

A Blanket of Caring
By SHIRLEY ZAGOREC
Orlando, Fla., Correspondent

So many children — Vantrese Russell has raised 34, seven of them her own and the rest special needs kids. ‘They’re the best kids in the world,’ she says.

At 84, Vantrese Russell is the image of a grandmother. Her youthful spirit and friendly nature are a blanket of caring, and she welcomes everyone into her home. On Nov. 13, 1951, Mrs. Russell and her husband, James, opened the first non-profit institution for brain-damaged children in Orlando County, Fla. Herself the mother of seven, Mrs. Russell has put every ounce of energy into 46 years of caring round-the-clock for another 27 special needs children, some of whom are now adults. And she’s never regretted this lifelong occupation as a mother. “It’s what I do best,” she says.

Some of the children’s parents were deceased, a few children were deserted before they arrived at Mrs. Russell’s home and several others were dropped off by their parents and never picked up again.

“It’s hard for some parents to accept the constant caring of an atypical child,” she says, explaining how she ended up with so many children. “Some felt it was confining, and it’s hard to give undying love.”

In Mrs. Russell’s eyes, all her kids are “normal kids.”

“They’re the best kids in the world,” she adds. “They’re happy. Each shares a special, unconditional love with no judgment of each other. The most important commodity is loving them and making them feel wanted.”

Mrs. Russell’s goal for all her children is to develop their individual potential at their own pace. An important part of their learning, as in any home, is the daily personal routine of dressing, eating and playing. Although doing these are natural desires for the kids, it’s often a challenge for them to develop the necessary coordination. The children are bused to private schools where they attend special classes designed to further their overall development.

Mrs. Russell’s husband devoted his life to helping her and died in 1974. While she receives no salary for her work, she’s blessed, she says, with many generous donations from the community. Today she has 21 paid employees to help her, serving as child-care attendants, nurse’s aides, a cook, a housekeeper and a maintenance person. Four of her own daughters also have come home to live and help.

“Mother always gave of her life freely,” says her oldest daughter, Janet. “She always provided lots of love, even with all the extra kids around. We all shared our toys, helped with chores and played well with one another.”

While old age is slowing her down these days, Mrs. Russell doesn’t think about retirement.

“You just don’t put an end to this kind of life,” she says, “like you would put a period at the end of a sentence.”

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