



Volunteering Can Save Your Life

Adding years to your life can be as simple as giving someone else a couple hours of it.

by Kathi Gunio

On

a rare eighty-plus degree summer day in Rochester back in 2003, a northern breeze intermittently provided a little respite from the hot sun. Seventy-six-year-old volunteer Ione Newman wiped her forehead with the back of her hand as she purposefully pulled out weeds from the gardens that embrace Lollypop Farm, an animal shelter outside of Rochester. As she removed the dandelions and thorny thickets, she saw something unexpected: a middle-aged couple was also working the gardens, spreading mulch between some bushes. Their efforts were diligent; they seemed driven.

They were. Newman found it was the gardens this couple came to see. They didn't need a new puppy or a kitten. They needed a connection to someone they lost.

"I struck up a conversation with them," recalls Newman, "and told them that one day I noticed the gardens were in desperate need of weeding. They agreed and told me how thankful they were that I was keeping it up. They thanked me over and over again." Newman soon learned the couple's gratitude was about more than helping to keep the flowers alive...it was about helping to keep the memory of their daughter alive.

Their daughter, Corey Lynn Parker, was an avid animal lover and frequent visitor to Lollypop Farm. She was murdered on Thanksgiving Day six years ago in Jacksonville, Florida, where she was attending college. Her parents donated and dedicated the garden, "Corey's Courtyard," in memory of their nearly

six-foot tall, beautiful, brown-haired daughter who had both a love of animals and people. Spending half their time throughout the year in Florida, the Parkers visit the courtyard as much as they can. Meeting the couple and learning of their devotion gives added incentive to Newman, who now feels even better about her volunteer efforts. And feeling better is one of the many reasons people volunteer.

Simply put, people who help others get a good feeling. In fact, studies show volunteers actually do receive a "helper's high"—an actual feeling believed to be derived from opiates, known as the "feel good" brain chemical.

Dr. Phyllis Moen, a professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota says, "Volunteering gives us a sense of ourselves as engaged in meaningful, productive activities that help change the world and a wider view of our possibilities, which benefit our psychological well-being." During her 13 years at Cornell University, Moen has conducted extensive research regarding the benefits, impacts and results of volunteering. She found people of any age who spend just eight to ten hours a week volunteering can improve their chances of living longer, healthier, happier lives. "Communi-

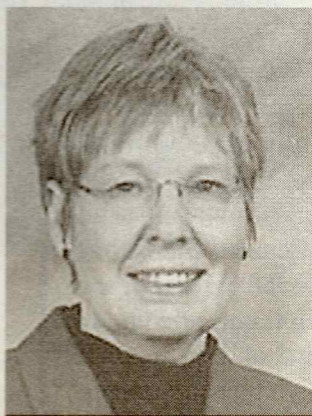
nity commitments, especially formal participation, help enhance our sense of identity, promote on-going networks of social relationships and foster expectations of what to do when we wake up in the morning," she says.

These expectations are primary needs for many people, especially those approaching mid-life or retirement. In a study conducted by Professor Thomas Glass of Harvard's School of Public Health and Social Behavior, Glass and his colleagues followed more than 2700 senior citizens for 13 years to determine how social activities and exercise impacted their longevity. Findings concluded that those senior citizens who were more productive and actively involved in volunteering were 23 percent less likely to die than those senior citizens who were not. These studies provide strong conditional evidence that remaining involved throughout one's life—especially later in life—can lengthen life.

Volunteering also provides an opportunity for maintaining human contact, which is crucial to human survival. From infancy to old age, having a purpose, feeling productive, and connecting with others are essential needs.

Newman, who began volunteering as a Girl Scout leader for her daughters over 44 years ago, agrees. "I guess we all need to feel needed." Newman now spends four to eight hours a week at Lollypop Farm weeding the gardens and working in the animal shelter's gift shop as well. Newman also volunteers at the Pittsford Public Library once or twice a week. "It keeps me out of trouble," she laughs.

Trouble is the very reason Jackie Morrison, 18, began to volunteer. "I got into some trouble in eighth grade," she says. "I had four free periods and too much time on my hands. My guidance counselor suggested I help out with the special education kids." Morrison began



Dr. Phyllis Moen

spending two hours every day with children of special needs. She learned that volunteering her time was not only giving her something worthwhile to do, but giving her a sense of worth as well.

"They have changed my life a lot," says Morrison who feels the constant smiles and the love she received from the kids was amazing. She says it helped her realize there were more productive – and rewarding – ways to spend her time.

One especially rewarding experience involved a student who was incapable of speaking, and even communicating at all. "I never knew why," Morrison recalls, "But the one thing he could do was hug, and that was one of the first things I experienced in that room...that connection." Morrison says special education students don't connect much outside their group. "I began to understand my role was more than helping the teachers in the classroom, but more to serve as a friend to the students who normally don't have 'typical' friends," says Morrison. "This really made me make the decision to put others before myself."

Now, as a freshman at St. John Fisher College, Morrison is co-founder and vice president of the volunteer coalition, *Students with a Vision* (S.W.A.V). She volunteers anywhere and anytime she can, including the Open Door Mission soup kitchens. "I have found that the little efforts, such as smiling when you are serving food, make a difference in someone's life when all they see is angry, sad faces on the street," Morrison says.

According to Moen, this puts Morrison ahead of the game. People who volunteer early in life are much more likely to volunteer later in life, when the benefits are particularly acute, she explains. These benefits include a boost in self-esteem, energy, good physical health and emotional well-being. Morrison says she definitely feels all of these benefits whenever she volunteers.

Jack Brassie, 49, found that same meaningful pursuit four years ago. His granddaughter was born prematurely, weighing just 2 lbs, 15 oz. "She spent

five months in Strong's Children Hospital. She was incredibly small and needed a lot of special care. We received so much support from our community." Moved by this experience, Brassie wanted to give something back to the community that gave so much to him. He began to volunteer for the Ronald McDonald House, the well-known children's charity that provides housing and respite for families of children with terminal illnesses.

During the huge annual Ronald McDonald House charity garage sale, Brassie fills a much-needed role as security guard. "We've got so many people coming and going, we just want to be sure everyone gets in out and safely, and that there are no problems, he says.

He describes the scene of thousands of bargain hunters rifling through tables piled high with everything from sports-wear to Tupperware as pure pandemonium – and very tiring. Still, he wouldn't spend the thirty hours that he volunteers during the three-day garage sale any other way. "You just know there are kids and their families out there who need help. It gets you right here," he says, patting his chest.

Agreeing with him is Jack Kowalski, a Kodak retiree who also volunteers at the Ronald McDonald House garage sale. But for the past seven years, Kowalski's commitment is year-round "We round up donations from people—sometimes whole attics and basements full—and begin the process of sorting it out, pricing, that kind of thing. It's a really big, long process." Kowalski says he



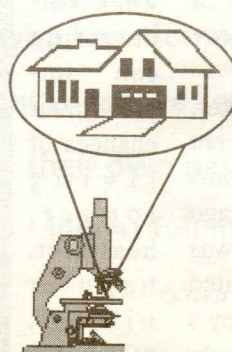
Lone Newman tending the gardens at Lollypop Farm, where she devotes several hours volunteering.

spends anywhere from 8-12 hours a week working for "the house." He claims he really can't pinpoint any particular volunteer experience that has affected his life, because it's an ongoing effort, and, "It's an ongoing good feeling," he smiles.

Overall, that ongoing good feeling is beneficial to all who volunteer. It's a helpful way to deal with boredom, stress, and chronic pain. Volunteering simply takes the focus off ourselves and puts it onto those who *need* us. It's a win-win situation.

Schools and colleges know well the benefits involved. Administrators say that giving students something to do, in addition to involving students in their community, benefits everyone. As for the young students who begin their volunteer career early in life, research and longevity charts show, they'll be glad they did.

Want to volunteer? Call the Volunteer Connection at (585) 242-6474-RP



A-MICRO Home Inspections

**27 Crescent Road
Fairport, NY 14450
(585) 259-8008**

Tim Gunio, Owner/Engineer