

# OPENING HEARTS

Told by Elaina Verveer

**While most seventy-nine-year-olds** have settled into retirement, Louise Jackson is much too busy even to think of slowing down. This mother of four, grandmother of eleven, and great- and great-great-grandmother of seventy-seven also takes care of the neglected children of our nation's capital. Don't look for her to stop anytime soon. She thinks her work has just begun.

Actually, it started when she was about eight years old, when Louise accompanied her great-grandmother, a midwife, to the bedsides of poor women. Often given the responsibility of cradling the newborns, she learned to care for little ones at a very young age. Over the years, she instinctively made this caring a touchstone of her life.

Now, as a volunteer with the District of Columbia's Foster Grandparent Program, Louise works with families affected by child abuse. She teaches adults parenting skills and helps them find employment. But Louise's greatest gift is her love for the children. "Every child deserves to be loved," says Louise. "If I find children whose tears are caused by neglect, I'll help open their hearts so they can love again."

In 1985, Louise did precisely that for baby twins, Phyllis and Phillip, and their single mother. During their first meeting, Louise noticed the mother's bloodshot eyes and blackened veins. She saw the children's bandaged limbs and tear-stained faces. Sensing the magnitude of her

challenge, Louise dedicated the next few months to helping this troubled family.

She gave the mother cooking lessons and job-training advice. But the young woman, overwhelmed by her difficult life, continued to put her craving for drugs over her children's needs. Louise was upset to find the babies alone and unfed several nights each week, crammed into one crib, faces red from hours of crying. She knew their unchanged diapers and empty stomachs were signs of a much larger problem. When their mother was incarcerated for drug possession and child abuse, the baby twins were left with no one.

Every time Louise saw children thrown randomly into foster homes, she suffered. *Haven't these two little ones been through enough?* she thought. Louise knew that what the baby twins needed more than anything else was a mother. Though at the time she was seventy years old, she accepted the judge's suggestion to adopt them officially. "I felt, within my soul, they were meant for me," she says. "From the start, I loved them as if they were my own."

Her brave love for these children helped Louise get through the long and difficult adoption process and remedied the worst of the twins' early life. Phyllis and Phillip are happy and healthy fifteen-year-olds, busy with school, church, and helping Louise deliver food to needy families. They are often at the Rosa Parks Institute for Self-Development, learning about their heritage, mapping the trails of the Underground Railroad across the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Louise still knows what it's like to be a kid. "I never *make* them do anything," she says. "I teach them to do the right thing. I tell them that I

may not always be around, so I want them to be well prepared to make good decisions for themselves.”

What does Louise expect in return for all that she has done? “I just want them to open their hearts and be kind to everyone,” she says. “Trust in the Lord and do good.”

Louise is a wonderful example for all those who think they are too old, too tired, or too busy to help someone. For as long as she lives, she’ll be giving it everything she’s got. Often, she finds love is enough.

*It may not make the evening news when a Foster Grandparent takes the hand of a child who has never had anyone raise a hand to her, except in violence. It may not be what most people write about when seniors understand that they, too, have something to give, but countless children benefit from the action of a Foster Grandparent every single day.*

SENATOR HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

If you are age sixty or over and love children, join the Foster Grandparent Program of the National Senior Service Corps (Senior Corps) of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which also includes the Senior Companion Program. To find out where your local office is, call 800-424-8867, or visit [www.seniorcorps.org](http://www.seniorcorps.org).