

# ViPS volunteer Rita Qualls brings childhood into play

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Two agencies are close to the heart of hardworking volunteer Rita Qualls - AARP and Volunteers In Public Schools. She's board president for the latter organization and is helping it to celebrate its 50-year anniversary during the 2022-23 school year.

Rita Qualls' role with Volunteers in Public Schools (ViPS) has its roots in her involvement with the Parent Teacher Association on behalf of her niece and nephew when they were school age. "And then some kind of way-don't ask me how - I got involved" in the Little Rock School District program, she says. Somebody asked me if I would serve ... and I've been here ever since. And it's going on 20-something, almost 30 years."

Qualls is now serving in her second term as board president of Volunteers in Public Schools, which is observing its golden

anniversary for the 2022-23 school year. She has become a fixture, a volunteer whose dedication has earned her the organization's most prestigious award. "My niece and nephew [are now] grown; they've got kids of their own," Qualls says. "They're out and gone and I'm still doing [things] with the school district."

The roots of Qualls' dedication to the organization-which brings volunteers into Little Rock School District schools to provide a variety of services including clerical and logistical work; resource speaking; and tutoring, mentoring and reading to students - also go back to her upbringing.

Her mother was an educator in Chicago. "We were brought up to believe in school and learning and education," she says of herself and her siblings. "When [our mother] volunteered to do stuff at the schools, we volunteered - putting up billboards, taking billboards down, grading papers .... She always taught us to give back to the community.

"And of course, being a volunteer in the community is one of the best ways you can give back to our children because education and learning is the most important thing you can impart to a child, I think."

Qualls' first go-round as ViPS board president came, coincidentally, during the organization's silver anniversary. Her second term as president came about from her willingness to pinch-hit when needed, according to Tammy Blaylock, ViPS coordinator.

"We actually had someone that was our president-elect in line and she had a family crisis and couldn't serve," Blaylock says. "And Rita, being the volunteer she is, says, 'I will do it.'"

An occupational therapist by trade, Qualls is employed by Baptist Health Rehabilitation Center in Little Rock, doing documentation work. She devotes her volunteer time to two efforts: AARP "and the children in the school district." Her devotion to the latter earned her a Jane Mendel Award, named for the woman who led efforts to start the ViPS program in 1972.

Jackie Merrell, ViPS specialist, notes how faithful Qualls is even at doing volunteer activities for which she doesn't care so much. "She doesn't like [doing] bulletin boards very much," Merrell says. "But Rita never tells you no."

The forthcoming Jane Mendel Reading Day, which takes place each November, is one of Qualls' favorite ViPS programs. Volunteers, some of whom are high profile, go and read to pre-kindergarteners through fifth-graders in the Little Rock schools.

"Some people act the stories out. They like to act them out," Qualls says. "We dress up as characters. "We also read books that are on the kids' reading list. So ... they can get school credit, if it's a particular book that we read during that time. That's an equal opportunity for everybody to get a chance to have someone in their school as part of our volunteer [force]."

Another favorite initiative is the organization's Arkansas Scholars program for eighth-graders. Arkansas Scholars gives a chance for a fresh start to students who may not have done so well in elementary and middle school, Qualls explains. "We go into every eighth grade classroom in the school district. ... What we talk to our students about is getting prepared for high school; [we let] them know that they will be an Arkansas Scholar the first day they walk into the high school."

The spring-semester program gets students thinking about such things as "what you're going to do after ... school, if you're going to college after high school, and stuff like that," Qualls adds. Students are informed of various opportunities and resources, such as college scholarships, and are told the kinds of jobs they can seek according to education level. Qualls says she usually stresses the importance of education to the students. Participation in the program has helped former participants when they looked for jobs, she adds.

## ARKANSAS SCHOLARS

Students are even provided financial literacy training through Arkansas Scholars. "It's a good eye opener," Qualls says. "Even those kids that don't like to listen in school, they'll start perking up when you start talking about budgeting and money and stuff ... Some of them tune out until that comes [up]."

ViPS offers mentoring and tutoring by carefully vetted volunteers. Training of tutors and mentors is done by Blaylock and Merrell at the ViPS offices, located on the second floor of the Fair Park Early Childhood Center.

"We have mentors that do one-on-one with students," Qualls says. "We have groups that come in and they do mentors. And of course we're partners with groups all over the city" - the League of Women Voters; the Junior League of Little Rock; the Arkansas Realtors Association; AR Kids Read. "We [have] a lot of Partners in Education," which include businesses, faith partners and community organizations, that work directly with the school system. "So we serve as the liaison between the schools and the community on getting volunteers," Qualls says.

The ViPS database has about 8,500 or more volunteers on whom they can call anytime, she continues. "We try to make sure that all the schools have some community involvement."

Volunteers can choose the schools in which they wish to work. Some do; others don't. "They'll just say, 'Wherever you need me ... put me there,'" Qualls says.

ViPS volunteers are recognized during the organization's spring recognition event, An Evening of the Stars, a themed event held the third Tuesday in April. It will be April 18 next year and will count as the organization's anniversary party. Significant milestones in ViPS' 50-year history will be highlighted and previous Jane Mendel Award recipients recognized.

### OVER 600,000 HOURS

During school year 202122, ViPS volunteers, including community partners, put in a total of 630,000 service hours. Those hours equate to \$18 million, if we were getting paid for that, that we give to the school district," Qualls says. Schools nominate teachers as well as volunteers for awards; a committee chooses the winners of each award including the Jane Mendel award. "We have community, we have students, we have our resources, our partners. ... Anybody can be nominated for an award," Qualls says. "It's just our way of saying, 'Thank you for volunteering in this school district.'" Past event themes for which Qualls and others don costumes, include storybook characters, superheroes, Star Wars and a Western theme. The Jane Mendel Award, given each year since 1984, is "the ultimate of volunteer recognition in the district," Blaylock says. In 2010, Qualls was a Jane Mendel award recipient - "and when they call her name, she's out there picking up trash! And she was like, 'I wish somebody had told me. I wasn't prepared.' That tells you how deserving she is." Qualls confirms this, referring to herself as a "behind-the-scenes person." Adds Blaylock, "She comes to the office every week and volunteers. She's the only board member that does that. And she's been doing it for years" - usually on Mondays because she's off from her job.

ViPS raises money for the organization not through events, but through a letter campaign, Blaylock says. "Our focus is really on human resources more than financial resources."

### DOING WHAT THEY DO BEST

A couple of 50th-anniversary activities have already occurred. In July, ViPS made a commitment to distribute 50 boxes of classroom supplies to 50 new teachers in the district. This month, the organization committed \$500 in educationally focused prizes given during the Little Rock School District convocation, a back-to-school event held Aug. 10 for all district staff.

And in the coming months, the board, 28 members strong, will be coming up with, and preparing for, anniversary-related projects - "a special 'impact project' each month," Blaylock says. "The idea is not to just 'celebrate,' but to celebrate service." "Each month we'll be adding something," Qualls says.

For the future, Qualls would like to see the organization bring in younger volunteers.

"ViPS is something I'd really like to see our younger generation buy into - and, having benefited from ViPS ... come back and bring the expertise."

Meanwhile, she is always directing people to sign up as volunteers.

"If I know somebody, I'm going to ask them" to participate in events like Jane Mendel Reading Day. She's even gotten her church, Saint Mark Baptist, involved.

"I just love doing that, getting people, because I want them to volunteer and enjoy it as much as I do," she says. "So if I know somebody that enjoys doing things, that's the first thing I'm going to say - 'This organization can use you. Why don't you come and see if you want to do something with it?'"