

Don Stauffer My Life as a Volunteer

I still remember it quite vividly. That crisp cold February morning six years ago, when I set out on my first volunteer assignment. I had heard of Community Caregivers and liked the idea of what they were doing, so I decided to become one myself. The roads up in the Hilltowns that morning were snowy and slippery, but I wanted to make sure that the lady I was taking to the doctor got there safely. But her yard and her steps were covered with snow, and she was using a walker! This was more than I had bargained for, but in order to make it easier for her I moved my car up closer to the house.

Then, it happened. My bumper slid up over a small concrete post and down around it. I was hooked. Try as I would, I could not work the car loose, and eventually I had to call for a tow truck. Fortunately, the lady was able to postpone her appointment to another day. When I returned to Flatland I learned from a very sympathetic Anne Patnode, the program director at that time, that I was taking my duties too seriously, and if either the client or myself were possibly facing danger we should not try to make the trip. But I was the object of a lot of friendly kidding for many months after my first assignment.

Life as a volunteer can indeed be interesting. One morning I lost a client and her husband. I had let them out of the car at the back of the building where they went upstairs to see her doctor. After running some errands I returned, and decided to go up to his office to see how they were doing. I was very surprised to find the office closed, and everyone out to lunch! And no sign of my clients. Then I discovered a second set of stairs leading to the front of the building, where I found the couple outside contentedly waiting for me.

Being a volunteer means meeting new and interesting people—people who live in the area, but who you know nothing about. I've discovered a number of interesting connections between some of these people and my own life. One lady, for example, whose husband was a professor, turned out to have been friends with a favorite professor of French I had had in college.

On another occasion, I learned to my surprise that the late father of a former CC staff member had been a colleague of mine at the university many years ago.

Most surprising, I think, was Al, who I found out had spent several years of his boyhood in the same tiny Scottish hamlet where my wife's aunt grew up, and where she lived when our family visited her many years ago. "Where are you from, Al?" I remember asking. "Scotland," he said. Where in Scotland? Oh ("Och"), near Glasgow. Well, where—would it be near Helensburgh, perhaps? Yes, but it's a tiny place called Cove. Cove! That's where Aunt Helen had lived. And we were off on a string of reminiscences that carried us through several rides to appointments.

I treasure the memories of these and many other meetings with people, many with backgrounds quite different from my own. When I began as a volunteer with Community Caregivers I thought I would be giving something to others. Turns out I receive a lot more than I give.

Not all volunteers drive, of course, although most of us do. There are many other ways to help our clients, or to help coordinate our efforts: office work, committee work, special projects (such as helping us settle in to our new home in Altamont), etc.