

Driven to volunteer

Vineyard Village at Home calls for more volunteer drivers for Island seniors.

By **Stacey Rupolo** - August 16, 2017

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Vineyard Village at Home volunteer Mike Adell walks Marie Louise "Loulette" Jordi to the car after a memory cafe event at Featherstone. — Stacey Rupolo

Ask any Vineyard Village at Home volunteer what the best part of their duty is, and they all tend to say the same thing: the amazing people they get to meet.

While driving seniors to and fro for Vineyard Village, one may pick up a former photosynthetic geneticist who just finished his second novel. Or perhaps someone who lived through Germany's occupation of France. Maybe your passenger for the day is a friend in waiting. Or a woman who fled Lithuania to escape the Nazis.

Vineyard Village at Home has made its mission to keep the elderly and aging population of Martha's Vineyard in their homes and as independent as possible, for as long as possible. They do this through a rideshare program that pairs volunteers with seniors in need.

Shifts can be short, are arranged with flexibility in mind to fit the needs of members and volunteers. The majority of volunteer shifts involve picking up a member at her home and dropping her off somewhere, such as a doctor's appointment, bridge lessons, or a friend's house. Volunteers may go grocery shopping or run light errands during their trip. Occasionally, some volunteers do some housekeeping, will read to members, or simply sit with them at home during a shift.

Since the program was launched by Polly Brown in 2007, the program has expanded to more than 70 volunteers and 50 members. They give about 90 rides a week.

"It was slow to get started, and as you know, New Englanders don't ask for help until they're desperate," Ms. Brown said.

Vineyard Village has been successful keeping members social, healthy, and in their homes, but, according to program director Lynn Orlando and Ms. Brown, more volunteer drivers are needed to assist a growing segment of the Vineyard's population in order to keep them in their homes.

“As more and more people have used our services they’ve told more of their friends. We have more requests than we have available drivers at the moment,” Ms. Brown said.

“The demand is challenging,” Ms. Orlando said. “The more popular that Vineyard Village becomes through word of mouth, there’s more members looking to do more things, too. It’s a good thing, though. We’d rather see everybody out and about. Many members have said their social life is what it is because they’re able to get out and get to appointments. We keep members in their homes for as long as it’s possible to keep them there. The more active members are doing the best because they can get out and visit with others, which contributes to their well-being.”

Marilyn Wortman decided to become a volunteer two years ago, after retiring and finding too much time on her hands. “I got involved because I love to pay ahead,” she said. “Some day, someone will be driving me. This is so needed since we don’t offer assisted living on the Island.”

Ms. Wortman works regularly with two members, but she likes to pick up extra shifts when she can. “I’ve just met the nicest people ever,” she said. “The ones I drive regularly I get so fond of. There’s one woman, she’s a sweetheart. She can tell me all kinds of stories. Physically she’s on a walker, but mentally she’s sharp as a tack.”

Ms. Wortman was happy to find a way to fill extra time in her day, but has stuck with her shifts because she developed lasting bonds with people. “This one woman called to check in on me after I got knee surgery,” she said.

Aline Skoog of Tisbury joined for similar reasons. “When I retired, everybody said what are you going to do, you’re going to be so bored, your brain is going to turn to mush,” she said. Ms. Skoog ignored the peanut gallery and signed up for shifts at Vineyard Village at Home.

“I think the real advantage of this is, if you want to volunteer you can pick how much time you want to put into it,” Ms. Skoog said. “There’s no pressure on you to do more than that. Generally, I end up doing one a day, but if the need comes up and they desperately need somebody I’ll do it, which is good because you get out of a rut and meet somebody new.”

Companionship is usually an unintended side effect of many volunteers’ experiences. Ms. Skoog finds joy during the week sitting with a particular member who lived in the Middle East, near where she lived for many years. “Having lived there, it’s hard to find someone who understands,” she said. During her shifts she will sit and read to him and talk about their shared experiences.

“There are so many people who have lived on this Island their whole lives, and they’re such a pleasure to drive with,” Ms. Skoog said. “I’ve learned so much from them, and I truly truly enjoy their company. They’re such a delight.”

Michael Adell has been volunteering for Vineyard Village at Home for over six years, nearly as long as he has lived on the Vineyard. Volunteering has always been a big part of Mr. Adell’s life, so he was eager and excited to offer his time to Vineyard Village at Home when he learned about the service.

“It’s a really delicate situation here on the Island, since public transportation isn’t like a major city and there are long walks in between spots,” Mr. Adell said.

“It’s been rewarding, certainly,” he said. “It goes well beyond that, though. It’s much more than doing a nice thing for somebody. I really do get a lot of benefit from it, and it’s obvious you’re giving a lot of benefit to the client. But you do need to make a commitment. It’s not just signing up, it’s also participating on some level.”

Vineyard Village at Home accepts volunteers on a rolling basis, and accepts year-rounders and part-time residents as well. “We do need more people, especially people in the Edgartown and Chilmark area,” Ms. Wortman said. “[And when] the winter rolls around, the need is still there.”

Volunteers must have their own form of transportation, but if you have something to offer besides a ride, there may be a senior who needs that service.

“It’s all paid forward — there’ll certainly come a time for me,” Mr. Adell said.

For more information about Vineyard Village at Home visit vineyardvillage.org.