellent program which promotes literacy for children. Volunteers go in and they go read and can have a conversation with kids and it really helps as a building block to the formal education.

Judy.: Sounds like it's safe to say depending on if you want to volunteer your time depending on what time you have or what skills you have there's a need.

Phet.: Yes there's definitely a need and we can find almost a match for anybody. We definitely try to take the time to listen to the volunteer when they do come in to assess exactly what it is. This is a public service that's no charge and we definitely as United Way of Chittenden County want to be able to make it meaningful and have the most impact for our community.

Judy.: And also the most impact for the volunteer as you said because you want the volunteer to be able to enjoy their experience.

Phet.: Definitely, definitely.

Judy.: Let's bring in Mary Pelkey to the conversation. Mary tell us about the Foster Grandparent program and who's eligible to join? And a little bit about your background because you've been at it awhile?

Mary.: I've been at it 24 years and it works just as well now as it did 24 years ago which is why I'm still with it. The Foster Grandparent program is a unique program and its inter-generational. It really links up adults over the age of 55 with kids and youth under the age of 21 that have been identified as having some need whether it be academic social developmental and they work one on one or in small groups in a variety of community settings head starts schools preschools elementary schools and under the direction or the direct supervision I should say of teachers and staff people. They work with identify children in the classroom on specific goals that are developed and tracked throughout the course of the year so they know at the end of the year what impact they've had on the children they've worked with. Which is really nice they can see the progress that has been made. Although they only work with a few children that we track goals with they are the grandma or the grandpa to all the kids in the classroom and even in the school. It is pretty impressive to see. We actually have some married couples who volunteer together which is really unique. To be eligible for the program you need to be 55. It's a very committed program so you need to commit to a minimum of 15 hours a week and you can volunteer up to 40 hours a week. We have several volunteers that are working 30-35 and it seems once we get them in the program they seem to like it. I have somebody that is in the 30th year of the program and I have folks there from 55 to 98 that are still working in the program right now. That's my age range.

Judy.: Why is it important for the kids to have these older adults in their lives?

Mary.: Times as we all know have changed. Families have a tougher time in these economic times where as a long time ago only one family one parent you to go outside and work and one could stay home with the children. Now most often they both have to. They have to move away from their hometown away from grandparents and family members because they have to go where the jobs are which leaves a lot of the children without the contact of their grandparents.
and although Foster Grandparents are not their blood grandparents so to speak they are their school grandparent or their day care grandparent and they fill such a wonderful void. To see the wonderful relationships that are formed between volunteers is just amazing.

Judy.: I know you have a unique way of serving the kids to learn how they feel about their Foster Grandparent volunteers. Tell me a little bit about that.

Mary.: Every three years we do a survey where we survey we are always asking volunteers how do you feel about the program and the teachers and staff people how do you think the program works. So we started serving the children that are actually served. They have specific questions that they're asked and they can draw pictures to answer and go along with those questions. We have had such wonderful wonderful comments and wonderful insight from the children especially this year and I believe we're going to have some pictures of that.

Judy.: Yes we can see them here lots of smiling faces.

Mary.: It's just wonderful to see those smiling faces and connections they make.

Judy.: It looks like we're dancing here.

Mary.: I had a volunteer tell me that this year there has not been one day that they haven't looked forward to coming in to their volunteer job.

Judy.: Wow that's amazing. Joining us now is one of the volunteers in the Foster Grandparent program I want to welcome Jean Cass of Burlington. Thanks so much for being with us. Jean, tell me why did you join the Foster Grandparent program?

Jean.: I'm happy to be here. I retired in 2006 after 40 years of working as a social worker. My understanding of retirement was that I was supposed to have fun. I didn't have a lot of money so I was looking around for some volunteer opportunities. Work oriented after such a length of time. I saw in the paper that United Way was looking for foster grandparents and I had never heard of this. It said specifically that we could be in the classroom and I thought that would be a very exciting interesting and very different opportunity for me to be in a classroom with children. So I went through the process it took a while because of background checks and everything involved to make sure that you are appropriate for the classroom. I was placed at Sustainability Academy at Barnes which is not far from where I live. I enjoyed that tremendously but realized I wanted a little bit more engagement with the children. I really want to be able to have relationships with the children and in a large classroom such as at the Sustainability Academy its next to impossible. I couldn't really know the parents either so I was placed this last academic year at the Schoolhouse Learning Center in South Burlington which is very open and self-directed learning with children which gave me some very different experiences.

Judy.: Tell us what your day is like as a Foster Grandparent?

Jean.: Last year was different every day was completely different. I work with all of the children and I'm primarily based in kindergarten. That's five years or a little older aged children. It has a lot a meltdowns and the high peaks. It can be really frustrating if all the kids are having a bad day so normally that's not the case. I could be asked by the children at recess to
play basketball with the boys. I love that because there's contact their also which they seem to like that one is not come sit on my lap let's play ball and that seems to work for them. Whereas the other children will ask me to read with them during quiet reading they will say can I read to you. They might ask me to read to them I play games with them I assist them with math. Of course the schoolhouse is small. The number of students is nowhere near what the city public schools are. It provides me with a lot more opportunities to do just about anything that's happening in the school working with parents or do short courses with kids.

Judy.: What is it that you get out of this when talking about doing things with the children? What personally do you like about this?

Jean.: I have no children of my own I have many great nieces and nephews but they are all in Syracuse New York which is where I grew up so having access to children. I live in senior housing and there's no children living in senior housing with us. So I do not have neighbors either so being in a school I'm able to be with children of all ages and establish relationships with them. I think are lasting and I believe that with the kinds of gifts that I get from the children which could be a picture or story or just saying can I sit on your lap.

Judy.: Are you surprised that the impact you have on these kids?

Jean.: I was totally and I didn't get it until the end when I was at the Sustainability Academy and the children made a book for me and children are so creative how whenever age but kindergarten children can draw and do our work and express themselves like they did with the survey. One of the things one of the children said in the survey of the children is that when I'm not there it's emptier. Which I thought was a wonderful. Yes I am very surprised by the impact that I have.

Mary.: When we recruit people we tried to explain that but it's very difficult to put into words. It's until you experience it like Jean has you can really understand the full impact of what this type of volunteer job can do.

Jean.: The love and joy is just amazing I really feel full most days coming home.

Judy.: Does that surprise the volunteers Phet?

Phet.: Yes actually it does surprise a lot of folks how much they are quickly part of the school part of the families of the kids because they are there quite a bit. Jean also brings up a great point about how we tried to be able to match the volunteer to the site. The Foster Grandparent program is a very versatile program working with children from birth to 21 years of age. We've a range of volunteers from head start to the school system to alternative schools and even some that work with juvenile at risk kids. It's a great program to have and to be able to promote in our community because it's making huge waves.

Judy.: It's OK for the volunteers to say that was a great experience but I think I'd like to work with younger kids or older kids or in a smaller setting.

Phet.: Yes.

Jean.: Absolutely.
Judy.: And there are settings that can certainly fit everybody who wants to volunteer?

Mary.: I can actually say through all of these years I've been in the program there has not been one volunteer that has wanted to work that I have not been able to place.

Judy.: Once again remind us how long you've been in the program?

Mary.: 24 years.

Judy.: That's amazing. So how can volunteers or people who are interested in volunteering get more information?

Phet.: They can definitely visit the United Way's website at unitedwaycc.org and we have a volunteer go in. If you're looking for the specific 55 there's a button that's for 55 but we have other volunteer opportunities for individuals. We work with hundreds of nonprofits. We have over 400 postings and you can volunteer as a group. We love having husbands wives best friends and makes it very meaningful. Even whole companies can be able to volunteer and promote social responsibility. You can also call us at (802)-860-1677. If you want to call particularly Mary at Franklin Grand Isle.

Mary.: They can contact me at (802)-524-6337.

Judy.: I want to thank you all for coming on and talking about these great programs. That's our program for today, I am Judy Simpson. We will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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