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Listening to the "After" People

By Cathy Dausman



Six Stephen Ministries volunteers with nearly 50 years of experience among them. Back row, from left: Kathy Hallock, Matt Bell, Judy Peak, and Cynthia Robey; front: Jean Lee and Marilyn Rockwood. Peak belongs to St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Lafayette; the others belong to Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. Photo Cathy Dausman

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Bill Sautter and Jean Lee expect to listen a lot when they volunteer. Sautter and Lee are lay volunteers for Stephen Ministries, working through Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. The Stephen Ministries website describes their volunteers as the "after" people – meaning those who arrive *after* the funeral, the divorce, the imprisonment, the foreclosure, or the devastating medical pronouncement.

"Our pastors are overloaded [with work]," Sautter said, and Stephen Ministries helps lighten their caseload by providing confidential, one-on-one support to care receivers. Volunteers take an initial 50 hours of training, and then attend monthly continuing education classes and twice monthly peer group meetings. But their main role is as a sounding board. "We're not trained as therapists, we're trained as listeners," Sautter emphasized.

Each volunteer is selectively paired with a care-receiver of the same gender; the volunteer generally visits once a week for an hour, for as long as their services are needed. Sautter said LOPC has about 75 trained volunteers, 25 of whom are currently active. Each volunteer commits to two years with the program. Stephen Ministries is used by 11,000 congregations in 160 Christian denominations worldwide. Lee said Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, Hillside Covenant Church in Walnut Creek, St. Anselm's Episcopal Church, Lafayette, Faith Lutheran, Pleasant Hill, and Hope Center

Covenant Church, Pleasant Hill also run Stephen Ministries programs.

The churches have formed a consortium and sometimes train together, which is kind of unusual, Lee said. The collaboration "works really well with us," added St. Anselm's Stephen Minister Judy Peak.

Six hundred thousand people have trained as volunteers since the program's inception in 1975; nearly three times that number have received program assistance.

Becoming a Stephen Minister requires "pretty intensive training," said Lee, who is the program's referrals coordinator. She became interested after a personal experience she had during her son's serious accident 10 years ago. "I spent a lot of time in the hospital," Lee said. While there, she noticed a young man who had no visitors. She decided to become his "friendly visitor."

A short while later, Lee noticed a Stephen Ministries announcement in the church bulletin, seemingly "in bold print, leaping off the page."

"Oh my goodness, I need to be in this class," she thought.

LOPC makes its Stephen Ministries services available to the Lamorinda community at large. "We did an awful lot of outreach at the beginning," said Lee. She adds that although care receivers should understand the program is Christian-based, volunteers do not proselytize.

To learn more about the program go online to www.lopc.org; click on "care," then "Stephen Ministry."

**Submit stories and story ideas to
storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com**