Bridging the Gap of Caregiving

By Denise Magee

There has been a lot of talk about generations these days, particularly with the advent of the baby boomers reaching retirement age. The trend today is to define age in generational standards. As Jenny Lyn Bader points out in her New York Times article (In the Eye of the Beholder), “Generations have a natural fluidity - it can be hard to say where one group ends and the next begins.” Whether we fall in the category of the G.I. Generation, (1901-1924); the Silent Generation, (1925-1942); the Baby Boomer Generation, (1946-1964); Generation X, (1961-1981); or beyond, we are all tied together generationally in our need to care for one another.

Today, caregiving has become an intergenerational endeavor that requires the crossover of generations to care for family members, or community members providing outreach to the elderly and youth in crisis. Frequently, grandparents are caring for grandchildren, and adult children are frequently caring for aging parents and teenagers. There is no longer a linear family dynamic that sees a natural progression of generational care from infancy to old age. Fortunately, there are community volunteers who are bridging the gap where family cannot keep up with the high demand of providing cross-generational family care.

In Linn and Benton County, seniors are fortunate to have the Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers of Corvallis and the Volunteer Caregivers in Albany, both nonprofit agencies working towards meeting the needs of seniors. Both agencies provide a plethora of free services for seniors, and Corvallis also serves younger disabled persons. Both agencies refer to the people they serve as Special Friends and services include: friendly visiting, transportation, housekeeping (short term), yard work, grocery and shopping assistance, building wheelchair ramps, minor home repair, fiscal management, and information and referral to senior resources. Each organization is sponsored by a ministry of churches and was established in Albany in 1983 and in Corvallis in 1986.

Linn Benton RSVP partners with Volunteer Caregivers by recruiting and placing volunteers with their agency, and providing referrals from LBvision, an online volunteer center sponsored by RSVP, to both agencies.

Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers of Corvallis

Betty Johnson, the director of Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers (VIC) of Corvallis since 1987, has created a legacy in the world of senior resources through years of hard work and diligence. A career that spans over three decades of developing, coordinating, and implementing senior programs in Linn and Benton County, she has been the driving force behind the Caregivers program. Prior to becoming the director of VIC, she was the director of Senior and Disabled Services since the early 1970s. It was during this time that she was successful in acquiring funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 1984 to fund the Albany Volunteer Caregivers for three years.

She was subsequently approached by the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 1986 to help establish a chore service in Corvallis. Within a year the program grew beyond the scope of this one church and quickly morphed into a coalition of eight churches providing a ministry of volunteer services to seniors over 60 and younger disabled persons. With Betty’s direction at Senior and Disabled Services working in coordination with the state Volunteer Services Office, Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers was born and has been serving the community for over 20 years. In 2006, they celebrated their 20th anniversary with the motto: “Twenty Years of Caring.”

No stranger to volunteer work, Betty was a professional Girl Scout before she married, and as a mother of four children, she served as both a Girl Scout troop leader and Den Mother. Of course, she says that she has volunteered with her church her entire life. “My father was a very civic-minded person and a wonderful example for me.” And it was an example that Betty would take to heart in her career and her volunteer work. While working at Senior Services, she was instrumental in establishing Dial-A-Bus, Senior Meal Services, and initiating the meetings that would bring together a core of professionals who established Hospice in the community.

It is through her continued good works that she leaves an indelible impression on people and the community. She maintains three core principles in her interaction with the people she serves: “respect, relationship building, and dignity of my fellow man.” This gracious woman is retiring after more than 20 years at VIC, and one wonders what project she will take on next. “It’s just not my nature to sit,” she says.
Volunteer Caregivers
In Albany, Suzanne Driver sits at the helm as the director of Volunteer Caregivers. She became involved in the program in 2002 after taking an early retirement and returning to the area to care for her aging parents. She began working part-time as an office assistant for the program and assumed the duties of director two years ago. Serving seniors 55 and over within the boundaries of the Greater Albany Public School District (GAPSD), Volunteer Caregivers works in partnership with a coalition of seven churches. Proud of the internal accomplishments they have made, she states they are building their board of directors, providing outreach of the services they offer, and working on a future goal of expanding transportation to East Linn County.

Suzanne says “I’ve got a passion for this program and I would like to see it do so many things.” This year marks the first year of what they hope will be an annual fundraiser, "Share Your Heart," that took place on Valantines Day. This heartfelt sentiment invited people to make a donation of $10 to have a rose and vase delivered to a senior of their choice. Suzanne says that many of these seniors have no family or spouse and are living on a limited income. Deliveries were made by board members, and the day was a resounding success, resulting in smiles and cheer and increased coffers for the program.

Two Major Needs
Transportation is a key component for both agencies, addressing an ever growing need for seniors or disabled persons with limited income. Currently, the Albany Volunteer Caregivers provides transportation to residents 55 and over, living in the GAPSD, to Portland, Salem, Eugene, Corvallis, and Newport, primarily for medical appointments. Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers of Corvallis also transports seniors and disabled persons to medical appointments in Salem, Eugene, and Portland, serving Corvallis, Philomath, and the surrounding area. Betty Johnson says her program provides a service where the volunteer will actually walk into the clinic with the person, ensuring they get to the right place.

Ramp Building is another commonality shared by both programs, and helping people live independently is a mission goal of both agencies. By providing wheel chair accessibility to individuals in their own homes, it enables them to live independently for as long as they desire. Corvallis VIC currently has 16 builders trained to build ramps and a crew of 5 to 6 volunteers can construct a ramp in approximately 3 to 7 hours. Special Friends are asked to pay for ramps (the only fee-based service), but funding is available through grants provided by Legend Homes and OSU Folk Club Thrift Shop. In 2007, they built 51 wheel chair ramps doubling the number from the previous year. The Volunteer Caregivers in Albany built approximately 9 wheelchair ramps, and completed over 117 home repair projects.

Bridging the Gap
Transitions and changes are a natural flow of life, and successful caregiving is rooted in flexible and alternate choices. It can take the form of intergenerational care, or support from community resources like the Volunteer Interfaith Caregivers of Corvallis (541-757-0980) and the Volunteer Caregivers of Albany (541-928-2173). These two agencies provide a bridge for families struggling to meet the needs of their loved ones, and, in providing this service, these agencies meet a human need that is universal.