How volunteering to help others can make you healthier, happier

By Jane Peterson
For MediaNews Group

Improving the quality of life for older adults is important to Jonathan Beaulac, D.O., FACOI, director of Geriatric and Palliative Medicine at Henry Ford Macomb Hospital. He says it is essential to protect physical well-being and brain health through preventative activities that keep the mind sharp and body active.

Volunteering to help others does just that.

Studies show, said Beaulac, that patients are more likely to report being happier, less stressed and feel healthier when they stay active and engage with others on a regular basis.

"Bodies in motion stay in motion," he said.

Studies also demonstrate that people with a higher sense of purpose in their lives, such as the satisfaction that comes from volunteering, enjoy health benefits like reducing risk of hypertension, delaying physical disability and boosting cognitive function.

At age 75, Tom Thompson shows no signs of slowing down. The Harrison Township resident has volunteered with Habitat for Humanity for 30 years, helping to build nearly 400 homes in southeastern Michigan and nine states. His journey with the organization began after a 1990 TV interview with Jimmy Carter captured his interest. He has assisted with new builds and rehab projects as well as disaster response, traveling to Joplin, Mo. and Henryville, Ind. after tornadoes ripped through the communities.

Why has he committed so much of his time to these volunteer efforts? Because, he said, it feels good to play a role in changing the life of a family forever.

"You feel like you are making a difference," he said.

Many Habitat volunteers are retired residents who just can't sit at home, said Dave Tirsell, Faith & Volunteer Relations manager with Macomb County Habitat for Humanity.

"They want to add something to their schedule that is meaningful," he said. "Our volunteers are interacting with others and being a part of something bigger than they are."

That, he said, can help boost spirits and improve mental health. Volunteers are always doing something different, so there is variety in their tasks and opportunities to interact with people of all ages while participating in valuable service to their community.

Lighthouse of Oakland County responds to poverty in local communities and offers a beacon of hope for those in need. Volunteer opportunities include packing emergency food boxes, sorting and packing food, yard clean-up, loading food boxes, driving, tutoring, providing childcare and more.

"My favorite quote is 'The gift is in the giving.' I think that says it all. I know from personal experience, as volunteering many years ago changed the direction of my life for the better," said Marci Fitch, director of Lighthouse of Oakland County.

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Volunteer and Community Engagement for Lighthouse. She explained that she was going through a hard time personally and was searching for a deeper meaning to her life when she attended a volunteer event. She continued to volunteer each month because it filled her with meaning and joy.

"I ended up making a career in volunteer management. It was a life-changer for me. I think no matter what your reason for volunteering, you will walk away with a smile on your face, knowing you gave a gift from your heart in helping others," she said.

Volunteering during a pandemic

When the COVID-19 crisis emerged last spring, the nature of volunteering changed almost overnight. In the interest of safety, some organizations paused their volunteer programs while others engaged in essential services like delivering meals to those in need were directed to remain socially distanced and wear personal protective equipment (PPE) like face masks. "COVID-19 definitely made us think 'outside the box,'" said Fitch. "We were challenged with how we can meet more needs in our community while ensuring safety to our staff, volunteers and visitors. It really brought our whole team together from different departments to strategize and work together for solutions."

Before COVID-19, the Lighthouse Emergency Shelter program maintained 30-35 shelter beds for men, women and children through partnerships with more than 60 congregations. Today, shelter capacity has increased and the program houses more than 109 clients in area hotels, providing meals and case management. Its food pantries in Clarkston and Pontiac once served 200 families a month, but now serve more than 4,000 per week with emergency food boxes. In addition, the organization was able to provide 2,300 Thanksgiving food boxes, compared to 1,500 in 2019, and provide close to 400 families with Christmas presents through the Adopt a Family Program, she said.

When construction activity came to a grinding halt, Thompson went from working on homes to staying at home. Once restrictions were lifted, he immediately was a part of smaller crews who continued their important work throughout Oakland and Macomb counties.

Volunteer opportunities in 2021

There is an unprecedented need in local communities, said Beaulac. As small businesses struggle and people deal with unemployment, community centers, churches, food pantries and other organizations need assistance now more than ever. While there is no one-size-fits-all way to safely volunteer during a pandemic, outdoor options are a good choice, providing opportunities for human interaction without being in close quarters.

Being outdoors is where Thompson loves to be. Selected Volunteer of the Year with Macomb County Habitat, he brings a wealth of building experience to every project. He also is instrumental in teaching younger volunteers new skills and sharing ways to make home design more comfortable for families.

In addition to construction, Macomb County Habitat for Humanity has other volunteer positions, like working to sort, prepare displays and interact with customers at its home goods ReStore retail resale shops in Shelby Township and Warren. Great care is taken with PPE and limiting the number of customers in the store at one time, said Tinsell.