



Our Be the Change column mission is to feature those, especially from the North State, who are actively making a difference in the lives of children and families. If you would like to nominate someone who is making a difference, please write to [editorial@northstateparent.com](mailto:editorial@northstateparent.com)



# JOHN & SHARON CHESNUT

## PARENT INFANT PROGRAMS, REDDING & CHICO



John Chesnut didn't start out with the goal of making a difference in the lives of children, or even to work with them, yet for over 30 years, he and his wife Sharon have been changing the lives of children and families throughout the North State.

The Chesnuts are the driving force behind Parent Infant Programs, which provide early intervention and family support in the homes of young children, ages 0 to 3, with developmental disabilities in five northern California counties.

"It wasn't a plan," says John. "This work chased me down, pushed me into it and knocked me over the head." In 1969 John wanted to go to college in southern California to study political science, but he couldn't find a daycare that he liked for his children. So, he went to school at night and started his own daycare. That's when he realized "how complicated and interesting kids were." This interest led to classes in child development. "The more I learned, the more I realized there still is more to learn," he says.

Eventually John started a preschool and met his wife Sharon. At the time, there were no real services for children with disabilities available. When parents of blind or deaf children asked if their children could join the preschool, John could not see a reason why not. These children also deserved to be involved in educational and social opportunities – the seed for Parent Infant Programs was planted.

Working with these special needs children led to further interest in normalizing attitudes and expectations for them and maximizing their development. As programs were created in urban areas to help very young children with disabilities grow, learn and thrive, the Chesnuts felt there was a need to replicate similar services for families in rural areas. In 1977, months of research and many miles of driving to meet with families across northern California confirmed the need and interest in early intervention services to help children.

Initially John and Sharon provided all services in person, logging thousands of miles per year. Now the program has grown to over 80 employees serving about 500 families. Yet clearly the hearts of both John and Sharon are still closely tied to the one-on-one interactions with the kids – both of their faces light up as they talk about them. "There is so much that can be done, and each family, each child, is different," says Sharon. "Kids are just fascinating," says John, and his genuine interest and excitement is clear.

While the Chesnuts' primary motivation has been children, they've also created a close-knit family among their staff. Johanne White, who has worked with the Chesnuts for the last 12 years, says, "They are such wonderful people. Both John and Sharon have changed my life personally and professionally, and continue to do so. Sharon will drop everything if an employee is having difficulty with a personal issue and will meet them for a walk or coffee. Her strength and wisdom are often my source of determination and perseverance." She adds, "John is able to share his wisdom in such a way that one feels a part of the bigger scheme of things. He is able to talk with his employees in a way that encourages reflective thinking. John has provided me the opportunity to grow personally by bringing up points of development that I have yet to experience."



The couple is now on the retirement track, and son Matt has taken over as the Programs' Executive Director. But John and Sharon are still intimately involved, providing philosophical and theoretical guidance, advice and support. They also keep busy maintaining five acres in Shingletown, gardening, traveling, and volunteering in the community.

White notes that she doubts the Chesnuts could have imagined the impact they would have on so many children and families when they started out years ago, but the significance of their work will continue on in our community for generations. ■

Pamela Jorrick is a North State resident and mother who loves learning about amazing people and programs that make the world a better place for children.