

## **The Gift of Love: Volunteers**

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Mr. Webster states this as a definition for volunteer: “a person who freely offers to take part in an enterprise or undertake a task.” I love the part that says “freely offers.” For the past six years my entire staff has consisted of volunteers who freely offer up their time for my program. Without their dedicated service, our program would not exist.

As I reviewed the list of available topics to write about this month, I knew this one on volunteers was for me. Many years ago I was taught that if I wanted to be a success, I had to surround myself with successful people. In my work with those living with dementia, I realized that successful volunteers for our program had to possess certain qualities: they needed to have a teachable spirit as well as a heart for those with whom they daily come in contact, and, above all, they had to understand how to love those they serve each day.

While my program is small as compared to other respite programs, my volunteers are giants in the volunteer state of Tennessee. Without the external monetary incentive, they always take very seriously their volunteer jobs. They are all trained in Positive Approach to Care and Hand-under-Hand. They strive to learn more and more about dementia.

No matter what type of dementia a person has, the statistics are frightening. I would like to leave you with some good statistics.

In the last six years, I have had the same eleven faithful volunteers working alongside me. Nine of the eleven volunteers are over 65 years old. In a three-day/four-hour program each week, they have logged more than 25,000 service hours in five years. Yes, they have taken every step I have taken. When it comes to fundraising, they are there for every event. They actually have prepared a meal for a banquet of more than 400 guests. Their goal is simply to go the extra mile. Our ratio of caregivers is one volunteer for every two clients. With that ratio, we track each client and their abilities to communicate with others. I truly believe it's because of the volunteer's abilities to care for them in a positive way. It's amazing to see. Great statistics, but guess what?

Our volunteers have loved more than 70 clients who were living with a disease they did not ask for. Their compassion for the families of our clients is stellar. We are a family whose bond is stronger than a disease called dementia.

I hope those of you who depend on volunteers for your programs will look at these words and understand one principle. My program is not about me; it's about those volunteers who “freely give” of themselves for me. They saw my vision, heard my heart, and, most of all, freely gave love to a population of people living with a disease that is often deemed as the most feared affliction in our country. My volunteers work hard, study hard, love

freely, and totally understand that love and The Positive Approach to Care wins. They have proven it.

By the way, the bond throughout our volunteer family is very close. So close that one of our faithful volunteers is now a client. She still thinks she is working for us and she is. My sweet Martha is teaching us every day. Teaching us about love from the other side... the Alzheimer's side.