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'This feeling of overwhelming love and joy'

*This is the latest in The Sun's "Be a Volunteer" series, focusing on people who join community nonprofits. Email ideas to [news@lowellsun.com](mailto:news@lowellsun.com).*

**By Chris Lisinski**

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LOWELL — Caren Caplan weaves through crowded tables of children at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell, her eyes scanning for any student who seems to be struggling on a homework assignment.

The room buzzes with the energy that comes just after the end of a school day. Caplan makes her way over to a second-grader named Lucas,

Please see **VOLUNTEER/6**

Caren Caplan of Bedford works on homework with, from left, Alanah Chhum-Mam, 9, Roshell Ramos, 7, and Alanah's cousin, Daisalyn Iem, 9, at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell.

SUN / JULIA MALAKIE



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She gives, and gets so much in return

**VOLUNTEER/** From Page 1 who is sitting alone working on a St. Patrick's Day themed math worksheet. Several other children recognize Caplan and say hello as they walk pass.

She helps Lucas with the addition and subtraction of gold coins for a few minutes before he picks up a brown paper bag with a cartoon elephant face on it, certainly the result of an arts-and-crafts project. Caplan quickly switches gears: "Hey, Mr. Elephant, how are you?"

Caplan, 60, was not a teacher by trade; she worked as a systems analyst for John Hancock before retiring about five years ago. But she had always helped her daughters with their homework, and so the Boys and Girls Club seemed like a natural fit when she decided last year to get more involved.

"It's an incredibly rewarding experience on so many different levels," she said.

Caplan volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club two days a week, usually for several hours per day — though employees at the Club say she often stays far later than expected to ensure kids are getting whatever homework assistance they need. Most students she helps are between the ages of eight and 12, so she found the material fairly accessible. But Caplan realized early on that

today's teaching techniques, particularly for mathematics, were different than how she learned, and so she decided to get up to speed through textbooks and online resources.

"The teacher is expecting kids to solve the problem the way they were taught in school," she said. "If the teacher wants them to do it a different way, they're going to be using those building blocks to work toward the way they want the kids to think in school."

Kate Thoene, volunteer coordinator for Lowell's Boys and Girls Club, said she had never seen someone put in that type of effort simply to help kids the proper way.

"We've had some great volunteers, but that is above and beyond," Thoene said.

Caplan was named the Lowell branch's volunteer of the quarter, and Thoene said she was nominated for Non-Profit Alliance of Greater Lowell's first annual volunteer award. In the paperwork submitted with the nomination, the Boys and Girls Club praised Caplan's focus on encouraging students and building one-on-one relationships.

For Caplan, getting to know the children is one of the greatest pleasures of volunteering. Sometimes, she even feels like they are her "surrogate children."

"Having the kids know that you care about them as people and not just as being better students — that makes them feel so happy and special," she said. "It's such a great feeling to feel like you've connected with the students on such a deep level. You just get this feeling of overwhelming love and joy when you're with them."

*Follow Chris on Twitter@ChrisLisinski.*

**LESSONS TO SHARE:** Caren Caplan of Bedford, who volunteers two afternoons a week at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell, helps Roshell Ramos, 7, of Lowell, with homework as Phillip Hayden, 8, looks on last Thursday. **See video at [lowellsun.com](http://lowellsun.com).**

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Caren Caplan, volunteer at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Lowell

