

Helping Children Stay Safe

by Kristi Essick

With 10 grandchildren of her own, 67-year-old Fran Doll is convinced that no one is more passionate about helping kids than a grandparent. That's why she calls upon local grandparents near her home in Akron, Ohio, to work as volunteers at her nonprofit organization, Grandparents Against Sex Predators, which she founded in 2006.

"It's really unfathomable to me that children are at risk for such terrible crimes, and I wanted to do something to help, even if I just made a small impact," says Ms. Doll, who got the idea to start GASP after hearing about the case of Jessica Lundsford, a 9-year-old Florida girl who was raped and murdered by a convicted sex offender in 2005. "When I looked at my own precious grandchildren, I just kept thinking of that poor girl and I was shocked, sad and enraged."

Ms. Doll started GASP after retiring from a busy career working in administrative positions and then running a successful temporary-staffing company, all while raising six kids -- two of her own and four stepchildren. GASP works with local law-enforcement agencies to train grandparents and other volunteers how to recognize signs of potential sexual abuse and help search for missing children. GASP volunteers also watch for and report any suspicious activity in the community, fingerprint children, and conduct community education programs to teach children, educators and parents about sexual-abuse awareness and prevention.

When Ms. Doll retired in 1997 at the age of 57, she had no idea she'd start a nonprofit a few years later. In fact, she abruptly retired from her role as president of Superior Staffing, the temporary-employment agency she started in 1980, after being diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer. (Her stepson and daughter now run the company.) She spent the next few years fighting the severe side effects of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, and has since regained her health.

"After I got better, I was like a man without a country," says Ms. Doll. "I had been a working mother all my life, but I was no longer working, my kids were grown, and my husband was retired and busy with his own activities. So I was lonely and at loose ends."

Not a big fan of hobbies, golfing or joining clubs, Ms. Doll thought hard about what her next project would be. "I prayed and prayed for one year to get clarity on my life path," she says. Her answer came in early 2006, when staying in Florida for the winter. She glanced over at a magazine on a table and saw an article about the Jessica Lundsford case.

"It felt like fate, that I was meant to read that article," says Ms. Doll. So when she returned to Ohio that April, she founded GASP. She got the organization off the ground by talking to local newspapers, asking everyone she knew to volunteer, and setting up a series of meetings with the Summit County sheriff's department.

At first, she worked more than 60 hours a week to get the organization started, but she now spends 30 to 40 hours a week directing activities and fund raising at GASP, which today has a board of directors, several special committees and more than 150 specially trained citizen volunteers. The group has fingerprinted more than 2,000 children and will soon open its doors in Alabama and other states. As far as how long she'll run GASP, Ms. Doll doesn't have a specific date in mind, but she does want to turn the day-to-day leadership of the organization over to a younger person in a few years' time.

"I never went to college, but I feel like I've accomplished a lot in my life," she says, "and I just hope that my work will end up helping as many children as possible."