



BY ELEANOR HERMAN

It's a clichéd phrase—"giving back to the community"—one that has the same effect on me as fingernails scraping a chalkboard. Yet I had reached the point in life where I wanted to... Well, let's just say I wanted to spend at least a few hours a month helping someone else.

But who? Where? And how?

Each Thursday the Washington Post's Fairfax County Local Living section runs a list of volunteer opportunities. After carefully perusing the list, I decided to contact Volunteer Solutions, a partnership program of Fairfax County's Department of Family Services, Health Department, and Department of Neighborhood and Community Services designed to help residents aged sixty and over as well as disabled adults of all ages. I always enjoyed the company of senior citizens and thought this might be exactly the right thing for me.

To join the program, I took a one-hour group class in Annandale where I learned about the smorgasbord of options volunteers can choose from. Meals on Wheels drivers deliver meals for older adults who can no longer shop or cook. Medical and general transportation drivers take clients to doctors' appointments, the grocery store, bank, and pharmacy. Volunteers with technical expertise can join the IT On-Call Program, which helps clients with minor computer problems and the internet.

Insurance counselors help older adults understand Medicare and sort

out medical claims and benefits. Money managers organize bills and balance bank accounts. Pets on Wheels provides pet therapy, and Caregiver Respite provides temporary companionship to an older adult who cannot be left alone so the regular caregiver can get a break.

Even the words IT, accounting, and medical claims make my eyes glaze over so I knew that wasn't for me. And while I can drive, Lord knows I can talk. At least that's what my husband says. And I've always believed that a friendly phone call or visit can make a big difference in someone's life, especially if they are feeling alone. So I decided to volunteer for a long-term relationship with an older adult by signing up for social visits and light housekeeping.

Before I could set to work, though, I had to undergo a criminal background check—they took my fingerprints—because we go into clients' homes, and a DMV check because we drive them around. Then I was ready to go.

Each week volunteers receive an emailed list of current needs. One client with the warning ALLEGY ALERT caught my eye. Jane—not her real name

because the program is super careful about client privacy—lives in her home in Falls Church with four cats, and since I had four cats and not many people are that eccentric, I figured it had to be a sign. I generally visit Jane twice a month for about two hours each time. I putter around in the garden and help her tidy the house. I've driven her cats to the vet. Often, we just sit, talk, and laugh.

Jane is a great fan of the program. "Volunteer Solutions is a lifesaver for older residents in need," she says as Felix, her big brown tabby, leaps into her lap. "I had worked and saved all my life but when my mother became ill, I had to become her caregiver. Then my own poor health wiped me out. I was afraid I would have to leave my house. A volunteer comes once a month to help me manage my finances and pay my bills on time. I can't cook anymore, and Meals on Wheels provides nutritious meals every day. I have difficulty cleaning the house and working in the garden,



Irene Chalk (right) tells Mary White, a volunteer with Volunteer Solutions, the story of her Polish wedding in Chicago. The two neighbors share poker, coffee, and memories during their morning visits. Mary's visits allow Irene's husband and caregiver, Joseph, the opportunity to spend a few hours working out at the South Run Rec Center knowing Irene is in good hands. "I started out as a volunteer, but now we are good friends," said Mary.

and for several years now volunteers like Eleanor help with that. Because of these services, I can stay in my house with my cats and garden and remain independent."

Volunteer Solutions is popular with volunteers from all walks of life with a wide range of skill sets. From July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2014, some 3,789 volunteers worked 103,721 hours serving 1,464 county residents. A volunteer hour is estimated as being worth \$24.49, which means that these volunteers' efforts were worth \$2,540,127.20 to Fairfax County.

Trina Mayhan-Webb, Director of Volunteer Solutions, says, "We are proactive, professional and innovative in recruiting and engaging diverse volunteers in service. As a direct result of our efforts, our community will grow even better as it grows older. Through the 2014 annual survey, 85% of Adult and Aging clients continued to reside in their own home one year after receiving services. Our volunteers are simply amazing and the numbers prove it!"

One of those amazing volunteers is Dave Roycraft of Burke, 64, who has been a Meals on Wheels driver for four years, driving four or five routes a month. For each route, he drives two or three hours and drops off food for five to eight clients. "I got involved when my mother in New Jersey was ill and began receiving Meals on Wheels," he says. "I couldn't thank them by driving the meals in New Jersey, so I started doing it here."

Dave works evenings as a broadcast engineer at Channel 9, a CBS affiliate in D.C. and has time during the day to volunteer. "Often, we're the only people

the clients see all day and they're so happy to see me," he says. "I get as much from them as I give."

Dean Rust, 71, of Alexandria drives three Meals on Wheels routes a month in addition to doing medical and general transportation which often turns into social calls. After he retired from the federal government in 2005, he joined Volunteer Solutions and puts in about twenty hours a month. "There are a lot of needy older people in the area without an direct support from family," he says. "I admire their courage and support the notion of keeping them in their homes for as long as possible. Without our help, many of them would have gone into nursing homes by now. Some of them have become my good friends. This is a big part of my retirement."

Volunteers Solutions recruits for two other programs. Adult Day Health Care provides a safe, fun, and therapeutic environment from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. for individuals who need supervision during the day due to changes in cognitive and functional abilities. And Senior Centers provide socialization opportunities and interesting classes to older residents who are still functioning well. Both programs look to Volunteer Solutions for help with serving lunch, manning the front desk, and teaching classes.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Website: www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/olderadultservices/volunteer-solutions.htm

Email: VolunteerSolutions@fairfaxcounty.gov

Phone: 703-324-5406

Lewinsville Senior Center and Adult Day Health Care Center

1609 Great Falls Street, McLean 703-442-9075 Open Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Michelle Ross, director of the Lewinsville Senior Center in McLean (which also houses the community's Adult Day Health Care Center), said that some thirty-five older adults come every day to her facility, some of them enjoying it so much they stay all day. Lewinsville currently offers line dancing, Zumba, yoga, bridge, voice and piano lessons, computer training, bingo, and social outings. "When I needed an American Mah Jongg instructor," Michelle says, "Volunteer Solutions put the word out and I got one. We are always looking for people with skills or a passion they want to share with others."

Each May, Volunteer Solutions runs a special program called Helping Hands. Over the course of several weekends, volunteers and corporations pitch in for big projects like home repair and landscaping for older residents who can't afford the work themselves. Last year Home Depot donated thousands of dollars of fencing, siding, and landscaping merchandise. Sixty-five volunteers assisted nine clients, donating 382 volunteer hours valued at \$9,355.18. For this year's program, Volunteer Solutions is hoping for more corporate donations and even individual gift cards from stores like Home Depot, Lowes, Target, Walmart, and Subway (hardworking volunteers must be fed!).

As successful as the program is, the need continues to grow in a county with an aging population, and Volunteer Solutions is always seeking new volunteers. If you're thinking about joining, consider this: according to a recent survey, 97% of the program's volunteers are satisfied with their experience, and 91% feel a stronger connection to their community through their service. A whopping 97% reported being happy with the support they receive from Volunteer Solutions staff and the same number would recommend Volunteer Solutions to a friend.

I certainly recommend it. Whether you want to call volunteering giving back to the community or just giving of yourself to people who need a bit of extra assistance, it's fun, flexible, and as rewarding to the volunteer as it is to those you help.

AUTHOR: Eleanor Herman is a New York Times best-selling historian based in McLean. Her new series Legacy of Kings: Blood of Gods and Royals debuts in September.