

VOLUNTEERS SHARE GIFT OF TIME

by

Jeffrey Steele/For Chicagoland Publishing

When people are younger, they seldom think about what it would be like to live in a nursing home, and never have a visitor. But for many people getting on in years, that notion does come to mind. They know it could be them living that lonely life someday.

It was that realization, recalled Arlington Heights resident Linda Kelley that spurred her to take action. Kelley volunteered with a new program called "Adopt a Nursing Home Patient", which pairs nursing home and assisted living facility residents with volunteers who regularly come to visit, offering the gift of time and attention.

"I think it's a nice idea," said Kelley, who is being paired with a resident of Manor Care nursing home in Arlington Heights. "How many people are sitting in nursing homes, and their relatives aren't around? That's got to be lonely and very depressing, too. . . This is an opportunity to brighten someone else's life a little bit."

"There are so many people who just have no one to come visit them," says Sharon Rhoads, president of the Hoffman Estates-based Dorothea C. White Foundation, a year-old organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life in nursing homes by restoring elder pride, and which founded the program. "They don't have family nearby, and don't have friends because their friends have passed away. We felt this would be an opportunity to offer companionship, emotional support and socialization."

Established earlier this year, the Adopt a Nursing Home Patient Program has affiliations with nine nursing homes, seven in Illinois. There are plans to expand the program nationally in the coming months.

The range of volunteers committing to the program extends from high school age to senior citizens. Those 50 and older, such as Kelley, may be particularly good candidates to volunteer, says Mary Baqueiro, Executive Director of the Dorothea C. White Foundation.

"They are closer in age, and possibly more compassionate," she said. "We have 77 million baby boomers who are starting to retire and saying to themselves, 'That may be me in the future years.' I think this volunteer work would be appealing at any age."

Everyone Wins

Linking nursing home residents with volunteer visitors is an idea likely to benefit both sides of the relationship, said Shari Floss, assistant administrator of The WealShire and

The Ponds in Lincolnshire. The WealShire, a skilled nursing facility, and The Ponds, a sheltered care facility, are both participating in the program.

For many residents, their only contacts are with other residents and with doctors, nurses and employees who work at their nursing homes or assisted living facilities. “To have someone come and spend time with them, show interest in their lives, it can be invaluable,” Floss said. “There’s nothing more precious than to know someone out there cares, and to not be alone. It’s a universal need to feel we are connected to one another. A volunteer meets that need, even if it’s for a half hour or an hour a week.”

Regular visits can also help bolster older people’s self-esteem, help keep their minds more active and keep them “emotionally uplifted,” Baqueiro says.

Rewards for volunteers are likely to be as varied as the volunteers themselves. Some have lost parents or other older relatives. This is a way for them to assuage that loss by regularly visiting an older person, Floss said. Others are “born givers,” who feel an hour a week with an older person fulfills a need to give back to society, she added.

Volunteer Karyn Schebel, 37, is in the process of establishing one-on-one relationships with a half dozen WealShire residents she plans on visiting several times a week. “What am I gaining from this?” she asks. “Just knowing I’m helping to put a smile on someone’s face, and spreading my happiness to them.”

Keeping it Simple

Some volunteers in the “Adopt a Nursing Home Patient” Program simply talk with their “adoptees.” Activities can be as simple as looking through a resident’s photo album, or thumbing through a cookbook and talking about recipes, Floss says.

“It always helps to have a prop,” she adds. “Bring in a book, movie, some music. Or find the facility’s activity calendar, and decide to join your resident in an activity. Outside walks, sharing food -- it’s limitless. It doesn’t have to be a three-ring circus every time you come to visit. Some residents are thrilled just to be with you. You don’t have to be a song-and-dance man.”

For more information or to volunteer, call the Dorothea C. White Foundation at 800-789-4836 and ask for the “Adopt a Nursing Home Patient” Program. Those interested can also email srhoads@dcwhitefoundation.org or visit the foundation’s Web site at www.dcwhitefoundation.org.

“We believe our society as a whole does not give the attention to or spend the time with our aging population,” Baqueiro said. “We want to try to remedy that.”