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Caring Hands volunteers make a difference in seniors' lives

Submitted by Stacy Appel



Lamorinda volunteer Kristen Headley, far left, took her longtime match and Navy veteran, Hilbert "Si" Seiwert (wearing cap), on an outing to the USS Hornet in Alameda. Headley's husband, Clayton, and son, Brett, came along to make it a real celebration. Photo provided and said Seiwert was like a rock star while touring the aircraft carrier. "The veteran volunteers providing the tour were thrilled to be with a World War II veteran."

Life at any age involves challenges, but these intensify as we age. The first concern may be that it becomes too difficult to drive to the doctor or the grocery, or to just get a haircut. Support systems change, neighbors and friends may not help as expected, and loneliness may put a damper on daily routines.

The Caring Hands Volunteer Caregivers Program, which serves seniors throughout Central, East, and South Contra Costa County, including Lafayette, Orinda, and Moraga, makes an extraordinary difference in the quality of life for many seniors.

About three years ago, Lafayette resident Kristen Headley started seeing a recurring paragraph in her church bulletin asking for volunteers for the Caring Hands organization. "Having been an occupational therapist," she said, "I thought this would be a perfect fit for me 'someday.' I didn't make any inquiries for several months, thinking I was too busy. But one Monday morning I decided it was time. It was meant to be, because a training was scheduled for the following week and the coordinator and I were able to make it work. I am so glad I made that call!"

Headley was matched with "Si" Seiwert - a 93-year-old living on his own and, fortunately for both of them, right down the street. Because of macular degeneration, Seiwert was unable to drive or read very well. "We started visiting on Wednesdays, reading mail and a great Life magazine on World War II," Headley said. "Si is a World War II veteran and a fountain of information."

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Aside from visiting and reading with Seiwert, Headley also helps him get to doctors appointments, get haircuts and get to the grocery store. "Our time together always puts into perspective what truly matters in this life," she said. "I love that I get to slow down from my crazy life with three teenagers and enjoy quality time with an individual who has a wealth of life experiences to share."

Caring Hands is a collaborative community outreach program between John Muir Health, social service agencies, congregations of various faiths and the community-at-large. The goal of the 20-year old program is to create finely-tuned one-on-one matches to help aging adults in Contra Costa County remain independent as long as safely possible with the help of a volunteer. Isolation and loneliness shorten lives and may make health problems worse.

Because Caring Hands has an unusually long waiting list of isolated seniors right now, they are in dire need of more Lamorinda volunteers or those who might know a neighbor or friend who could volunteer. The program is offering two volunteer trainings on Oct. 13 and again on Nov. 10 in Walnut Creek. For information, call Caring Hands at (925) 952-2999, ext. 36063 or email Stacy Appel at Stacy.Appel@johnmuirhealth.com.

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