

# RSVP

# NOTES & NEWS

A PUBLICATION OF UNITED WAY OF PORTER COUNTY | SPRING 2021



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# SISTERLY LOVE

Paula Swenson,  
Companionship Volunteer  
By Evelyn Harris, RSVP Director



After 15 years as the Chief Nursing Officer at St. Catherine's Hospital in East Chicago, Paula Swenson retired in January 2020. Not knowing exactly what life would be like after retirement, she set out to find a purpose and began volunteering at SoJourney Truth House, one of our RSVP sites. After volunteering less than one month in their Food Pantry, COVID-19 hit and required everyone to stay home, which put a damper on everyone's volunteer efforts. While sheltering in place, Paula sought God's direction for what to do next with her life.

Fast forward to July, when Ginger Brockwehl, an RSVP volunteer who serves at Porter County Aging and Community Service, reached out to me about her client Cheryl Miller. Ginger thought Cheryl could use the extra support of a RSVP Companionship Volunteer to assist her with errands such as rides to the grocery store, the doctor's office and the pharmacy.

Cheryl is in her 60s, lives alone and has no family support, and she has been legally blind from birth. Cheryl has also suffered from several hardships over the last several years which left her in a state of depression. In April 2018, life was good for Cheryl and her husband Tim, who had just purchased a new home in LaPorte County. Then in May, Tim was diagnosed with a brain tumor—Glioblastoma—and given less than a year to live. With Cheryl's physical challenges, Tim was not only her eyes, but her everything. In April 2019, they lost Butchy, their family pet, and two weeks later, Tim died.

After I notified our volunteers of Cheryl's need for companionship, Paula responded right away. "I went from working 70-80 hours a week to doing nothing; my job was my life. I had not been able to volunteer until I retired. I asked God what is it that He wanted me to do and I saw your email looking for a Companionship Volunteer. I feel that this is what I am supposed to be doing right now."

She was just what Cheryl needed and more. What started out as a volunteer assignment grew into a very special friendship over the past year. The relationship started with occasional phone calls to get Cheryl comfortable with the idea of allowing a complete stranger into her life. Cheryl had been taken advantage of in the past due to her disability and was very hesitant to try and begin again. Paula assured her of her trustworthiness and continued to call and just chat. Soon Cheryl accepted the offer of assistance and the two have been inseparable ever since. Cheryl said, "Eventually, I had a good feeling inside that I could trust her."

In addition to providing rides and running errands, Paula has become the largest part of Cheryl's support system, helping with minor repairs around the house and being her health advocate for her Type II Diabetes medical benefits. Paula also included Cheryl in her family Thanksgiving dinner plans this past year, when she realized that Cheryl was planning to spend the holiday alone. Cheryl accepted and was grateful Paula had asked.

I asked Cheryl how her life has changed since meeting Paula. She responded, "I think Paula's wonderful and I'm glad she's a part of my life. I'm very grateful and thankful and I don't know what I would do without her. She came into my life when life was not worth living. She's just a miracle and definitely one of God's angels for sure. I was in a bad place before she came around, had a lot of people take advantage of me and she just swooped me up making sure things were okay. This world has changed so much, but she gives me hope in humanity. Paula is my Life Alert, so I don't have to buy one!"

When I asked Paula the same question, she answered, "I think Cheryl is pretty amazing. She's had a lot of hard things hit her in a very short period of time and she still perseveres. We're here to try to help each other and I think that she's grown a lot in being independent. She's got such a good heart and each of us can be helpers in our own way. God truly has blessed me that I was able to retire earlier than I had planned. Cheryl has given me purpose."

This friendship was born out of a mutual need for purpose and help. And thankfully, the RSVP program was there with both. Currently, Cheryl is working on downsizing her home and Paula is right there by her side to help her along the way. After the issues with her home are fixed, Cheryl wondered what she'd do next; Paula suggested she become a RSVP volunteer. Cheryl recently requested an RSVP application so she could pay Paula's kindness forward. And so, this assignment has come full circle like many others.

"We each have to give in our own way and each of us gives at different times in our lives," said Paula. "It takes us all doing our part."

That it does. Thank you, Paula, for choosing to do your part and choosing RSVP! You, too, can find purpose with RSVP. If you have room in your heart to positively impact the life of others in your community, join us. Someone is waiting on you.



*Evelyn*

Evelyn Harris,  
AmeriCorps Seniors/RSVP Regional Director

## "Happy spring!

We didn't forget our annual March volunteer appreciation luncheon; due to COVID-19, we're postponing it until warmer weather prevails. We plan to host an outdoor event in the summer or early fall. Volunteers who served in 2020 through June 2021 and submitted a timesheet will receive an invitation!

Thank you to everyone who participated in our survey collection process. The federal government requires us to evaluate program effectiveness annually by surveying all program volunteers, clients and station managers. Your input helps us keep the RSVP program running in Northwest Indiana. Survey distribution began in mid-February and wrapped up at the end of March. All volunteers should have received either a paper or email survey. If you didn't and would still like to fill one out, call me at 219.464.3583 ext.127 or email [evelyn@unitedwaypc.org](mailto:evelyn@unitedwaypc.org)."

## SOCIAL DISTANCING VOLUNTEER ASSIGNMENTS

### Grocery Shopping Volunteer

Shop and deliver groceries to the door of a neighbor, senior, etc. As a safety precaution, the volunteer isn't required to enter any homes. Instead, volunteers will leave the delivery on the porch and notify residents.

### RSVP Volunteer Survey Taker

Volunteer surveys are normally completed every year during the Volunteer Appreciation Banquet to measure the performance of the RSVP program. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to meet this year. We are looking for volunteers who are willing to call members that don't have email to take their survey responses over the phone.

### Inspirational Note Writing Volunteer

Write encouraging notes for food pantry clients to give them hope and let them know that they are not alone. Due to COVID-19, many of them are using food pantry services for the first time.

### RSVP Resource Volunteer

Call members without email to notify them of program updates, news, referrals and more.

### Crafting for Love Volunteers

Sew COVID-19 face masks, hospital gowns and seasonal items such as gloves, hats and scarves. Or recruit volunteers and sewing clubs to help make face masks and hospital gowns to be used by medical professionals, first responders, senior centers and other volunteers as they serve.

### Social Distance Transporter Volunteer

Volunteers who are willing to provide transportation for others to critical medical appointments, pharmacies and grocery stores. Volunteers and clients are provided gloves and masks. To social distance, clients will ride in the passenger-side back seat.

### Meals on Wheels Phone Pal Volunteer

Provide wellness checks and social support to Meals on Wheels clients via phone.

### Companionship Volunteer

Assist individuals in need with grocery deliveries, medication deliveries, rescheduling doctor's appointments, enrolling for mobile meals, connecting to mental health support services or just being a listening ear.

### RSVP Volunteer to Volunteer Calls

Since many members live alone, we're looking for volunteers to place wellness calls to ensure RSVP members are doing well.

### Stress Reduction Support Volunteers

Provides information about ways to help reduce stress and anxiety. Will conduct wellness checks, provide information about depression and stress reduction and refer individuals in need of further assistance to professionals with the help of RSVP staff.

### Computer Buddies

Assist RSVP members with social media (setting up emails, Facebook, shopping online, etc.).



## RSVP ADVISORY GROUP IS RECRUITING!

In order for the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program to effectively serve our members and the people they service across the Region, we need volunteers to join the RSVP Advisory Group to guide our work. Advisory volunteers share their perspective on service and become advocates for our community's most underrepresented members. We meet virtually four times a year (once per quarter). If you are interested and would like more information, call Evelyn at 219.464.3583 ext. 127.



## PEER-TO-PEER WELLNESS CHECKUP PROGRAM

This new volunteer assignment will conduct wellness checkup phone calls for RSVP members. If you live alone or do not receive RSVP emails, we created this assignment just for you! If you're interested in this assignment, call 219.464.3583 x127.

Interested in joining a monthly wellness call? To sign up, call 219.464.3583 x127. We'll assign a RSVP volunteer to you, set an initial call time and provide you with their contact information. After your first contact, then you two can determine a future monthly schedule.



## RSVP SENIORS CONNECT SHOW – NEW!

Do you have a special talent, recipe or workout routine that you'd like to share with your peers? We are looking for you! We've created a new opportunity to keep you actively engaged from the comfort of your own home by sharing virtually. RSVP staff will help interested members with planning and production. If you're interested in hosting a segment, call 219.464.3583 x127 or email [evelyn@unitedwaypc.org](mailto:evelyn@unitedwaypc.org).





“The closest thing to being  
cared for is to care for  
someone else.”

— Carson McCullers



AmeriCorps  
Seniors



**Are you 55+ years and interested in volunteering? Contact  
Evelyn Harris at [evelyn@unitedwaypc.org](mailto:evelyn@unitedwaypc.org) or 219.464.3583 x127.**

The United Way of Porter County fights for the health, education and financial stability of every resident in Porter County. Together with more than 400 community partners, 2,300 donors and 4,000 volunteers, we are uplifting lives across Porter County and Northwest Indiana.

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