On the playground at the College Road Early Childhood Center, two friends bracket a little boy with a skinned knee as he hobbles over to Magnolia McLean, or "Grandma Magnolia" as the kids there call her.

A teacher has already cleaned up his little wound and offered a band-aid, which he declined.

He still wants Grandma Magnolia to take a look at it. He wants to be seen.

She hugs his shoulder, gives him a few loving words, and pats his back to send him on back to his friends.

“He’s alright,” she said with a laugh, “he just had to get a second opinion.”

Grandma Magnolia and the students she volunteers with through the New Hanover County Foster Grandparents Program are at the opposite bookends of life: They are four; she recently turned 95.

But they share a connection that defies the nine decades of life experience between them.

“When I’m here, I just usually do what they do,” she explained. “They sit down, I sit down. They go outside, I go with them. They had me hula-hooping the other day. I said Woooo!”

Her doctor worries about her falling. “I don't fall because I watch myself,” she told him.

Her daughter knew better than to try to tell her to slow down. “Mama, you always did whatever you was going to do," she told her.

Her family calls her the roadrunner because she just keeps going.
“I’m the only one in my generation that’s alive,” she said, “so I just try to stay busy.”

Grandma Magnolia has always been one to keep it moving. When she was widowed with eight kids, she thought about closing the daycare center she had been running with her husband. He had been doing the cooking for the center, and she just couldn’t see how she could do it all on her own.

But instead of giving up, she doubled down.

At 45 she decided to go back to school to get her high school diploma. She then attended Cape Fear Community College and Miller Motte to get a childcare degree and learn business accounting and payroll.

Finally she bought a preschool center of her own, and made it the first integrated preschool in New Hanover County.

It wasn’t an easy thing to do, necessarily, but it was an easy decision to make, she said.

“Some of the schools didn’t accept Black children then. I feel like all children are the same,” she said, adding, “all people are the same.”

Eventually she became a sort of childcare titan in Wilmington, owning and operating four centers, mentoring other women who wanted to start similar businesses, and taking in countless young teen mothers who needed to learn how to care for their babies — and themselves.

She’s retired twice, but, you know, roadrunners don’t retire.

Now she spends every morning with the preschoolers at CREC, and the rest of the day working at the childcare center at the YWCA Lower Cape Fear up the road.

“I found that when I have two or three days off and I don’t do anything, I don’t feel good. I’ll just sit around and mope around, and by 4:00 I’m still moping around,” she laughed.

But it’s more than just keeping busy; after 60 years helping to educate young minds, being by preschoolers’ sides as they learn still inspires her.

“You know, they know a whole lot more than we think they do. You learn from them and I love it,” she said. “Just give them a little time to think. Let them have a mind.”
Her approach leans on patience, positivity, love, and respect.

“One of the reasons I like my chair is I don't like to look down on them. I like to get on their level and then we can talk, and they understand you better when you talk to them, not at them.”

The Foster Grandparent program pairs community elders who have patience, wisdom, and love to spare with young students who might be antsy in the classroom, or struggling with a subject, or hurting at home.

“The foster grandparents fill in the gap,” said Vicki Wells, the program coordinator at the New Hanover County Senior Resource Center. “They make sure that everybody is able to meet their emotional goals and their academic goals, and nobody's left on the sidelines.”

The program also gives seniors who yearn to contribute to the community the chance to give back, she said.

“A lot of them do it solely for the satisfaction of knowing that they're helping the child,” she said. “Those who might be isolated can interact with children and pour some of their wisdom and knowledge into them.”

Ninety-five years ago, Grandma Magnolia was born on a South Carolina cotton farm, in a Jim Crow world, to a dad who taught in a one-room schoolhouse.

Her hands that picked cotton as a girl, and washed thousands of cloth diapers and held hundreds of little ones in her career, now have painful nerve damage that forces her to wear special gloves.

If she has a day off, her daughter says, she calls to complain about her hands hurting.

When she's working with the children, the phone doesn't ring.

Those same hands are busy pointing out how nicely one student wrote his name, or steadying a child walking the playground balance beam, or rubbing the back or holding the hand of a child needing comfort and connection.
For some of the kids, the teachers said, a day when Grandma Magnolia is there is a day they get along, work hard, don’t cut up, experience more joy.

“I’ll just say, ‘Listen, we’re gonna be good today. We’re gonna do this, we’re not gonna do that,’” and when the behavior stops, the teacher will look at her and marvel, “The magic touch!”

“I hadn’t paid any attention,” she said, “but they said just being here makes a difference.”