

Myrna Burgess

ServeMontana Award Winner 2010

If you ask anyone on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, "Who is Myrna Burgess", you would get a myriad of answers ranging from Cultural Trainer, Tribal Elder, Family Matriarch, Wisdom Keeper, to "that grandma who helps children at Head Start and the Boys and Girls Club."

Myrna is a Foster Grandparent volunteer with the St. Vincent Healthcare Foster Grandparent Program. Although fairly new to the program, Myrna has become the program's catalyst for recruitment and partnership-building within the reservation. This past year, the Foster Grandparent Program received a federal grant to expand the program's borders to include the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation. To help facilitate the expansion, the program applied for and received an AmeriCorps VISTA member, Nikki Schreder. Myrna has been the key to that expansion, introducing Nikki to the reservation community, its customs, and its people.

Myrna serves as a Foster Grandparent volunteer during the school year at the Northern Cheyenne Head State in Lame Deer. Serving with the program is a natural extension of her lifetime of service since Myrna is a "Wisdom Keeper" for Head Start. As a Cultural Trainer, Myrna has devoted her time to teaching the Cheyenne culture to the young. As Myrna put it, "No matter what kids do, they're still Indian children. They need to be proud of that. They also need to know that whatever they want to be - they can be."

62 year old Myrna retired as a Foster Mom, a service she was committed to since 1975, caring for children on an emergency basis. During that time, Myrna cared for 1,860 youth. It's no wonder that being called "Grandma" comes naturally to her. Although Myrna has three children and nine grandchildren, she is "family" to so many more.

As a Foster Grandparent, Myrna is continuing her service to children. She is incorporating cultural education into her mentoring opportunities. Myrna believes, "We need to all do our part in life - even if we don't have parents to tell us these things."

Myrna is contributing to the success of the Foster Grandparent Program. She is actively recruiting for the program and accompanies the program VISTA to the local senior center to meet tribal elders. With Myrna's referrals, the program has enrolled another elder into the program, with a possible three others set to come on in the fall. She has helped the VISTA establish partnerships with local non-profit agencies and is working to educate the program staff on the Northern Cheyenne culture. This summer she is serving at the Boys and Girls Club and can frequently be seen sitting with a group of children, passing on stories of their Cheyenne heritage.