Take 5 reporter Sonja Kowanjko visits a carer devoting her time to a sick little girl

The moment I met Yuli and her Ward Grandparent, Judith, I could see they shared a very special bond. Judith was watching fondly over six-year-old Yuli while she played with Lego in her room at The Royal Children’s Hospital in Melbourne.

Nestling into Judith’s arm, Yuli whispered a shy hello, “Very nice to meet you,” I said.

“She’ll warm up to you soon,” Judith reassured me.

As Yuli played, Judith and I settled into some seats.

“Oh, you better put this on first,” Judith said, handing me a hospital gown. She explained Yuli was currently on strong antibiotics to fight off a bug, so all visitors had to wear gowns.

“But I don’t have to,” Yuli said, giggling.

Judith became involved in The Royal Children’s Hospital’s Ward Grandparent Program 10 years ago.

“I saw an ad in the paper asking for volunteers and applied right away,” she said.

After 10 years as a teacher, followed by 16 years in child care, Judith retired. However, she dearly missed caring for children. With her grandchildren of her own, the Ward Grandparent Program appealed to her.

After three months of training within the hospital’s social work department, Judith was assigned to look after two kids, from babies to teenagers.

“Often parents have other commitments and can’t always be here; so that’s when I come in handy,” Judith said.

“I once had a child in hospital and the nurse was really nice to me. I thought that’s what I wanted to do. I was 17-month-old baby waiting for a transplant... sadly he passed away,” Judith said, the pain still evident in her eyes.

But rather than being put off by the heartbreaking, it made Judith more determined.

“I realised I wanted to do all I could to make these kids happy for however long I could,” Judith said.

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Fast Facts:

- The Ward Grandparent Program at Melbourne’s Royal Children’s Hospital began in 2002. Although other hospitals run similar initiatives, this is the only program of its kind.

- There are six active Ward Grandparent volunteers in the program.

- There are no age restrictions on becoming a Ward Grandparent but volunteers must undergo a reference check, undergo a children check, training, and commit to a minimum of three days per week.

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As Yuli and her husband Ali had three other children - Cardynne, 13, Rebekah, 12, Joshua, 10, and Ayana on the way - life had been a constant juggling act for the couple.

“Knowing that Judith could be there was so comforting; they just adored each other from day dot,” Yuli said, content.

Additionally, over the years Yuli’s bowel has noticeably started working months at a time, the joy it never lasted.

“Yuli’s probably spent four of her seven years in hospital. She loves it when she can go home, but she always misses Judith - and so do I,” Lynda said.

Judith visits Yuli three times a week and their instant bond grew stronger by the day.

“Marriage is over, hand-in-hand with Judith, Yuli said she wanted to see the meerkats, enclosure on the hospital’s ground floor. “We always visit the meerkats. Yuli loves them,” Judith said.

“Is it just to show a little love and support goes a long way.

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