

When Claudia Nill came out on the other side of a particularly rough time in her marriage, she decided she wanted to give back to her community, emphasizing the importance of family. A purpose-driven woman, she takes delight in commitments. “I don’t like to do anything just a little bit,” Claudia laughed.

Out of that resolution was born a desire to volunteer for Port Huron’s Bridge Builder’s as a Mentoring Mom, where she is paired up with a single mother in what’s called a “purposeful friendship.” The relationship gives the mentee an opportunity to develop important skills, while enjoying the mentor’s companionship.

“The gal that I have is legally blind,” told Claudia of her mentee, Karen. “She doesn’t have transportation, so a lot of what I do is taking her places, and then we spend time in the car talking about issues, her family, and her needs.” Karen has four children, two of whom are now out of the house, and a step son. The youngest child is just two years old, and she has two sixteen year old boys in the home.

Karen and Claudia have successfully scouted the community for all kinds of resources. “We’ve gone to get food at the food depot; we’ve gone to the soup kitchen; she was evicted from her apartment, and I took her to Mother Hills; we’ve gone to the Salvation Army to find out about resources that were available there; went to the United Way and Pathways,” marveled Claudia in retrospect.

Claudia’s husband, Scott, is a strong supporter of Bridge Builder’s Mentoring Moms. “The idea of this program is not to come in and prevent the suffering these families experience,” he explained. “It’s to experience it with them, and kind of stand at their side. It would be easier to write a check, but that’s not the purpose. (With Bridge Builders) they have someone in their world that can come along and speak encouragement and support, and maybe long term it makes the situation better, as opposed to fixing everything—allowing them to develop the skills that would allow them to fix it themselves.”

A Mentoring Mom looks at each situation as an opportunity for instruction, building confidence and modeling for the next generation. “Generational poverty is such a cyclical thing, and everybody that they interact with is in the same situation. Bridge Builders gives us a lot of training and a lot of support for that,” Claudia emphasized.

“When I first got involved I felt that I was at least giving my mentee some hope,” Claudia reflected. Soon, she learned Karen also needed to feel a sense of value. “Part of it is showing her that she’s worth it, because I think that’s a lot of what they don’t have; they don’t have that feeling of hope or of worth.”

Claudia works as an occupational therapist at Mercy Hospital, joins her husband in marriage ministry at Cornerstone Church, and enjoys serving in many capacities at First Presbyterian Church, as well. In her free time, she enjoys knitting, crocheting, walking, running, reading and spending time with her family. As the mother of two grown daughters—Marissa, a pharmacist who lives and works in Chicago; and Laura, who is married to Trevor Watson and works as an Emergency Room Nurse in Lansing—she could be enjoying this empty-nest chapter of her life in many ways. However, she willingly fills her schedule with an ample amount of mentoring.

“You’re required to spend an hour a week with them in some capacity, but I spend a little more time than that,” she admitted. “Claudia spends about 15 hours a week,” Scott interjected. “She’s being very modest, but it really has been inspirational what she’s

done in this program. I'm so happy that she's done it, because it's just been a real focus for both of us."

Turning to her, Scott said, "You've hosted her over here, had overnights here in times of crisis, taken care of her and her kids, helped her find a place to live, helped her get back into worship, and back into a church."

Reluctant to accept his compliments without praising him, as well, Claudia looked into his eyes as she spoke. "Scott's been very supportive. He helps out a lot. He helps out with the older boys, and he's helped providing supplies and furniture and transportation. You've done a lot, too."

"When one's gotten involved, the other has been supportive, and that's been nice. This has been an example of that, I'd say," Scott nodded in agreement.

Claudia went on to explain how helping Karen and her family has impacted others, as well. "When our girls come home they always want to see the little boy, and they want to see my mentee. And Scott's mom and dad, who live in the other part of the house, they do things; and my mom--who was here at Christmas--she'll do things. So we've gotten a lot of people involved. It's really rippled," Claudia testified.

Scott concurred. "I went over today, to see my mom, and she's got a little pair of pants that she got for the boy," he said. "What's happened is this has pumped them up, because they have a family to do for," he noted.

"Really, it is beautiful--it's a really great program. It's really grounded. It's been humbling to do this," Scott acknowledged.

"It's difficult for me," expressed Claudia, "because I just want to go in there, help her and change things for her. But it's a very slow process. I really have to rely on God, and God's time table, and know that God has a plan for them. His plan is much grander than anything I could plan or work out, and I'm reminded of that every week when I go to see her.

"It's been the hardest thing I've done in my life," she continued. "It's very difficult to go from a lifestyle like this," pausing to glance at her lovely kitchen in her beautiful home, then continuing, "...over to see people who have, at certain times--not right now--but at times, have just lived in squalor. The physical needs, the emotional needs, the spiritual needs, the medical needs...there are just so many needs there. To spend time with people that live like that twenty-four seven; and I spend a couple hours over there and I do what I can and then I say goodbye. It's hard for me to see people suffer like that."

"The nice thing, though, is you keep going back to it, because you could be so overwhelmed and so intimidated by it that you could grow calloused to it, and not pay attention to it at all. Claudia's had just a great heart for helping people, kind of rolling up her sleeves and getting involved," Scott bragged. "Twice she's gone to Romania and worked in orphanages. When she gets motivated to do something, she throws herself in it."

"I would like to be able to say that every day I use my life to glorify God; that would be my goal," Claudia concluded.