

PRESERVING INDEPENDENCE

Helping seniors 'age in place,' Village Friends seeks donations, volunteers

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Village Friends subscriber Helen Brown, left, talks with one of the nonprofit organization's founders, Joanna Hoit, while attending an outing with the Supper Club last week at Mama Lucy's Peruvian Restaurant in Auburn.

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In 2017, John Frandsen endured replacement of two knees and a partial hip replacement. Unable to drive, he knew he could rely on Village Friends, a local nonprofit organization, to provide him with transportation to his doctor appointments.

"In my case, they're like my soul mate," said Frandsen, 84, of Auburn. "When my stepdaughter and family are unavailable and can't take me to a medical appointment, they're a resource that's available."

Founded in 2012, Village Friends helps seniors within the Auburn-Opelika community maintain their independence in their homes through a volunteer-based support system. Seniors pay an annual enrollment fee of \$240 – totaled from \$20 per month – to receive a variety of services ranging from transportation to technology assistance.

"The idea is that, as people grow older, most of us prefer to 'age in place,' meaning that we prefer to live in our own homes independently," said Joanna Hoit, who founded the organization with Mary Burkhart, Jim Warman and the late Ferne Garrett. "And so with this kind of assistance from community members who are Village Friends volunteers, we can

live independently even if we can't drive anymore.”

Now, as the organization aims to expand while providing services to a growing number of requests, more donations and volunteers are greatly needed, according to representatives.

List continues to grow

Village Friends has 50 subscribers and 50 volunteers, said Martha Shepherd, the nonprofit's president, who is planning to double these amounts by the end of the year.

Additionally, the organization has significantly increased the number of its fulfilled requests, according to Chief Administrator Latasha Durr. In 2016, 328 requests were fulfilled, while 914 were completed in 2017. Between January 1 and June 30 this year, approximately 640 requests have been addressed, and that amount is anticipated to rise to about 1,500 by the end of the year.

Therefore, more donations and volunteers are needed to help ensure operation expenses and services can continue to be managed, Shepherd and Durr said.

“The reason that we need this is because the organization has grown and is continuing to grow,” Durr said.

Grateful for the support Village Friends receives, Shepherd said subscriber fees pay only 40 percent of annual expenses, while 60 percent comes from donations from individuals and corporate sponsors.

“This community is so supportive if you've got a legitimate cause and a reason why you need this money,” Shepherd said.

The more volunteers who are available, the easier the load on everyone wishing to help as service requests are spread out, Shepherd also said.

“One of the benefits of being a volunteer with our organization is that you are able to volunteer when you are available for the things that you want to do,” Durr added. “So we always need more volunteers because not everyone is available at the same time.”

Assisting with kindness

Although there are some young people devoting time to help seniors in the program, most volunteers are retirees, Shepherd said. Once a senior signs up for services, an assessment is conducted at the person's home to determine if the Village Friends can provide the level of assistance needed.

“We're not everything to everybody,” Shepherd said. “We're not indigent care. We can't come in and clean your house on a regular basis. We can't prepare your meals,” Shepherd said. “But with those seniors who are still active-minded and still want to get out in the community, our volunteers take our members to get their nails done, to the beauty shop. We take them to OLLI [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute] classes, we take them to a Bible study class. We take them to the gym. So see our subscribers are active people. That's what I meant by we're not everything to everybody.”

To assist those who are approved, a list of requests for services – grocery store visits, beauty shop or medical appointments, trips to social events – is communicated to the volunteers by email, Shepherd explained. Afterward, seniors are notified about who and when someone will arrive to help them.

“I might look at it and say, ‘You know, I’m going to be in Opelika on Thursday. I’ll take Miss Addie to get her nails done,’” Shepherd said. “I may even get mine done while I’m there.”

Guaranteed, members are always dressed and ready to go, Shepherd added, and volunteers are delighted to spend time with subscribers while helping them complete errands. Other services include deliveries and basic home maintenance, like helping with lawn care or installing a light fixture. Also available are temporary housekeeping and technology assistance services, the latter of which can range from helping set up an iPad telephone voice messaging to programming a TV remote control.

Additional services include quarterly programs or workshops that offer helpful information to subscribers, Shepherd also highlighted. Other routine social events, like the monthly Lunch Buddies and Supper Club, are available for subscribers and volunteers to socialize as a group as well.

Friendly visits are available to seniors longing for company, as well as on behalf of family members who are managing a busy work schedule and simply want someone to check in on their loved ones maybe once a week.

“Loneliness is one of the worst things about when you lose your independence and you can’t get out,” Shepherd said. “And our society is such these days that family gets grown and moves away, and you no longer have that little grandson who’s 20 or 21 pop-in and say, ‘You need anything?’”

Lisa Abercrombie deemed Village Friends a “blessing,” and its volunteers have been “wonderful” with her 96-year-old mother-in-law, Addie Abercrombie, since she became a subscriber two years ago.

Miss Addie enjoys the friendly visits, Abercrombie said, and recently Village Friends representatives were accompanied by Opelika High School students during a special visit.

“She really enjoyed having the interaction with the young people, and they also brought her a flower, which she is absolutely thrilled about,” Abercrombie said. “And so for her to have those friendly visits and stuff, it’s wonderful. She absolutely loved it, and she was so overwhelmed by it when they gave her the flower, she was almost in tears. She was in tears, trying to hold them back.”

‘Rewarding’

Village Friends is hoping to continue growing, Shepherd said. But, to keep subscriber fees low and help seniors maintain their independence, more donations are needed. For more information on how to donate or volunteer, Village Friends can be contacted at 334-209-4641. Information also is available at village-friends.org.

“In this community, there is a huge senior population,” Shepherd said, afterward adding, “I feel like that we fill a void in their life to keep them active, to keep them connected, to keep them feeling productive in their community.”

Besides offering helpful services to seniors, volunteers gain a sense of meaning from the organization as well.

Bob Kribel, a new volunteer and retired physics professor who taught at several universities, deemed his experience as “rewarding.”

“They’re happy to have people help them work out a maintenance problem,” he said.

Carolyn Coker, 85, enjoys the time she spends helping 99-year-old Auburn resident Helen Brown with her busy schedule.

“I try to keep up with her,” Coker said. “She’s the most positive person you’ve ever met.”

Brown, meanwhile, delights in having Coker’s company, as well as the opportunities to develop friendships through Village Friends.

“That’s what I like,” Brown said, smiling. “I love to be with people.”

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