

SENIOR LIFESTYLES

'Grandpa Norb' offers hugs, encouragement

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

ROCHESTER — "Grandpa Norb, look," Randy Johnson exclaimed excitedly, holding up a worksheet on which he'd been drawing.

"Yeah, that's great," Grandpa Norb (Norb Robach) responded. "Boy, you used your imagination."

Grandpa Norb continued to circulate around the kindergarten classroom at Holy Family School the morning of Feb. 3, dispensing words of encouragement.

"That's good," the 78-year-old Kodak retiree said repeatedly. "You've got it. You've got it right."

For the past 10 years, Robach has been coming to the Jay Street school an average of twice a week to help with the kindergarten classes. He's been doing everything from reading stories to going on field trips. He has also dressed as St. Nicholas at Christmas.

"I can't tell you how much I care about them," Robach said of the children.

And it's obvious how the children feel about him, calling him over, taking their work over to him, hugging him.

"He's like a friend to us," explained Jessica Mulholland.

"He's a nice guy," observed Marchell Dade.

"For a lot of years, for a lot of kids, he's been the only male role model," remarked Mary Jo Passero, an aid in the class the entire time Robach has been coming. "He's consistent for them."

"I think I get more out of it than they do," Robach acknowledged. "It's very rewarding."

Robach, a Holy Family parishioner whose two adopted children attended the school, became Grandpa Norb by accident. He and a friend used to drop off his friend's wife to work in the school cafeteria. The two would then attend daily Mass and go out for coffee.

But one day, Robach recalled, "One of the ladies said, 'You come here all the time. Why don't you be a grandpa for the kindergarten?'"

Robach already had a track record of volunteer activities. For years the graduate of Holy Apostles School and Aquinas Institute helped to bring residents of Monroe Developmental Center to Mass, and assisted at Ss. Peter and Paul Soup Kitchen. He continues to take Communion to shut-



Greg Francis/Staff Photographer
"Grandpa Norb" Robach checks an assignment with kindergartner Adam Howard, 5, at Holy Family School Feb. 3.

ins every First Friday and to prepare meals at the Cameron Community Center several times a year. Meanwhile, his wife of 41 years, Helen ("Honnie"), likewise remains active with various groups.

"Nobody's going to know you're alive if you just stick around the house," he observed.

So he decided to give volunteering at the school a try. He came to love it so much that he even stops in on days when he's not scheduled just to say hello.

"As soon as you get to the door, everybody comes up to you and gives you a hug," he said. The children's show of affection continues in public, he noted.

"I see these kids when I'm walking down the street, and it's 'Hey, Grandpa!'" he said with a smile.

"I think I get more out of it than they do," Robach acknowledged. "It's very rewarding."

Part of his pleasure, he said, is seeing the children progress.

"One of the things I like about the kids is you see them come in in September and right from scratch you see them improve and learn," he said. "What these kids need is encouragement."

Robach's positive attitude about the children is a reflection of his view of life.

"If you dwell on the good things that happen in your life, then you're going to be happy," he explained.

For him, people — like the children — are among the "good things" in life.

"I don't know what it is. I've always loved people," he said. "It seems the older we get, the more wonderful people we run into."

Apparently, some people feel that way about him.

"I've got letters at home from some of the parents of these children thanking me for the care I give," he acknowledged. "You get the feeling you're doing something worthwhile."

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