

I'M PROUD TO BE A VOLUNTEER OMBUDSMAN

I read an article in The Press about training to become a volunteer ombudsman. After reading about the ombudsman program I was compelled to enroll and become an advocate for residents of long-term care facilities. The elders in my own personal life were the greatest advocates for me during my growing up years so why not reverse the trend and give back to them?

I signed up for the 7 week course taught by Jan Noyes, the Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA) responsible for training and monitoring the volunteer ombudsman. Jan helped us navigate elder issues we'd be dealing with as volunteers. I was excited about learning how to make a positive difference in the daily lives of residents of assisted-living and skilled-nursing facilities. Could I commit a certain number of hours a month to the program? You bet I could! Could I educate residents about their rights and help them solve issues concerning their quality of life and care? Yes, again.

It was very intensive learning that gave us critical knowledge about the aging process, types of facilities and levels of care, investigation, problem-solving, ethical and legal problems and much more. This is all very important information for ombudsmen and also for those of us exploring our own future health care options.

After graduating from this program, I was assigned to a facility with another volunteer ombudsman. Having a buddy to work with really is beneficial because we bounce our experiences off each other without breaking the bonds of confidentiality. We learn from each other and become more effective at what we do.

As to the residents—they are all so individually unique. I really look forward to interacting with them. Somehow they have wrapped their heartstrings around me like hoops of steel. They tell me all about themselves, what they used to do before retirement, and what they like to do now. They tell me about their families and friends and connections to the rest of the community.

Their sense of humor is acute. When they throw me a wise saying or wisecrack, I always look for the corners of their mouths to turn up when they know they got the best of me. However, there are moments when they turn very serious and express frustration about an issue related to the care they are paying for and not getting.

So as an ombudsman, I listen to their concerns and help bring to light possible solutions. I work with the residents, the facility, Jan Noyes and Jan Young, the Regional Ombudsman for the Elderly. We work to resolve residents' issues in confidentiality and without the threat of retaliation for exposing weaknesses in the health care system.

We all know it's not a perfect world. But, by golly, we can make it a better world for those who have given and sacrificed so much for younger generations. The residents need to know that there is someone in their corner who will listen attentively and go to bat for them when they need it. They are only too aware of how vulnerable they are and how dependent on others to maintain the quality of their dignity, life and care.

If you are interested in learning more about the volunteer ombudsman program and training, contact Jan Noyes at the Area Agency on Aging in Coeur d'Alene, 208-667-3179 or jnoyes@aaani.org.

By Dian Koefod, July, 2009