

Kudos to Our Volunteers

According to Statistics Canada, every year more than six million Canadians, or one in four adults, volunteer their time and energy to a long list of causes. Many of these wonderful people spend their time bringing a little extra sunshine into the lives of Extendicare residents across Canada.

Our volunteers are business people, retirees and homemakers. They are our associates, friends and neighbours. And they can be recognized by the enormous amount of spirit, patience, warmth and empathy they bring to their relationships with the elderly.

You may have seen their friendly faces in our homes — perhaps talking to a resident in the lounge, teaching someone a craft, pushing a resident's wheelchair down the hall, or helping someone into a vehicle. Perhaps your family member has told you stories about a newly acquired friend.

While nothing can replace family participation, staff and residents have come to depend upon our volunteers' contribution to daily life in nursing homes. Staff are caring, hard-working and efficient, but they cannot do everything or be everything to residents. That's why volunteers — by sharing their interests and skills, and by giving generously of their time — are able to enrich programs such as crafts, cooking, bingo, music appreciation, friendly visiting, musical or theatrical entertainment, events such as outings or parties, or special interest seminars.

Throughout their involvement with Extendicare, volunteers work closely with staff. Many homes produce and distribute manuals to help volunteers understand both their role and Extendicare's role within the partnership. For example, volunteers are cautioned, for their own safety and protection, not to lift residents; to avoid financial and legal involvement with the resident, even if at the resident's request; not to accept costly gifts; to respect the confidentiality of information residents may share with them; and to acknowledge that staff ultimately are responsible for each resident's welfare.

At the same time, volunteers are assured of Extendicare's respect, accessibility and assistance throughout their tenure. And, it goes without saying they certainly have Extendicare's appreciation.

Residents fortunate enough to develop a friendship with these extraordinary people have shown marked improvement in their state of mind and ability to stay connected to the community and world beyond. The simple gift of listening and sharing stories has a powerful ability to build self-confidence. Also, some Extendicare residents don't have family, so their relationships with volunteers and staff are all they've got.

For volunteers, the rewards are tremendous. They may be motivated by a compelling desire to "give something back" to society, a need for human contact after a long day of doing paperwork, or something as simple as the fascination of hearing stories from a person who has lived through a wealth of experiences.

However, much more important than what drives volunteers to seek the adventure of volunteering, is the great extent to which Extendicare staff value volunteers' participation on the care team. We welcome the important contribution our volunteers make to the quality of life of our residents. And we believe our attitude is shared by residents and families.

Volunteer Week is April 23 – 29, 2006