

Volunteers understand the reason for the season

By Matthew Santoni
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As Ken Milko carried a flower arrangement through the halls of a Murrysville nursing home on Christmas Eve 14 years ago, one patient after another looked up with hope.

Walking past those happy, expectant faces and seeing them turn to disappointment after they realized the gift wasn't for them was like a series of heartbreaks, said Milko, 48, of Swissvale.

"It was very difficult for me to leave there," he said.

Milko and his business, Penn Hills-based Flowers in the Attic, began working with nursing homes to find residents who get few visitors or presents during the holidays.

This year, he expects to deliver flowers to more than 150 people, thanks in part to volunteers who make the arrangements and customers who donate \$5 toward the cause.

"The holidays are a more somber time when you don't have your parents, so it's hard to see people who have them and neglect them," Milko said.

Opportunities for charity abound during the holidays, but some people are driven to give their time and treasure by more than just a sense of seasonal obligation or a desire to get on Santa's "nice" list. While giving traditionally picks up this time of year, those with deeper desires to give back are the ones who tend to come back after the holidays, said Jim Guffey, executive director of South Hills Interfaith Ministries.

"We get lots of phone calls from folks who are in the spirit of the holidays. ... Families call to volunteer, so their children get the idea of giving back," Guffey said. "But the need is not going to go away come Jan. 2."

Year long need

Clarence "Code" Gomberg has been volunteering with the Department of Veterans' Affairs for more than 50 years through the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America.

"If I have a little gripe, it's that when we have the Dec. 9 volunteer brunch, I wonder, 'Where in the hell are all these people the rest of the year?'" said Gomberg, 89, of Stanton Heights.

A combat medic during the invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, Gomberg mans the ceramics shop at the VA's H.J. Heinz campus in O'Hara and organizes the yearly decoration of veterans' graves on Memorial Day.

"When a patient comes in, I help them get started on a project," Gomberg said. "If nothing else, I sit and talk to the patients. If a patient finally gets out of bed, gets down to the ceramics shop, that's a plus already."

He hadn't intended for the Jewish War Veterans group to lead him to a lifetime of volunteer service, but the survivors of World War I and the Spanish-American War pushed him, he said.

"I joined the post to be in the bowling league," Gomberg said. "But we got broken in by the old men there."

Lynne Torchia started volunteering at churches and nursing homes with her daughters, Brianne, 8, and Regina, 11, to counteract the commercialism of the holidays and give them perspective on the privileges they enjoy. Since beginning several years ago, they've collected for Toys for Tots, sang

Christmas carols to collect money for Children's Hospital, and most recently have been ringing bells for the Salvation Army's Red Kettle drives.

"My kids are very privileged. ... I want to remind them that there's another side -- that not everyone gets all the toys they want, not everyone drives their own car, not everyone has a meal on their table," said Torchia of Robinson.

Sam Yamron, a lawyer with Downtown-based Spilman Thomas & Battle, joined the Young Lawyers Division of the Allegheny County Bar Association for a couple of holiday charity events, including a toy drive for families living in area homeless shelters, and the Attorneys Against Hunger program that runs from fall through spring.

Yamron's desire to give his time was motivated by his late mother, whom he helped to run support groups for people with pulmonary hypertension, and by his mentor, U.S. District Court Judge Nora Barry Fischer. She emphasized taking an active role in the community outside of the courtroom, he said. Volunteering gives him a sense of accomplishment, a chance to meet other lawyers and other volunteers, and an escape from the stress of work.

"It's a way to touch base with reality, to see there's a world outside the legal world," said Yamron, 27, of Wilkins. "Certainly there's a spirit of the season in giving back, but you're also getting to know folks, becoming a part of the community beyond your fellow lawyers."

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