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The Shepherd's Center of Richmond: Opportunities for Meaning and Personal Growth through Service

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Shepherd's Center of Richmond

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Virginia Center on Aging
Virginia Geriatric Education Center
Virginia Department for the Aging

Case Study

The Shepherd's Center of Richmond: Opportunities for Meaning and Personal Growth through Service

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Educational Objectives

1. To inform Virginians about The Shepherd's Center of Richmond, a non-profit service organization by, with, and for older adults.
2. To demonstrate the impact of volunteer service as a means to finding a sense of meaning and purpose in later life.

Background

The Shepherd's Center concept arose organically, driven by the needs of one aging community. In 1971, Elbert Cole, the minister of a large church in Kansas City, Missouri, recognized that

his congregation was aging and sought ways to address the changing needs of his members. His first inclination was to build a nursing home, but on the advice of the seniors themselves, he changed his approach. What developed was The Shepherd's Center, an interfaith, non-profit organization with the mission to empower older adults to use their wisdom and skills for the good of their communities. The members, all over 50 years of age, organized committees to assess the needs of their fellow seniors and to devise ways to meet those needs. Home delivered meals, handy-man services, friendly visits, and transportation to medical appointments were among the first services offered to seniors by seniors at the Kansas City Shepherd's Center. An educational component of the program soon became a popular enrichment activity. Today, there are 75 Shepherd's Centers in 21 states serving tens of

thousands of older adults, including three sites in Northern and Central Virginia.

When seniors themselves respond to the needs of other seniors, the results are far greater than mere quantitative measures of meals served or rides given. Shepherd's Center activities offer a means for tremendous personal satisfaction and growth for the volunteers who provide these crucial services. Through "giving back" in ways that fill genuine and urgent needs, volunteers realize a profound sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. This is what makes Shepherd's Centers unique.

Numerous authorities on aging (e.g., Erikson, 1963; Schulz 1986; Moody, 1997) have concluded that the search for personal meaning and integrity is a crucial part of our spirituality as we age, and is a source of great satisfaction and personal growth.

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Rowe and Kahn (1995), in their now famous study, define successful aging as “the ability to maintain three key behaviors or characteristics: (1) low risk of disease and disease-related disability (2) high mental and physical functions (3) active engagement with life.” However, Wong (2000) argues their definition fails to consider the possibility and potential of “success” when we have become frail or ill. He stresses that it is not merely health and productivity that mark successful aging, but also engagement in the activities that provide meaning and sense of purpose in later life. These activities are vital to our mental and physical health as we age.

The Shepherd’s Center of Richmond

The Shepherd’s Center of Richmond, begun by Robert Seiler and incorporated in 1984 following the Kansas City model, is dedicated to enriching the lives of older people and enabling them to continue to live meaningful lives. It precisely addresses the crucial needs of purpose and meaning. Most interestingly, it does so through simultaneously addressing the problems of inadequate transportation, isolation, and the need for socialization and intellectual stimulation. The Shepherd’s Center of Richmond is a completely volunteer-operated organization of senior volunteers

helping other seniors in the community.

Personal Services

More than one in five adults 65 years of age and over does not drive. Transportation is recognized as one of the most crucial, under-addressed needs for older adults. Transportation to grocery stores and to medical and dental appointments is essential. When caring volunteers address needs such as transportation, minor home repair, and bill paying, it becomes increasingly possible to minimize feelings of dependence and isolation. No one lives “independently”; we are *interdependent* throughout our lives. For both providers and recipients of Shepherd’s Center services, the sense of this vital interdependence creates opportunities for satisfaction and growth.

The Shepherd’s Center of Richmond provides services to seniors in the community who, for whatever reasons, cannot provide those services for themselves. Included services are transportation to medical, dental, grocery shopping, and other essential appointments; friendly telephone calls or visits; help with tax, insurance, medical, financial and similar forms; and minor home repairs. These services are available to anyone in the community who is age 60 or over, and who is in need. It is not necessary to be a Shepherd’s

Center member to receive services. A client who needs services may call the office and speak with an office volunteer who will match the client with a volunteer driver who lives near the client. The Shepherd’s Center service area is defined by zip codes within which there are sufficient numbers of volunteers to provide service.

Last year, 88 volunteer drivers, using their own cars, filled 1,853 round-trip ride requests. Drivers almost always stay with the client in the doctor’s office, and often stop with the client at a pharmacy on the way home to fill a prescription. In several cases, a client was admitted to the hospital, and the volunteer stayed, as one would with family, until the person was ready to return home. The personal satisfaction derived from regularly providing transportation to clients who could not otherwise make the trip is tremendous. One volunteer driver insists on using the word “friends” rather than “clients.” This driver has routinely taken people to medical appointments and grocery shopping for more than 15 years. Moreover, volunteers made over 1,400 friendly visits or calls and over 50 minor home repairs last year in response to requests.

Education and Socialization

The Center’s Open University provides opportunities for

intellectual stimulation and socialization. Classes are held at churches in three areas of Richmond. Eight-week terms in the fall, winter, and spring feature well-qualified lecturers or instructors, many of whom are faculty or retired faculty members of area colleges and universities. All instructors volunteer their time. Programs at the three sites differ. Members may attend classes at any location at any time for a single \$25 per-term tuition. Open University courses may include foreign languages, literature, history, political science, art, music, religious studies, philosophy, science, writing, estate planning, bridge, yoga, Feldenkrais, health subjects, and travel (including a weekly illustrated travelogue at each site). A bring-your-own-lunch is followed by a noon presentation. Recent presenters have included authors Melvin Patrick Ely and Kenneth Alford, Glen Winters of the Virginia Opera, and Ralph White of the James River Park System.

Each term averages some 340 registrants, all age 50 or over, and more than 70 people volunteer their time as teachers, hospitality workers, and organizers. The volunteers of the Shepherd's Center Education Committee are completely responsible for planning and carrying out the myriad details of each term. Many seniors have attended the Open University for

more than 10 years, citing the friendships and the continued learning as keeping them happy and eager to return each year.

Volunteer Leadership

Shepherd's Centers are special in their capacity to engage volunteers in leadership roles. The Richmond center employs only three people: the executive director, an administrative assistant, and a part-time volunteer coordinator. Some 400 volunteers carry out all other work, giving more than 20,000 hours of service annually. This work ranges from teaching or direct personal service to organizational planning, committee work, and board leadership. Individual volunteers maintain the Shepherd's Center web site and database, prepare mailings, and make public presentations about Shepherd's Center opportunities. While it is not uncommon to find older adults giving their time to service organizations like *Meals on Wheels*, it is unusual for an organization to be almost entirely comprised of older adults.

Case Studies

1. Dr. F., a gentleman of 75 who had been dean of a mid-western university, came to the Shepherd's Center looking for something to do to keep himself occupied after his wife passed away. He began attending the Open University, where he met a

number of other men with whom he enjoyed the history classes. Hearing a request for drivers in the north side of town, he volunteered to drive once a week, quickly becoming well known for his willingness to respond on short notice and in difficult circumstances. He continued as a driver until he was in his eighties, when his health suddenly deteriorated. During his tenure with the Center as a driver, he had driven more than 370 times. Upon this "retirement," Dr. F. sent a letter to the office, saying that this had been one of the most meaningful and fulfilling experiences of his life. No longer able to volunteer as a driver, he became a friendly caller/visitor, for he had developed friendships with several retired men who came to rely on the reassurance of his regular presence in their lives.

2. Mrs. D., 78 years old with macular degeneration and in need of memory support, contacted The Shepherd's Center when neither her daughter nor anyone else was able to take her to a medical appointment. She spoke with an office volunteer who matched her with a volunteer driver. The office volunteer called Mrs. D. to tell her who her driver would be and the driver called to introduce himself, letting her know that he would be taking her. Anxious, Mrs. D. called the office several times during the week, concerned that her driver would not

know where she lived. Office staff responded kindly to each call. On the morning of the appointment, the driver called to reassure her that he was on his way. The driver stayed with Mrs. D. at the doctor's office and stopped at a pharmacy on the return trip to get her prescription filled. Several days later, the office received a small donation and a note from Mrs. D., saying that the driver had been courteous and helpful and that she was very grateful for what The Shepherd's Center had done for her. The driver reported that she had been delightful, and that he would happily drive for her whenever the need arose.

Summary

Few of us hope for a retirement that is merely busy, as full of tasks, deadlines, and bustle as they ever were when we were working. For many of us, the retirement years offer both the opportunity to focus on our own sense of purpose and meaning, and time to pursue activities that allow us to express that purpose. Whether in the healthcare, government, or non-profit setting, issues of esteem, purpose and meaning so central to later life often remain neglected; for aging-related public and private efforts tend to focus on providing essential services that are desperately needed. These may include programs for socialization, physical activity, mental stimulation, or a variety of other

needs. However, the majority of these programs are, by definition, recipient-oriented. Services or activities are delivered to those who participate in programs. The Shepherd's Center does this and more, focusing on both giver and receiver.

Those who are new to the Shepherd's Center often ask, "What do people get for their \$25 membership dues?" The standard response is that they will get a discount on Open University tuition and a discount on wonderful travel opportunities. It may take a little time for new members to appreciate fully how much more they receive. Through their participation in The Shepherd's Center, whether as a donor, an Open University student, a volunteer, or as a recipient of service, they will grow to feel that they personally participate in, and contribute to, an enriching and vitally important organization. There is a great sense of camaraderie, of purpose, and of meaning in being part of an organization that touches one's own life and the lives of thousands of people in Richmond each day.

Study Questions

1. How does volunteer service help to generate a sense of purpose and meaning?
2. How can churches, civic organizations, and senior service

organizations implement programs that will encourage older adults to share their time, talent and wisdom?

About the Author



Linda Frank is the Executive Director of The Shepherd's Center of Richmond. She holds degrees in both Psychology and Education from Virginia Commonwealth University. In addition to her full-time position with the Shepherd's Center, she contributes more than 15 hours of volunteer time each week to her religious organization.

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