

THE VALUE OF volunteering

PAYING IT FORWARD PAYS BIG DIVIDENDS

BY ROBIN ROENKER

Alberta Johnson will always remember her first student match as a volunteer tutor with The Learning Club in Kansas City, Kan.

"The first thing I noticed when I got her information card was that she had a different tutor every week. She was a challenge, even for me. She was going into the fourth grade but was probably at a first-grade reading level," says the retired nurse, 76, who is now in her sixth year volunteering with the program.

"I just decided I'm not going to give up on her. After about six months, she realized I wasn't going anywhere, and we started making real progress," says Johnson, who found the volunteer role through her local Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP), a nationwide network for people age 55 and over that's part of Senior Corps — a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

"I've always enjoyed working with kids," says Johnson, who retired

in 2010 after a four-decade health career. "They need our time and energy. In my life, I had people that helped me, and I feel obligated to pay that back."

A WIN-WIN PROPOSITION

An array of public health studies have found that volunteering can lead to improved physical and mental health — and may even help delay cognitive decline for older adults.

One 2018 study published in *EMC Public Health* went so far as to assert that volunteering should be promoted as "a kind of healthy lifestyle." Survey data proves the point as well. Participants in Senior Corps — which encompasses more than 200,000 volunteers performing 50 million service hours annually via its Foster Grandparent, RSVP and Senior Companion programs across the country — reported improved health, decreased depression and improved social connections after just one year of service. >



A 4-H volunteer shares the joy of gardening with a young girl

LOOKING
FOR A
VOLUNTEER
MATCH?

Both Senior Corps and Points of Light offer searchable listings of volunteer opportunities throughout the country. Click on "Get Involved" on either site for a database of projects in your area. You can also try sites such as VolunteerMatch.org, Idealist.org, JustServe.org and AllforGood.org — or contact your local United Way, Habitat for Humanity, food banks, libraries or other community nonprofits to ask how you can help.



Volunteers lead intergenerational cooking classes

In short, research has proved what often seems intuitive: It feels good to do good.

Meanwhile, those on the receiving end of volunteer outreach benefit from seniors' combination of well-honed experience and — in the case of retirees — ample free time. Senior mentorship is a win-win paradigm for everyone involved.

"If we stood in front of a whiteboard and tried to design the perfect human resource for kids, it would be a group that's vast and growing, with time on its hands, in possession of abundant skills and inclined toward connection. In other words, older people," says Marc Freedman, CEO of Encore.org, a national nonprofit focused on bridging the generational divide.

SHARING SKILLS

As president of the Missouri Music Educators Association (MMEA), Chris Sprague, 53, of Ozark, Mo., volunteers between five and 15 hours weekly

as an advocate for the importance of music education — in addition to her full-time work as a music, band and choir teacher.

One of the most rewarding aspects of her work with MMEA, she says, has been drawing on her 28 years of teaching experience to mentor and support new music educators who are just beginning their careers.

"We were finding that almost half or more of our new music teachers were leaving the profession in their first three to five years," Sprague says. In response, she and other seasoned members of the MMEA now serve as mentors to new teachers across the state — providing guidance, encouragement and a ready sounding board.

"Knowing that you're helping young

teachers find the skills they need to be successful in the classroom is extremely rewarding," she says. "I have the satisfaction of knowing that my work is not only affecting my own students now, but students in classrooms across the state."

Diane Schonberger of Chappaqua, N.Y., also finds enjoyment in volunteering in a field where she has professional expertise.

A trained reading specialist with a long career in education, Schonberger, 62, began volunteering five years ago as a SMART (Students and Mature Adults Read Together) tutor with JCY-Westchester Community Partners through Volunteer New York!, an organization affiliated with Points of Light Global Network. Founded in 1990

in response to then-President George H.W. Bush's call to volunteerism, the nonprofit Points of Light now serves 37 countries and is one of the world's largest organizations dedicated to volunteer service.

As a SMART tutor, Schonberger visits area schools to work one-on-one with students who need extra reading support. "Because I am a reading specialist, I was able to bring in some of my own materials, and the teachers really appreciated it," she says. "Plus, the kids are so amazing."

Earlier this year, when face-to-face schooling came to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Schonberger was able to continue her tutoring sessions via Zoom calls, including with a particular fourth grader who was >

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essentially a nonreader.

"He was diagnosed with dyslexia just last year but through our twice-a-week remote calls, he is progressing and learning and he is so excited," Schonberger says. "It's been amazing and such a silver lining because in some ways I'm getting to know him better than I did some of the children I saw face to face every week."

STAYING ACTIVE

Want another reason to get involved? Volunteering can ward off feelings of boredom or isolation — thanks to ample opportunities to build meaningful relationships with fellow volunteers or mentees.

Just ask Jim and Cindy Peebles of Broken Arrow, Okla., who have built lasting friendships in their role as mentors to first-year Oklahoma State University medical students through a program with RSVP of Tulsa.

Ostensibly, the pairings are meant to help new medical students become comfortable interacting with older patients. Students meet with senior volunteers a few times a year and practice asking in-depth questions regarding their health and medical backgrounds.

But the Peebles, who have volunteered with the program for four years, have built real ties with the students they've met, inviting them over for home-cooked meals and even attending one student's wedding.

"It's all about the relationships," says Jim, 80, who also volunteers to do taxes for seniors and often leads elementary school gardening classes as a master gardener with his local agriculture extension office. "I just enjoy visiting with people," he says. "When you get older, you've got to have relationships that put a little spark in your life."

"We want to stay connected with people," agrees Cindy, 71, whose additional volunteer roles include



Senior volunteers find rewarding work in the classroom.

leading presentations on the dangers of prescription opioid addiction for seniors. "It helps keep the cobwebs out of the brain."

LIFELONG LEARNING

Volunteering can also lead to new opportunities for growth and self-discovery.

A career educator, Schonberger uncovered her knack for leading online lessons only this year when, due to the pandemic, she could no longer meet students in person.

And while Doris McGugan, 76, of Bethune, S.C., may be as experienced as any 4-H volunteer in the Palmetto State — as she has five decades of service to the youth development organization under her belt — she is still finding new ways to learn through the program.

"In addition to giving kids wonderful experiences, 4-H has also given me so many opportunities that I would never have had," says McGugan, noting that she's been able to continuously grow her skill set thanks to national 4-H conferences and area 4-H leadership workshops over the decades.

The training equipped McGugan, a retired teacher, and her husband

with the know-how to host a summer wildlife day camp on their family's farm property throughout the 1980s — an experience she views as one of the most rewarding of her life. Even now, she continues to lead after-school 4-H workshops for elementary school youth in her county.

Seeing rich intergenerational experiences play out for senior volunteers — and the youth and young adults they encounter through volunteerism — is one of the most inspiring parts of Meg Moloney's job as chief operating officer with Points of Light, she says.

"Older adults have time on their hands, and they're also one of the biggest drivers of using their skills that they've developed over the years to do good," Moloney says.

Moloney encourages would-be volunteers to consider their passions — whether it's young people, animals, social services or the environment — and find opportunities to put them to good use.

"When you get involved and are able to make an impact, you get this really tangible feeling of adding value," she says. "It's such a human need to want to make a positive difference in the world around you." ■