



Giving Back

A CULTURE OF VOLUNTEERISM

BY JEN OTTERSON

Joan Hebert knows the name of every resident at the Maine Veterans' Home in South Paris. She knows which of them has recently been in the hospital, which is likely to join her for bingo in the activity room, and which will only come if there's a sizable pot to be won. She knows who has family or friends that visit regularly and who might feel a little lonely or sad.

Hebert is one of a hundred or more people who volunteer their time at the **Veterans' Home**. For twelve years she has driven from her home in Auburn every Wednesday and Saturday, spending over ten hours a week with the veterans.

On Saturday afternoons, Hebert arrives an hour before bingo starts and checks in with the residents: "You going to be coming to bingo?" She places a hand on the shoulder of an

elderly man and raises her cheerful voice to be sure she's heard. One resident wants to come, but will need help getting there. Hebert rings the bell to call a nurse for him. Another won't come because he never wins. To entice reluctant players, Hebert brings a group of veterans from the Auburn VFW every other Saturday. She knows that more dollars in the pot will bring more people to the game.

Photo Top: Joan Hebert with one of her favorite residents, Leo Gaudette, at the Maine Veterans' Home, where she has volunteered for the last 12 years

Hebert stops to chat with a woman working on a puzzle. She doesn't have time to help today, but promises to sit down for awhile when she returns next Wednesday. "Just don't lose any pieces," she playfully chides, "and don't hide any in your chair." She explains that this resident wouldn't leave her room when she first came to the Veterans' Home. A staff member asked Hebert to spend some time with her, and the diligent puzzle-maker soon emerged and became a part of the veterans' community.

The staff and residents at the Veterans' Home entered Hebert's life when her husband became a resident there in 1995, one of the first to get a bed at the then brand-new facility. "The woman who was activities director then told me 'you need to do something to keep your mind occupied,'" Hebert remembered. "They got me hooked on volunteering. I got to loving it. Now that he passed away, I keep doing it."

Hebert's eyes teared up as she described her devotion to the home's residents. "I'll do anything for them—help them out, buy anything—if they need it, I see they get it. Since I started here, my whole heart has been with the veterans." Her dedication has led to the need for surgery on both knees in the past few years to repair damage done by pushing wheelchairs up the ramps at doctors' offices. Even that was worth it to her. "What they give to you, it's such a reward."

Throughout the Oxford Hills, dedicated volunteers such as Joan Hebert are driven by that same intangible reward that comes from giving their time, their energy, and their hearts to others. They pull weeds, change litter boxes, and sweep floors. By selflessly giving to the communities they love, they both create and thrive on that small town spirit of neighbor helping neighbor that makes the Oxford Hills special.

Dennis Gray, executive director of **United Way of Oxford County**, has a unique connection to area volunteers. "At some time, every family needs a little help," notes the organization's website. The United Way supports the agencies that provide that help, including The Good Shepherd Food Bank, **Seniors Plus**, and the **American Red Cross**, by raising funds and providing volunteer opportunities.

"People have a commitment to their communities," Gray said. "They see a problem and they want to help out. You see it all the time when someone is sick or burned out of their house. People want to help their neighbors."

The annual Day of Caring, held each spring, is one way the United Way helps neighbors to help each other. Up to eighty employees of area businesses, including **Hannaford**, **Northeast Bank**, and **Oxford Networks**, give their time that day performing general maintenance tasks such as painting and spring cleaning at United Way's area affiliates. Many of those who lend a hand also give to the United Way through payroll deductions.

McLaughlin Garden in South Paris depends on the volunteers who help maintain the garden, work in the gift shop, and perform myriad vital tasks in the offices. The twelve regular and up to 250 occasional volunteers allow the non-profit McLaughlin Foundation to keep costs down by employing only a bare minimum of staff members.



United Way "Day of Caring" volunteers gather in Paris before heading off to group assignments

The garden offers volunteers the unique opportunity to learn while they help. At its "Weed and Feed" events, volunteers who spend the morning working in the garden receive a free lunch, the occasional plant to take home, and access to horticulturalist Kristin Perry's wealth of knowledge. "A lot of people have no gardening background whatsoever," volunteer coordinator Jennifer Caldwell-Jeans said. "Kristin tells them exactly what to do."

Not all volunteers at the garden get their hands dirty, though. Many are involved in preparing the schedules and other mailings the foundation sends out or maintaining the archives. Caldwell-Jeans says there are opportunities for anyone with a smiling face and a willingness to help, from students doing school projects to retirees and stay-at-home moms who bring their children.



"Weed and Feed" volunteers potting plants in preparation for the Annual Plant Sale at McLaughlin Garden in South Paris



Sandy Geddry helps tend to more than eighty cats awaiting adoption at Responsible Pet Care in Norway.

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Cyndy Tinsley and fellow volunteer Lisa Moore are always sure to greet customers with a smile at the Fare Share Market in Norway, a member owned co-op since 1989.

Volunteers also find a wide range of opportunities at **Responsible Pet Care** in Norway. Supervisor Lucille Moffett said that help is always needed cleaning litter pans, maintaining the building, doing office work, and of course caring for the eighty or more cats who call the shelter their home.

Sandy Geddry began helping at Responsible Pet Care when she moved to the area three years ago. She spends up to twelve hours each week maintaining the computer database and website, posting photos of adoptable cats and sending out the e-newsletter. She credits her mother, who volunteered throughout Geddry's childhood, for teaching her the value of giving back to the community.

Like Geddry's mother, Cyndy Tinsley has passed a love of volunteering on to the next generation. As a home-schooling mom, Tinsley has always taken on volunteer jobs that allowed her children to work at her side. Through their volunteering, the three younger Tinsleys developed a strong connection to their community.

Customers at the **Fare Share Market** in Norway are likely to find Tinsley or another volunteer stocking shelves, running the cash register, or mopping the floor. These unpaid helpers are sometimes performing community service or working

to improve their skills through an organization like **The Progress Center**. Often, though, they are members of the cooperative that owns the market.

"They just want to make things better in the store they are part-owners of," Fare Share manager Claire Gelinas said. "And it's sometimes fun to be here." For some, the fun and feeling of community gained through volunteering have led to a paid job at the market. Five current staff members, including Gelinas, started out as volunteers.

Tinsley has been a member of the Fare Share Cooperative since its creation thirty years ago. For the past fifteen years she has been a regular volunteer both in the Market and behind the scenes, serving on the board of directors and organizing fundraisers. Although her primary task at the natural foods store is to receive and shelve the order that comes in each Monday afternoon, she helps out wherever she sees a need. "If I come in and it's snowing, I shovel. If someone asks me a question, I try to help them."

The opportunity to give the task at hand her full attention is one of the things that makes a volunteer different from a paid staff member, Tinsley feels. "You can spend as much time as you want to without worrying that you're running the store budget dry." She enjoys being able to make a connection with customers and share her knowledge without feeling that her nose is to the grindstone.

"My favorite thing is to be of help, of service," she explained. "If you get appreciated in some way, it just makes it so worth it. You know your energy and time made a difference to someone."

At the Maine Veterans' Home, Joan Hebert echoed Tinsley's sentiment. She urges anyone with a little time to share and a caring heart to "sit down and talk to a person that's sad and doesn't have anyone to talk to. Just come in for half an hour. It makes a big difference." ■

Volunteer OF THE YEAR

When Lisa Jones enrolled her daughter in preschool twenty years ago, a friend suggested she spend some of her spare time volunteering. Jones began helping out at the Oxford Hills Food Pantry and, as she explained, "one thing blossomed into another." Over the years she has found more and more places where she can lend a helping hand. Last year, her dedication to the community was honored by the Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce, which named her its 2007 Volunteer of the Year.

Jones estimates that she spends ten to fifteen hours volunteering each week. She served as director of the food pantry for over ten years, and now drives to the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Auburn twice a month to pick up the twenty crates of food it donates to the Oxford Hills area. She has cooked for the community lunch program at the First Universalist Church in Norway for eighteen years. Jones is also a regular volunteer at the **Stephens Memorial Hospital** thrift shop and coffee shop.

"That's just what I'm doing now," Jones said. In the past she has also been involved in the sports boosters at **Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School**, helping in the snack shack during games, and continues to help with Project Graduation even though her two children have graduated. She has also served on the church council at Trinity Lutheran and taught Sunday School.

Following in the footsteps of the friend who inspired her to give her time to the community so many years ago, Jones encourages her friends to join her. "If I see somebody on the street and I know they need something to do, I say come along with me and volunteer. There's a place for everybody," she said, "and the need is so great."



Lisa Jones, Oxford Hills Chamber of Commerce Volunteer of the Year