

Family Resource Center provides relief & joy to Oak Ridge school families

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 23, 2022)

Carolyn Krause brings us a Christmas story of assistance being provided to children and their families to give them a "hand-up." She tells of Jo Bruce and her tireless efforts to help children learn through tutoring and to help meet the basic needs of their families for approaching 30 years! Learn about this exciting woman and her assistant Sharon Gleason who help hundreds of children and their families.

Jo Bruce is in her 29th year as the director of the Oak Ridge Family Resource Center, one of the original 13 family resource centers established by the state of Tennessee in the fall of 1993. The state now has 106 family resource centers.

You can't say Jo Bruce doesn't have a positive attitude. When she suffers adversity, she sees it as an opportunity to empathize more with and better guide the families in crisis she has helped for almost 30 years as director of the Oak Ridge Family Resource Center (FRC).

She calls her FRC job "a wonderful opportunity for service. That's why I stayed so long. We will continue to grow this program" to help at-risk children and their families become fully functioning and independent members of their community.

Bruce receives numerous phone calls as late as 1:30 a.m. and as early as 4:30 a.m., along with 500 email messages a day, from distressed families with children in Oak Ridge Schools. The crises these families are dealing with, she said in a virtual talk to the Women Interfaith Dialogue of Oak Ridge (WIDOR), include domestic violence, drug-affected behavior, food insecurity, illnesses, and homelessness.

Bruce, a social worker, personally knows about sudden homelessness and is still missing her house, which is undergoing massive repairs.

"Last year, a car ran into my house and put a huge hole in my home," she said. "I am very blessed because my insurance company put me up in a hotel and then into an apartment. I'm still not back home.

"Just the trauma of not being able to live in your own home for months is really overwhelming, and I have all the financial resources needed to ensure my comfort. But I still feel this angst because I must renew my insurance for my house every month. I got evicted once because my paperwork wasn't done in time due to confusion, and I had to move in 24 hours.

"All of those experiences have taught me so much about how to help families who are in this cycle. I can imagine how hard it is for other families. My plight has helped me to teach them about navigating the bureaucracy in the housing arena."

The need for affordable housing is growing in Oak Ridge. "We are having a hard time finding it," Bruce said. "We can get vouchers for our families, but the landlords no longer accept them."

Some of the families FRC helps have a member who is dying or who has just died. Bruce had to cope with the tragic death of her husband in November 2005 when a 15-year-old freshman shot the principal and two assistant principals at Campbell County Comprehensive High School in Jacksboro, Tenn. The assistant principal who died from the shooting was Ken Bruce.

Bruce said that she and her assistant, Sharon Gleason (wife of Sean Gleason, who was recently elected to the Oak Ridge City Council), have extensive knowledge of the resources within the Oak Ridge community and work hard to connect families with these resources.

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"We are a hand-up, not a hand-out program," Bruce said. "We provide family education to give the parents the skills and information they need to achieve the goals they want to attain. We spend a lot of time communicating with our parents. We encourage parent leadership in schools so that the parents can serve as volunteers and as our partners in the school."

According to the FRC website (<https://www.ortn.edu/frc/>), FRC provides emergency assistance to families living at or below the poverty level who have children in Oak Ridge Schools and who need help paying rent and electric bills or buying medicines, gasoline, clothing and food.

"Rents and food costs are increasing," Bruce said. "Families are asking for help buying increasingly expensive gasoline for their cars so they can stay employed. Getting affordable childcare is an issue." But, she added, she has helped some families with childcare by referring them to the Blossom Center for Childhood Excellence (21-hour a day childcare) across the street from where Bruce is based, at Willow Brook Elementary School.

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The WIDOR attendees also heard from Gleason, who manages FRC's annual effort to provide a Christmas meal, as well as presents for children, for the families in crisis who are FRC clients. Starting in August, Gleason said, names of families needing the meals and presents from "angel trees" are paired with various local agencies volunteering to help.

"Last year we served 800 children, and we will probably exceed that number this year," Bruce said. "We screen the children to make sure these are families that need assistance. I think all children deserve the joy and magic of the holidays.

"Children should be able to sit down with their families and have this wonderful holiday meal like we all have. You grow a lot when you have family mealtime. It's a way to teach families to be grateful, and in some cases how to cook a turkey perhaps for the first time!"

Gleason is based at Glenwood Elementary School, which is accepting donated clothes for Oak Ridge children. She joined the Family Resource Center in 2020. Previously, she worked at the school as a teacher assistant to help children with reading and comprehension needs. A native of Virginia, she once managed a successful business, IB3 Global Solutions, and has served on multiple boards, including Meals on Wheels.

Starting with the COVID lockdown in March 2020 when the students had to switch to online learning only, Bruce said, FRC set up a program of volunteers called the Food Angels, who delivered food to families needing it.

"We had lots of drivers and people picking up food to distribute to 126 students and their families," Bruce said. "Some got daily deliveries, and some got weekly deliveries. The Food Angels always included an encouraging card in the bag of food so the receiving families would know that people care about them."

The Food4Kids program is back in action at First United Methodist Church (FUMC), where volunteers pack bags of food for at-risk students for weekends, so they don't come back to school Monday too hungry to learn. The families of these students live at or below the poverty line. The food is delivered to the church from the Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee. Volunteers are needed for the food packing dates on the second Monday of each month.

Gleason said that during the 2020-21 school year, when students were back in the classroom, 400 students signed up for the Food4Kids program. This past October, 422 bags of food were packed during

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the Food4Kids event at FUMC. "In the first nine weeks of school this fall, 30 more children were added to the Food4Kids program," Bruce stated.

Noting that test scores for children have fallen because of the COVID pandemic, she said volunteers are needed for FRC's Readers and Leaders Tutorial Programs.

"Children must be able to read at grade level or they will likely not be advanced," Bruce said. "I will hook up our kids with volunteers willing to tutor individual children and small groups in reading and math. We need readers for kindergarten kids and tutors to help students struggling to keep up in the classroom."

To donate clothes, toys, toilet paper, paper products, Kroger gift cards or money to FRC, visit Bruce or Gleason at Willow Brook Elementary School, 298 Robertsville Rd., or Glenwood Elementary School, 125 Audubon Rd. To volunteer as a tutor, contact Bruce, FRC director, at 865-425-3205 or jbruce@ortn.edu or contact Gleason, FRC assistant, at 865-425-9369 or slgleason@ortn.edu.

Thank you, Carolyn, for another great story about one of Oak Ridge's most important programs for improving the lives of disadvantaged children and their families. And a Merry Christmas to all you faithful Historically Speaking readers!



Jo Bruce who has served children and their families for nearly 30 years



Sharon Gleason assists with programs that serve hundreds of children