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February 2017

New Advisory Council Chair Is Always Learning, Always Volunteering



Joan Strickland, the new chair of the AgeOptions Advisory Council, has had two careers – three if you count the volunteer activities that would exhaust a lot of people far younger than her nearly 79 years. In addition to more traditional volunteer activities, Joan has signed on to mission trips to Botswana, India and Costa Rica in each of the last three years. A fourth trip is likely this year.

She's motivated by an intrinsic commitment to continue learning, stay busy and contribute in a variety of ways. "I've always been an activist kind of person," she said.

Joan Strickland

Finding retirement "boring," she didn't stop at typical church and community volunteer work, but decided to join the arduous but rewarding two-week mission trips.

Joan retired from the State of Illinois after 23 years as an intake caseworker and field staff caseworker in Public Aid, and an employment service interviewer and unemployment compensation deputy in Employment Security. "I retired early and made myself a full-time student," she said. "Not doing anything to me is boring."

After graduating from Chicago State University with a bachelor's degree in secondary education she taught language arts in grades 6-12 before retiring a second time and taking on more



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volunteer work. "I believe people are watching you and you can say all these nice things, but seeing you do something may encourage them to do something too," she said.

At Chicago's Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ, where she's been a member for 60 years, Joan has served as Sunday School superintendent and volunteers as an usher, communion worker and in hospitality. She also volunteers at the Catholic Charities Josephine P. Argento Senior Center in Calumet City.

She joined the AgeOptions Advisory Council in 2010, was vice chair for two years before becoming chair, and also serves on the AgeOptions Advocacy Task Force. She first learned about AgeOptions at a Legislative Breakfast in Calumet City, where she lives with her husband of 47 years, John Strickland. "I asked so many questions they asked who I was," she said, "and they said they needed people from the south suburbs on the Advisory Council."

But retirement was still boring, and when she heard about faith-based mission trips at the church she saw an opportunity to learn about different cultures. "I'm always learning," she explained.

"You sort of submerge yourself," she said of engaging with people in other cultures. In Botswana, villagers one morning brought the volunteers a gift – a cow. Throughout the morning, "that cow became a person to you," Joan said.

But around noon their hosts killed the cow for dinner. "That was the hardest meal I ever had to eat," she said. "As a city person, you don't think of an animal as something to eat. But when people are poor and made a sacrifice for you, you don't want to offend them."

The trips can be expensive, sometimes costing upwards of \$3,000, and the accommodations are anything but luxurious. Volunteers usually stay in rural areas and have to pack everything

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they will need. In India they were told hot water would be ready at 6 a.m. "But nobody said it would only be heated in the morning because of electrical power overload," Joan recalled. The volunteers also learned it wouldn't be possible to use their computers during the business day.

In Costa Rica they slept in bunk beds in a dormitory-like situation with five bathrooms for 45 people.

Joan leaves the physical work to others and handles responsibilities like vacation Bible school and clothing distribution. But she is adamant about carrying her weight. "I have to remind the people I travel with that I'm not going to travel out of the country if I can't be independent," she said. "I carry my own."

Among her observations are the generosity of people who have very little, and that older people are treated with more respect in other countries than in the U.S. "It's a very humbling experience because they have less than we have but they want to give all they have," she said.

The volunteers want the people they visit to know "we're not all ugly Americans," Joan said. "We want to be culturally sensitive. Many Americans don't know other cultures and aren't sensitive to them. We don't know and we don't think we need to know."

The national Missions Department of the Church of God in Christ will have mission trips this year to Trinidad, Colombia and Tanzania, and Joan probably will go on one. The fact that her four adult children are very protective doesn't stop her, although "it irritates the heck out of me," she says fondly.

She is going to continue learning and volunteering. "I have learned that I'm going to be the best old lady I know how to be," she said. "With patience and tenacity, I don't know why I can't."