

COMMUNITY

'Grandpa Mike' is retiring



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES HERALD

Foster Grandparents volunteer Mike Miller reads with Jaden Rogers at the New Opportunities Head Start preschool program.

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Kids who have gone through the New Opportunities Head Start preschool program or Carroll Public Library's summer reading program in recent years likely will recall a familiar face: "Grandpa Mike."

Mike Miller, a longtime volunteer with Foster Grandparents in Carroll County, is retiring from his volunteer work and moving from the

Carroll area soon.

And he'll be missed, according to many who have worked with him and seen the impact he's had on kids over the years.

Through the Foster Grandparents senior-citizen volunteer program, Miller, 77, has volunteered at Fairview Elementary School, with Carroll Public Library's summer reading program and most often at New Opportunities'

MILLER, PAGE 12



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Mike Miller has volunteered with the New Opportunities Head Start preschool program and the Carroll Public Library's summer reading program for more than a decade.

MILLER

FROM PAGE 1

Head Start, an income-based preschool program for kids ages 3 to 5.

Why?
"No. 1, I like kids, and No. 2, it's just fun to be with them, and No. 3, the most important thing is, they learn from you and you learn from them," Miller said.

Representatives from all of those organizations said Miller served as a vital role model for the kids he encountered — sometimes as the only positive male figure in their lives at the time.

Once, a child Miller volunteered with told him, "I wish you were my daddy."
"That floored me," Miller said. "I said 'Stop it,' to myself. I said, 'A man doesn't do that,' so I didn't start to cry."

He was quick to offer a high-five or hug and a helping hand to those putting together a puzzle, reading a book, playing a game — or just looking for a bit of attention, said Shari Bieret, Head Start Center supervisor at New Opportunities.

"The kids, I truly believe, were the reason Grandpa Mike got out of bed in the morning," Bieret said. "It was his life."

New Opportunities and the library are offering a public reception for Miller from 10 a.m. to noon Wednesday in the Head Start classroom at New Opportunities.

Those who can't attend can

send a card to Miller at: Mike E. Miller, 807 E. 8th St. Apt. 12, Carroll, IA, 51401.

Foster Grandparents is a program that connects area residents ages 55 and older with volunteer opportunities. It's associated with the Carroll County Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, or RSVP, through which Miller also was a pen pal for area kids.

"If there was a poster child for a Foster Grandparent program, Mike would have been it," said Melanie Frantz, RSVP volunteer coordinator and former Foster Grandparent director. "There are so many kids right now that don't have a male figure in their lives, and he filled that role, so much. There were so many kids that looked up to him."

Miller's longevity as a volunteer and his knack for connecting with people will be missed, said Stacy Venteicher, RSVP director.

"It's been a pleasure having Mike as part of the program," Venteicher said. "I not only consider him a volunteer, but I consider him a friend, and I truly appreciate all of his effort that he put forth for the program."

At Carroll Public Library, Miller gave out stickers and other prizes to kids who had reached certain goals in the summer reading program.

"A large part of him was the support he had with the kids, talking to them, saying, 'What a good job you're doing,' and just all that positive reinforcement he gave

to them to keep reading — getting that message of how important reading is and just validating the kids and letting them know they matter and what they're doing is important," said Diane Tracy, children's librarian at the library. "It was positive validation he gave to them about things that matter for their future."

Kids remembered him and lit up when they saw him. "He is a great role model for the kids, and kids just really connect with him," said Carroll Public Library Director Rachel Van Ennewyk, who remembers Miller volunteering at Fairview Elementary School years ago when she was a student there.

Miller, who struggled with alcoholism and spent eight years studying English at Iowa State University starting when he was 58, said the volunteering was hugely meaningful to him.

"All I have to say is that everybody over the age of 55 who wants something to do should join the Foster Grandparents," he said. "It gives them a sense of accomplishment and brightens their lives up."

At the end of the day, Miller said, the most important thing he did for the kids he volunteered with was simple. He was their friend.

"I just can't believe it, that I'd touched so many lives like they said I did," Miller said. "It gives you a good, warm feeling inside to know you accomplished something in life."