

LOCAL & STATE

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The Source

Celebrate Community



Arrowhead Elementary School volunteer tutors Kora Briekjar, standing, and Connie Lowe.

LARRY MAYER/Gazette Staff

Former elementary teachers continue to give to children in their retirement by becoming....

Tutors

By LORNA THACKERAY
Of The Gazette Staff

Connie Lowe can see Arrowhead School out her living room window at Mission Ridge, her home for the last four years. It's a short walk for a vibrant 88-year-old great-grandmother from the retirement community to the playground, which is usually teeming with children.

She has been volunteering as a tutor at the school for four years, and many of the children know her.

"It's wonderful in the past few years to come off the little hill to the playground and they run and hug you," she said. "I love to go. I'm glad I have the privilege."

Lowe and three other women from Mission Ridge spend part of a day each week helping students read, spell and comprehend their lessons a little better.

"It's just enrichment, that's all it is," said volunteer Barbara Moscardini.

But the volunteers are really much more, according to Holly Lehfeltd, family resource coordinator and reading tutor at Arrowhead.

"I see a real big difference, especially for those who need that one-on-one attention," she said. "The kids are happy when they come in. They are all excited."

For some, who live far from grandparents, the tutors help fill a gap, she said.

"You can really see it's a comfort zone for them," Lehfeltd said.

The kids aren't the only beneficiaries. "It's important to see young people and get their energy into our lives," said tutor Lois Thomas.

Kora Breikjar joined the volunteer corps at Arrowhead almost immediately after moving into the new Mission Ridge

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— **Connie Lowe**
retired teacher

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complex four years ago.

"Our activity director suggested it, so I went down there and talked to Holly and I think we formed a pretty good relationship over the years," she said.

Breikjar has spent most of her life volunteering — 60 years of it Glasgow, where she raised her own family.

Teaching was her original career choice and after graduating from St. Olaf College in Minnesota, she taught high school English in South Dakota for a year. But she wanted to come home to Montana and accepted an offer to teach English and man the library part-time in Glasgow. She taught two years there before marrying a local boy and settling down. She did some substituting in the schools before starting a 20-year career in social work, helping the elderly and disabled.

"I retired at 69 on a Friday," she said. "On Monday, I started as an aide at the school. I spent every morning there. I rode to school on the bus in the mornings and took the bus home at noon when the kindergartners went home." In addition to her work at

Arrowhead, Breikjar reads to two residents at St. John's Lutheran Home next door, calls bingo once a week, makes booties for premature babies at St. Vincent Healthcare and knits and crochets quilt blocks for the needy.

Lowe was also a teacher by training, but her professional career was short-lived. In the days before World War II, she said, women couldn't teach once they were married. But she did substitute teach and managed 30 years of teaching Sunday school. She initiated the kindergarten program at her Lutheran Church.

Thomas also honed her skills as a Sunday school teacher. She and her husband moved to Billings a few years ago from California to be close to one of their children. Before settling into Mission Ridge, Thomas had volunteered at Bench School for two years.

Now she's working with a second-grader.

"I want to help her enjoy reading," Thomas said. "One of the things my husband and I really enjoy is reading."

Moscardini, who has been a volunteer most of her life, often in hospital settings, was ready to try something different when she moved back to Montana after 18 years in Tampa, Fla.

She admits being a little nervous when told she would be helping fifth-graders.

"I thought they would be much more smart alecky, but they are so sweet," she said.

She worked on reading with her two charges and when they got ahead of their class, they worked on social studies. The big reward for all came when both brought her test papers marked with A's.

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