

Volunteer Spotlight – Lis Sonsalla

*Kids' & Safe Spaces Support Group Facilitator &
Strategic Planning Committee member - Home Free*

In contrast to many advocates, who see the affect of domestic violence on adults, Lis sees it through the eyes of children. That makes her a passionate child advocate, eager to talk about DV, share resources, recruit friends to volunteer, and tell others how they can support a child survivor. “Even if they don’t say anything, kids tell you what they need through playing, coloring. Listen. Let them take the lead. Enforce for them that they deserve to be safe.”



“Her work is informed by a fundamental respect for children as people,” says Christine, a Home Free child advocate who has worked with Lis for the past five years. “She gets to know them as individuals. And her deep knowledge of the issues these particular children face makes her an extraordinary advocate.”

Lis has always been passionate about kids. She’s spent time as a nanny and as an OHSU Doernbecher volunteer, but when she discovered Home Free she found where she belonged.

“Home Free lets kids be kids,” Lis explains. “It’s a place for them to relax and let go of the responsibility they often feel because of the violence in their homes.”

Home Free supports children through Kids’ Group, which coincides with Women’s Support group, and the 12-week Safe Spaces group, where many children talk about the abuse they have experienced for the first time. “These kids don’t know that not everyone throws things when they’re angry,” Lis says. “They learn by seeing how I handle things differently.”

“I like Lis because she is sweet and kind,” says a nine year-old Safe Spaces participant. “She helps a lot of kids that have problems with their families and that is a great thing she could do.”

What keeps Lis motivated is the satisfaction of being a role model and watching the transformation many children make with just an hour a week in a safe space. “Kids will start miming what we teach them,” Lis shares, enthusiastically. “When they get it and start shouting, ‘I have a right to be safe!’ it’s the most amazing thing.”

Lis also credits the incredible support she receives from everyone, everyday for what she has been able to accomplish. “What I have learned at Home Free about DV, self-care, and how to take care of friends has made me who I am,” she says.

When Home Free invited volunteers to participate in their strategic planning process, Lis was eager to lead teen focus groups. The process enabled staff and volunteers to map out a plan for the program’s future, and inspired Lis by showing Home Free’s innovative reach into the community and how much work there is left to do. “We have to talk about it (domestic violence). If we don’t, no one works on making it stop.”

“Our program and our participants are so lucky to be the place Lis has chosen to generously donate so much of her time,” says Christine.

“This isn’t something I could do for a living,” Lis admits, “but there are nights I can’t wait to go to Safe Spaces and put together a puzzle. You have to be real with kids. And if you give them a basic stepping stone, they can do anything.”

Thank you Lis for your passion and commitment!

By Nancy Loso, VISTA Volunteer Resources Coordinator