

Volunteers Bring Joy with Adoption

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Sharon Rhoads and her husband Jerry were driving home shortly after Sharon's mother passed away in 2004, when the couple got to thinking.

They were discussing how Dorothea White's life was cut short after a miserable experience in a nursing home, and they wanted to make sure no nursing home patient or family lived through what they had endured.

"We were talking about all the things people adopt. People can adopt a highway; we adopt children; we adopt pets; we adopt laws. We thought we should be adopting nursing home patients. We started writing up our thoughts, and we thought about the foundation."

In honor of her mother, Sharon and Jerry Rhoads created the Dorothea C. White Foundation in 2006 and implemented a program called Adopt a Nursing Home Patient.

The program strives to improve the quality of life for residents in nursing homes by providing them with companionship, emotional support, socialization and spiritual services through the work of volunteers.

Sharon said she saw both the loneliness and friendliness of nursing home patients when she visited her mother. She decided those patients needed more visitors.

"Some people actually have no one. We thought it would be a good thing to start, and we could recruit people and start visiting elderly people," Rhoads said.

The program serves both skilled-nursing facilities and assisted-living facilities.

Although organizers of the Schaumburg-based program said it is still in its infancy, Rhoads said it is gaining interest from all over the country.

"We've had people call and say, 'I have relatives in North Carolina,'" she said.

The foundation's Web site was up and running while the program was in its early stages, and it motivated a woman who called from Billings, Mont., to inquire how she could volunteer.

It was a surprise to see such a quick response, but it was also the impetus for Rhoads and her husband to move forward with their project.

“We hadn’t gotten the program up and running, and we didn’t even have a facility yet; but we thought, ‘Why wait until we have a facility?’ So we rewrote our program so that it would include any facility that has patients who need to be visited,” said Rhoads, president of the foundation and a volunteer with the program.

Foundation officials are now working with 13 facilities in Illinois and also have volunteers in Texas, Arkansas and Iowa, Rhoads said.

The program is driven by volunteer efforts, and foundation officials are currently working to become a 501c3 nonprofit organization so they can begin fundraising efforts.

In seeking volunteers, the couple has reached out to not only facilities for patients, but schools and churches as well. People interested in participating can contact the foundation, and organizers will coordinate the volunteers with a facility close to their home zip code.

Fielding calls from potential volunteers from as far away as California, Mary Baqueiro, executive director of the White Foundation, matches volunteers with facilities and keeps track of service hours. Baqueiro, who also volunteers, finds her work fulfilling.

“I wanted to get into a business that would make a difference, and I am at the tail end of the baby boomer generation. This is going to affect my life literally,” said Baqueiro, 47.

“Right now 77 million people are beginning their retirement. I see this as a way we can make strides for helping baby those boomers in the future.”

On a recent night, the foundation signed up 73 students from Hersey High School in Arlington Heights. The organizers hope the Adopt a Nursing Home Patient program flourishes in communities like Beverly, Morgan Park and Mt. Greenwood, where a large percentage of students attend Catholic high school, which requires community service hours from each student. More importantly, the program provides an opportunity to bring two different generations together to enhance understanding between them.

“We thought it would be good for the students to understand and get used to the elderly. Maybe their grandparents have passed on; or maybe they are not as old as our grandparents were, and they have never gotten to know that generation before,” Rhoads said.

Some people seek the foundation’s help for the present and the future. Rhoads said she heard from an elderly woman with a disabled son living in a nursing home. She also requested volunteers for when she passes on because she would like someone to continue to be there for her son.

With younger volunteers, the foundation provides training on how to deal with patients who may

have conditions such as dementia. In addition to gaining knowledge, volunteers will discover that their experience enriches their life, Rhoads said.

“I think it’s as rewarding to me as I hope it is for the patients. At least I think, ‘Wow.’ I hope they feel as good as I feel.”

For more information or to volunteer, visit www.dcwhitefoundation.org, call (800) 789-4836 or email Sharon Rhoads at srhoads@dcwhitefoundation.org or Mary Baqueiro at mbaqueiro@dcwhitefoundation.org.

In her travels to nursing homes, Rhoads said she is saddened to encounter patients who do not have visitors but see other residents who do. Through the program, she hopes to provide those people with a better life.

“We’re giving them socialization and companionship. We are giving them something to look forward to because they know that someone cares for them—and not just someone who works there,” she said.

“The main thing is that you make them feel like they are worth something. We call it restoring elder pride.”