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The Gift of Time: Skilled Volunteers Found in Local Retirees

By Jennifer Wake



Orinda resident Kay Aaker takes a quick break between volunteer jobs to enjoy her garden Photo Jennifer Wake

Not long ago, retirement was considered a time for travel and leisure. Today, more retirees are seeking to continue an active role in their communities, volunteering as a way to stay connected.

Moraga resident and Town Councilmember Mike Metcalf didn't slip quietly into retirement. With an engineering and construction background and graduate degrees in engineering from Stanford University, Metcalf went on to utilize his skills and expertise after retiring from Chevron in 1999, making an impact in his community.

In addition to serving on the Moraga Town Council, Metcalf is affiliated with the Contra Costa Transportation Authority, the Lamorinda School Bus Transportation Agency, and Lamorinda CERT. He is also a USA Swimming Certified Official, a Pacific Swimming Board/Safety Chair for Northern California and Nevada, and a Campolindo High School Swimming official.

"Volunteers help nonprofits increase the number of clients and services they provide," says Ann Wullschleger of the Volunteer Center of the East Bay. "We are excited to see an increase, although much smaller, of volunteers recently retired who want to use their professional experience to help nonprofits with projects."

During the last three months, Wullschleger says the Volunteer Center's Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP Contra Costa) has seen an increase of about 30 percent in the number of seniors contacting them about volunteer opportunities.

Orinda resident and second grade teacher Kay Aaker is the head of recruitment for seniors who volunteer in Orinda schools, and says she has also seen an increase in volunteer interest.

"Volunteering used to be so limited," she says. "Now there's such an array of choices for seniors to do."

Although not retired, after more than 40 years of teaching, Aaker job shares with another teacher at Sleepy Hollow Elementary, yet still finds time to recruit school volunteers and work with several non-profit organizations.

She works with Caring Hands at John Muir Hospital, offering help to seniors who are choosing to stay at home and avoid assisted living, and volunteers as a driver coordinator for the American Cancer Society putting out 50 to 100 calls per week to people who drive patients to chemotherapy or doctor's appointments. She is also a bedside companion at the Bruns House, which provides end-of-life care at a residential home in Alamo as part of Hospice of the East Bay, and for the past 25 years has worked as a patient support volunteer for Hospice where she currently visits two patients a week.

"There are so many things volunteers can do," says Aaker, who was named Orinda's Citizen of the Year in 2003 for her volunteer efforts. "You can do respite for caregivers, can be an office volunteer, or a bereavement volunteer (who helps family members after the loss of a loved one)."

According to Wullschleger, RSVP Contra Costa (sponsored by the Volunteer Center of the East Bay) has over 400 volunteers age 55+ who are helping local communities by volunteering. "There are many ways to help our local nonprofits," she says. "Opportunities to help range from volunteering at home by making a daily reassurance call to a homebound senior to using your professional know how to develop a website or marketing materials."

Hospice provides training for its volunteers. Other organizations help match skills of retirees to openings. And some retirees are continuing their professional affiliations into retirement.

While a professor at San Francisco State University, Lafayette resident Alice Neman had a leadership role in the university's Institute on Disability, which develops partnerships with programs that serve the disability community locally and statewide, nationally and internationally.

Now retired, she continues to sit on several committees and boards, including the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Advisory Committee to the Department of Rehabilitation, and the California Communications Access Foundation, a non-profit organization which contracts with the California Public Utilities Commission to manage and operate the Deaf and Disabled Telecommunication Program.

"I do a lot of Board work - even more since I retired from San Francisco State University about three years ago," Neman says. "I think that it helps you, as well as the programs you help."

For Aaker, it's all about finding the right fit and finding what makes you happy. "I can't imagine my life without volunteering," Aaker says. "The question becomes whether you're happier giving your time or giving your money. Both are important, but for me, giving my time makes me happiest."

Those retirees interested in using their professional experience to help non profits with projects can contact Margaret Oliveri at (925) 472-5777.

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