

Proof you're never too old to volunteer

Spunky seniors help keep hospitals humming

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FRED SOMMER, 92: The retired barber has logged some 3,700 hours over the past 17 years as a volunteer at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in south Sacramento. "My mother lived to 104," he said. "I've got to give her credit." Above, he pushes a wheelchair containing patient Francisco Sablan, Sommer's junior by seven decades. Hector Amezcua / hamezcua@sacbee.com

Fred Sommer, 92, stops in front of the elevator, pulls out a hankie and blows his nose. He's at the hospital again. He comes here a lot.

But Sommer's not sick, he's a volunteer. And, surprisingly, at his age, he's in good company.

People age 80 and older constitute nearly 20 percent of the volunteer staff at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in south Sacramento.

A few blocks from Kaiser, at Methodist Hospital, those age 80 and older account for more than 25 percent of the volunteer staff. At Shriner's Hospital for Children Northern California in Sacramento, it's closer to 35 percent, said Volunteer Services Manager Lillian Nelson.

Those numbers don't surprise Cheryl Osborne, director of California State University, Sacramento, gerontology department.

"It's a trend, and will be even more so as the leading edge of the baby boomers start retiring," Osborne said Wednesday.

Indeed, volunteering among adults age 65 and older has increased 64 percent since 1974, according to a report by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Sommer and his peers aren't baby boomers, however. Osborne said academics refer to people in their 80s and 90s as "the traditionalists."

"People in that cohort ... come from a belief system that giving back is very important," she said.

"They grew up mostly on farms and really had to rely on one another. ... Relying on others besides yourself is normal for them."

And they're the "healthiest and wealthiest of all generations who have survived thus far," she said.

Take 93-year-old Raynia Kinniston, who volunteers three times a week at Mercy General Hospital in east Sacramento.

Kinniston walks a half-mile from her Land Park home to a light-rail station, transfers to another train and then takes a bus to reach the hospital, said Melissa Jue, marketing and communications officer with Catholic Healthcare West.

A couple of times a month, Kinniston, who works in the emergency room, at the information desk and in the hospital gift shop, pulls double shifts.

"They just need her so much," Jue said.

Back at Kaiser, Sommer's elevator arrives with a 'bing.' He takes it to the first floor to await his next task.

"You should've been here at 8 or 9 a.m.," said fellow volunteer Orsula Hanna, 90, as she waited by the help desk for her next task.

"I've been all over the hospital – nine runs since 8 a.m."

The phone rings. Volunteer Bob Mugford, 77, answers it.

Hanna needs to pick up lab work from the special-care nursery. A baby's being tested for jaundice.

The petite powerhouse heads down the hall toward her destination. Her no-nonsense attitude is hard to miss.

Hanna started volunteering after her husband of 40 years, Michael, died. And it helped.

"That's the reason I'm here," said Hanna, wearing pink flower earrings and a blue volunteer coat.

She's been at it since 1986, chalking up 7,000 hours of service.

"I don't know how long I'm going to be here, but I try to make the best of it," Hanna said. "As long as I can walk on my two feet and get behind the wheel, I'll be here at Kaiser."

Yes, Hanna still drives. Besides good reflexes and fleet feet, she's quick-witted, too, and the only malady she deals with is high blood pressure.

Sommer's no schlump, either.

"I snow-skied until I was 86," said the retired barber, who leans in to hear questions.

He lost a lot of his hearing during "the war," he confides.

He pops a baby aspirin every day to keep his heart healthy – that's it.

"I inherited, with birth, good genes. My mother lived to 104. I've got to give her credit," said Sommer, who has volunteered 3,700 hours at the hospital over the past 17 years.

"He bowls, too," Hanna said.

His latest score?

"A 145," Sommer said.

Sommer, who lives in Sacramento with his wife, Regina, 89, said he gets a lot of satisfaction from volunteering.

He feels appreciated.

At Kaiser in south Sacramento, volunteers range from age 15 to 92 – Sommer being the oldest. They all wear blue coats.

"It gives members a sense of comfort to see a blue coat," said Valerie Sanders, site manager for volunteer services at the hospital. "Sometimes the idea of a nurse or doctor is frightening."

Volunteers greet patients, escort them to different parts of the hospital, run errands – freeing up staff to focus on the technical and medical tasks, she said.

Both Sommer and Hanna have outlasted the average volunteer stint, five to 10 years, Sanders said.

Back at the help desk, Sommer is given another run.

He's to pick up patient Francisco Sablan, who's using a wheelchair. Sommer pushes him from the emergency room to the pharmacy. Kind of a long trek.

At 92, Sommer is 70 years older than Sablan, 22.

"I really enjoy the walking," said Sommer, whose 5-foot-7 frame looks slight next to Sablan – all arms and legs in the wheelchair. "When they got a long walk to do, they send me. I'm a fast walker."

Indeed, Sommer's pace is one to reckon with.

"I used to wear a pedometer," he said. "I once walked seven miles in one five-hour shift."

Sommer and Sablan arrive at the pharmacy. Sommer goes up to inquire about the patient's prescription.

He has to return to the volunteer desk in a few minutes.

"I've got a young man here with a leg injury," Sommer says to a pharmacy clerk.

"When he's ready to go, will you call the volunteer desk?"

With the clerk's agreement, Sommer quick-paces his way back to the desk to await another task.

About the writer:

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ORSULA HANNA, 90: After her husband of 40 years died, Hanna began volunteering at Kaiser, and has spent about 7,000 hours working at the hospital. Hector Amezcua / hamezcua@sacbee.com

Comments

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[Cali4niaRags](#) at 12:38 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Inspiring!

This is an amazing article. How fortunate these older folks are, to be strong, healthy, and able to give their time and energy like they do. God bless them!

3 out of 3 people found this comment helpful.

Was this comment helpful? [Yes](#) | [No](#)

[flwrchld52](#) at 4:40 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Amazing!

These two humans are workhorses! I've known both of them for years (I work at Kaiser South). They are always cheerful and full of warmth and charm. And still sharp. These wonderful humans provide so many services to their fellow man. I know that Orsula still travels the world. And Fred...yes, he is a bit hard of hearing...but what a delightful man....

3 out of 3 people found this comment helpful.

Was this comment helpful? [Yes](#) | [No](#)

[Utahreb](#) at 6:37 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

High five!

It is wonderful that senior citizens are volunteering to help others in all kinds of areas. Compared to these seniors in the article, I am a youngster of 70 and have been director of a non-profit, no-kill pet rescue for about 8 years. If I didn't have a reason to get up and get busy with the dogs, cats, horses, llamas, goats, sheep and more, it would be a really dull life.

Volunteering has been a way of life for me for years and years and it is such a fulfilling and gratifying way to live. One of our senior volunteers also does hospice work. Some of the younger volunteers also work for children's causes, which we also support and help with donations.

To those who suffer from depression and feel left out, I recommend helping someone less fortunate. And believe me, there is always someone who has it worse than you do, no matter what you think.

4 out of 4 people found this comment helpful.

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[BJColbert](#) at 7:19 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Compare these wonderful people

with the ones who sit home and feel sorry for themselves. "When ye are in the service of your fellowman, ye are only in the service of your God" These people are angels on earth.

2 out of 2 people found this comment helpful.

Was this comment helpful? [Yes](#) | [No](#)

[Nytingalle](#) at 7:41 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Incredible

The volunteers don't even know how much of a gift they truly are to the patients of the hospital... I worked at Curves, which is a circuit workout for women in Jackson, whose population is usually older, and I swear to goodness I was the luckiest person there. I was paid to talk and enjoy these incredible women. Their wisdom and passion was wonderfully inspiring to me. I'm sure the people that the older set care for or volunteer for are really receiving something special.

2 out of 2 people found this comment helpful.

Was this comment helpful? [Yes](#) | [No](#)

[freedom_rings](#) at 10:49 AM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Good article

Kudos for a well-written, upliftng article!

2 out of 2 people found this comment helpful.

Was this comment helpful? [Yes](#) | [No](#)

[Joe Niner](#) at 1:02 PM PST Tuesday, November 13, 2007 wrote:

Very Good Article

What an inspirational article! I have done some volunteer work myself, but it amounts to nothing when compared to these folks. I am blessed with good health, and this article will inspire me to give back more. I truly believe that we are all obligated to make a difference! There are so many ways we can do that, but doing it in a hospital is special.

1 out of 1 people found this comment helpful.