

THE ADVOCATE

Paw Paw helps school for 24 years



Foster Grandparent David West shows Sebastian Flores how to build with Legos in Liza Armshaw's prekindergarten classroom at Southdowns Elementary School. RICHARD ALAN HANNON/The Advocate

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On school day mornings, Liza Armshaw's prekindergarten class at Southdowns Elementary School is filled with busy children working at small stations.

They are building with Legos, playing with blocks, learning letters, cooking on a toy stove or drawing with crayons and markers.

Figure At a table in the center of the room, 87-year-old David West quietly works puzzles with a small group of boys and girls.

They all call him Paw Paw. Everyone at Southdowns, from Principal Mary Sue Slack to the youngest student, does.

West is a Foster Grandparent who has served at Southdowns for 24 years.

"He is a very kind man, truly one of those people you hope to get to know in your lifetime," Slack said. West was at Southdowns when she got there 22 years ago.

West and Armshaw have worked together for the past 12 years.

"I run into kids that I taught years ago," Armshaw said. "They may not remember me, but they always remember Paw Paw."

As a young man, West worked in construction. Later he became a cement finisher. After 17 years at Furlow-Laughlin Equipment, West stopped "hard work," he said. That was in 1985.

"The Lord blessed me so that he instilled in me to still do something," West said.

On the recommendation of a friend, he contacted the Foster Grandparent Program.

The program, which has been administered locally since 1983 by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, places senior citizens in schools, juvenile service facilities and Head Start Centers to work with children, especially those with special needs.

After an interview and training, West was assigned to Southdowns. He has been there ever since.

"He is one of the longest serving Foster Grandparents," Gerrie Baker Allen said. She directs the Foster Grandparent Program, which has some 90 participants working in the community. They work about 20 hours per week and receive a stipend of \$2.65 per hour.

"My purpose is to teach discipline, how to respect other people, how to have a positive attitude," West said. "I tell the children not to do anything you wouldn't want done to you."

West comes to Southdowns four days a week. "I look forward to it," he said. "It keeps me young. I give God all the praise that even up in age I can do something."

The children adore him, but his biggest fan is Armshaw.

"He has such a calming effect on the classroom," she said. "He has so much wisdom."

He is wonderful with all of the children in Armshaw's class, but he is especially helpful with the few special-needs children.

"Some of the children at school are handicapped," West said. "Some can't say anything, but if you rub their little heads, they will give you a smile."

Armshaw attributes West's steady influence on the children to his strong faith. "He accepts and he moves on," she said. "Over the years I have worked with him, he has lost siblings and lost children, but he just moves on."

West and his wife, Essie, had nine children. Two have died in the years he has worked with Armshaw.

Every day, West works with small groups of children at the game center, where he teaches them to do puzzles, play games and to build.

Because of his knowledge of construction, he is able to show the children how to set a foundation when they are working with blocks and Legos.

"He understands about helping children but not doing for them," Armshaw said.

Tiffany Meek's son Jacob attended preschool at Southdowns for a year after surgery to remove a brain lesion he was born with.

"It was a godsend when Jacob was put in that class," Meek said. "The whole combination of Liza, Mary Sue Slack and Paw Paw was amazing,"

Jacob, who is now doing well in the fifth grade at St. Aloysius Catholic School, had to relearn many skills after his surgery. His parents have nothing but praise for Southdowns and its creative program for teaching children including those with special needs.

Every day, two children who behaved very well were chosen to take a ride in Paw Paw's cart, Meek said. They were taken out of the classroom on an outing around the campus.

"It was a big thing for the kids," she said. "It was a privilege to go on the ride — like going to Disney World or something."

She wishes more people knew about some of the outstanding programs in parish schools. "It's unfortunate that East Baton Rouge Parish sometimes gets a bad rap," she said. "That's a solid program at Southdowns. The time when I was there, I felt fortunate as a parent."

Besides being an anchor in Armshaw's classroom, West does such other things for the school as performing solos with his beautiful singing voice and helping with school programs. In the 1940s, he sang with the Kings of Harmony, so it is a treat for students, parents and teachers when West performs.

"He is also the school's chief recycler," Armshaw said. "He collects all of the cans and recycles items."

West's influence can be felt throughout the Southdowns campus, but it is especially important to those students without a father figure in the home.

"Here is a man who comes to school on a daily basis," Meek said. "He's a good father role model. He is kind and well-mannered. He treats everyone with respect, and he's always there."

For more information about the Foster Grandparent Program, contact Catholic Charities at 225-336-8700.