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TeleCare volunteers make holidays a little less lonely with comforting calls

By David Scholz



Marcia Mulcahy with Santa at the 2022 TeleCare party Photo provided

The holiday season brings its own special array of sights and sounds. But it also creates emptiness and loneliness, and seniors can be at their most vulnerable as connections with family and loved ones may grow even more distant, if they exist at all anymore.

So, listening and filling that void take on a greater importance for TeleCare volunteers with the Walnut Creek-based Assistance League as that harsh reality, starting at Thanksgiving, reaches its crescendo as the New Year dawns.

Candy Berryhill and Patty Scowley, both of Moraga, are among a team of volunteers who place reassurance phone calls Mondays through Fridays to the elderly, many of whom may be shut-ins or homebound. And, with each "hello" they hear on the other end of the line, a heartfelt connection to the outside world is established yet again, if only for a few moments.

Among the recipients of their daily reassurance calls is Briones resident Marcia Mulcahy, 86, who has enjoyed hearing the sweet sound of their voices for more than five years.

"I am not shut in by any means," she said, being blessed with a wonderful circle of friends. But living alone, receiving the calls were just added peace of mind. "I thought it would be nice to have a phone call from someone first thing in the morning and hear a voice," said Mulcahy. "If they don't get an answer, then they would call my family."

Berryhill is her Wednesday caller, and she gets as much out of the experience as Mulcahy. "All of us who call have a special place in our hearts for people who could be alone at the holidays," said Berryhill. "They are opening up to us and telling us how they feel."

"Some are struggling," she added.

Sometimes those conversations extend to the volunteers being asked questions like how their holiday preparations are going. "I usually I respond it is a lot of work," said Berryhill.

"That gets them to giggle," she continued, implying it brings back memories they have of Christmases past and the time spent ensuring there are gifts for everyone and guests to the house are getting along.

"We have discussed that a lot of times," Berryhill said.

Scowley, who has been involved with TeleCare for 10 years after working her whole life, echoed Berryhill's sentiments. When Scowley retired, a desire to serve the community where she had personal contact with others was her goal. And, TeleCare afforded her that opportunity with direct interactions with the clients it served.

Heightened sensitivity and greater listening, Scowley noted, are the order of the day during the holidays.

"I don't say the calls differ much in terms of subject matter," she said, but there is greater attentiveness to what clients are saying and thinking, including what they might have planned for the holidays.

"We are sensitive to knowing that individuals can find their loneliness is more acute during this time of the year," Scowley added, knowing some don't have family.

The invaluable connections made during the holidays are bolstered by an annual gathering that brings most of all of the clients and the program volunteers together for a joyous face-to-face encounter.

A long attendee of the holiday gathering, Mulcahy unfortunately was not able to attend. A recent accident occurred on a Saturday when a daily call was not expected. Yet, she acknowledged someone, in some form, must have been looking out for her. Still, she's hardly far from the hearts of the volunteers who make sure all the clients receive a holiday gift to brighten the season.

Planning to go back next year, Mulcahy recalled the way the room and tables are decorated for the festive gathering.

"It is just a nice touch," she said.

The arrival of COVID prevented Berryhill from initially meeting Mulcahy and others at the Christmas party when she first joined the TeleCare team. It wouldn't be until 2022 that the party, first held in 1994, resumed.

"It was the most special time," said Berryhill. "Sometimes we just held hands. It is the biggest trip."

No longer just voices, "they were a face and personality we could see," she recalled of the experience.

And, what's Christmas without some gifts from Santa and his helper. One such token of love that keeps giving all year round is a coffee mug bearing photos of all the volunteers for the clients to have when they answer the phone and see who's on the other end.

"It was fun for them to see our mug shots," Scowley said.

A further holiday treat for clients takes the form of hand painted potted succulents that included a snowman decoration, courtesy of AL's AssistTeens group.

This holiday gift complements the other personal gestures of appreciation that the younger members take charge of during the course of the year, including distribution of cards on Valentine's Day and birthday cards for the clients.

"It's a nice personal communication with the clients," Scowley said.

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