

Spotlight on Ruth MacNutt, Public Health Museum Volunteer

By Mary Ferguson, Volunteer

Ruth came to the museum for a tour and was so impressed with what she experienced, she wanted to learn more and find out what she could do to help spread the word about this fine institution right in her own community. She met with Sandra Price, Coordinator of Volunteer Engagement, to discuss where she might fit in at the museum given her background and interests.

Ruth recalls her favorite exhibit on that first visit to be Polio, its microbiology, race to develop a vaccine, signs and symptoms, treatments and the campaign to conquer it. The Iron Lung especially struck a chord with her, having grown up in the 1950s. She can still recall the polio outbreaks every summer that brought fear amongst the populace and public health officials alike until a vaccine became available in 1955. Although the virus that causes polio is not as deadly or as contagious as COVID-19, its victims sadly were more often children, causing varying degrees of paralysis or death.

Ruth has always worked in the healthcare field, first as a nurse's aide during college then, as a medical technologist once earning her degree. She retired from Lahey Clinic after 20 years working in the chemistry lab. Ruth has been a volunteer for a year and helps out wherever she is needed; participating in tours, talking to visitors and reading and studying about aspects of public health history that are featured in the museum. With a keen interest in infectious diseases, Ruth finds the museum's exhibits of TB and Smallpox to be the most illuminating. The Smallpox exhibit features excellent artifacts such as the bifurcated needles used in facilitating the eradication of smallpox worldwide.

In thinking about the future of the museum, Ruth sees that the current pandemic has put into the forefront the critical nature of the work that public health agencies do while being underfunded, and would like to see the museum take a role in educating the public about this major concern. In addition, she would like to see more outreach by the museum to increase community awareness of public health history and therefore interest in the future of the community's public health system.

Ruth resides in Billerica and is very active in the community. She enjoys being part of the Bedford Camera Club, Billerica Garden Club, and Spools Quilters at the Billerica Senior Center. When she is able, she enjoys traveling with her son and two grandchildren and reading, especially about medical science.

The museum plans to reopen soon and will need volunteers to help with writing, tours, archiving, organizing inventory, publicity and more. Contact us at volunteers@publichealthmuseum.org. We'd love to hear what you have to offer!

