

Volunteering And Neighborhood Falmouth

By FRANK KAUFFMANN Jan 5, 2018

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My mother drove her own car until she was 90. By then, in a concession to her advancing years, she had stopped driving to Boston to visit her two daughters, limiting her travels to Falmouth from her home at Old Silver Beach. She relished her independence and the mobility that allowed her to continue her volunteer work at Falmouth Hospital, the Carriage House and Falmouth Service Center.

She probably would have stayed behind the wheel longer, had her 20-year-old car not died one afternoon on Quaker Road, only a couple of miles from home. She grudgingly agreed with her four children not to buy another vehicle, ending her driving career forever.

My mother, Evelyn Kauffmann, passed away two years later—on April 7, 2009—just a week after Neighborhood Falmouth began operating and started its work helping Falmouth seniors—people just like her—age in place.

Over the years, Neighborhood Falmouth has provided 15,000 “services” to hundreds of 50-plus Falmouth residents, helping them lead connected, confident and independent lives. Today, it continues to serve as a valuable resource for seniors, relying on volunteers to help with activities like driving people to the supermarket, to medical appointments and social and cultural events, helping with occasional household chores or just providing companionship and conversation.

My mother would have loved Neighborhood Falmouth and the independence and peace of mind it would have given her. Instead, in the last years of her life, she had to cobble together a network of friends, family and pricey cab rides to take her the seven miles to town to shop, volunteer or see her doctor.

She is the reason I volunteer.

I like to think that by helping people, I’m honoring her. The truth—and I’m sure other Neighborhood Falmouth volunteers would say the same thing—is that I get as much, if not more, out of the experience as the folks I’m helping.

Consider what I would have missed had I not joined Neighborhood Falmouth’s corps of 90-plus active volunteers a couple of years ago. The fascinating people I never would have met—people like the CEO of an iconic American shoe company that bears his name; the woman I drove to Saturday morning seminars where she and other scientists would gather to engage in lively conversation; and the East Falmouth widow of a World War II veteran who fought at Normandy and whose story Tom Brokaw told in his book, “The Greatest Generation.”

Giving, it turns out, makes us happier than receiving.

“In fact,” a writer for Time magazine once astutely observed, “it can create a feedback loop of happiness in your life. Volunteering makes us happier and can therefore be the most selfless way to be selfish. Helping others reach their goals brings joy. Doing nice things for others today can literally make you happier for the rest of the week.”

Volunteering can also make you healthier—reason enough to give up some time for pro bono activities. There are studies to prove it. Research cited by the Corporation for National & Community Service showed that those who volunteer “have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer.”

A report by VolunteerMatch offers more proof:

- More than 68 percent of those who volunteered in the past year say volunteering made them feel physically healthier;
- 89 percent of volunteers agree that it improved their sense of well-being;
- 73 percent feel it lowered their stress levels; and
- 92 percent agree that volunteering enriches their sense of purpose in life.

Like so many others, I volunteer because I believe it’s good to give some of my time to help my Falmouth neighbors. I’m not sure I’m healthier or will live longer because I volunteer. I do know that volunteering has given me more than I have given.

If that isn't enough, I've been touched by the appreciation volunteers get from members and their families, like the note a woman sent after her mother died. "You may have only met my mom a couple of times or maybe once," she wrote, "but she so loved her Neighborhood Falmouth friends."

"Thank you," she said, "for helping others live a life of dignity."

Frank Kauffmann is a seasonal Neighborhood Falmouth volunteer. Neighborhood Falmouth is a local membership organization whose mission is to provide information and services so that Falmouth seniors can live safely and comfortably in their own homes for as long as possible. To serve as many members as possible, Neighborhood Falmouth is seeking additional volunteers. For more information, call 508-564-7543.