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A publication of

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# THE GOOD LIFE

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## How Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteers Support Residents

By Janis Merrell, Editor of *The Good Life*



**Christopher Shepard (left), Mark Niemela (middle), and Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteer Linda Ackerman (right) at RegalCare.**

Linda Ackerman, a Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteer for the last 9 years, said she chose to introduce me to Christopher Shepard and Mark Niemela because they are “such fun.”

Chris, 80, and Mark, 69, both enjoy chatting and share a love of music, which makes them excellent roommates at RegalCare, a long-term care facility in Greenfield.

Ombudsman volunteers support residents in long-term care facilities and help them to resolve concerns regarding quality of life and quality of care. Linda, who has worked for Greenfield Savings Bank for almost 32 years out of the Turners Falls office, says she is very fortunate that Greenfield Savings Bank views community involvement as a cornerstone of the bank. Her weekly visits are within her working day. She is also a life-long resident of Montague where she raised 3 “awesome” daughters.

Linda’s mom was in Buckley Long-Term Care Facility, before the facility became RegalCare. Linda says, “I did this the year that I lost both my mom and dad. I went for the training because I needed to feel worthwhile . . . these guys are just part of the facility here, and you know, everybody is different, they bring their own joy to me by my calling on them. It gives me a sense of purpose, a sense of giving back.”

When I ask Chris and Mark what their experience is like working with Linda, Mark says it’s “totally natural” and Chris agrees.

Chris, a former teacher at Northfield Mount Hermon, tells me, “My parents lived to 88 and 89. So I was always looking out for them. And even though I can’t stand or walk, I still look out for people.” He then shares a funny story about a music director who almost fell off the stage during a concert, until Chris shouted a warning. Chris and Mark now look out for each other.

I ask about when they first met and Chris says, “We found out pretty quickly that we both liked music.” Mark responds with, “Obviously, we’re both yappers. [Then we asked each other] so what do you do? What did you do with your life? You know, and I was a musician. And Chris was a Spanish language teacher and ESL teacher. But then we talked about activities. He talked about his love of choral singing. And then I branched out into my long history of being a chorus member, too.” Mark plays three instruments: viola, violin, and piano, and Chris plays guitar. Chris is a fan of the Kingston Trio and James Taylor and Mark enjoys jazz music, mentioning Keith Jarrett as an especial favorite.

Humor is another factor that makes Mark and Chris excellent roommates. “We laugh together. It’s great,” explains Mark. They also enjoy discussing their travels, Mark mentioning trips to Finland and France, and Chris describing time spent in Spain, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.

When I ask Pam Porter, a Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteer for Charlene Manor Extended Care Facility in Greenfield, what made her interested in becoming an Ombudsman, she explains, “I was a Home Care Program

Director for five years at LifePath and then I retired. So I knew something about nursing homes and elder care. When the pandemic was going on, I thought, well, that is something I could do. I could learn to be an Ombudsman. And I just felt it was one way of having somebody in the nursing home in a time when not very many people were allowed inside. In the beginning, I wasn’t allowed in, and I had to do it by Zoom meetings. It was kind of rough, but at least there was an opportunity to start to get to know people.”

Pam introduced me to Donna Thomas, 80, who has been a resident at Charlene Manor for 6 years, and Resident Council President since February. The Resident Council President is a resident within the facility with whom other residents can speak to about concerns or complaints. Resident councils are generally facilitated by Activity Department Staff and meet regularly. Long-term care facility administration may not participate in meetings without an invite from the residents. The minutes from the resident council meetings are brought to the attention of the administration. The Resident Council President may invite the Ombudsman to participate in the meetings. Resident council presidents can provide additional insight into the issues faced by residents. Donna says “I’m the only one that was willing to take it on and have the ability to.”

Donna’s room is cheerful, filled with stuffed animals she calls her “critters.” She tells me she has experience working as a caregiver, beginning at a nursing home in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, before transitioning to private pay home health aide work, which was what she did for 90% of her career. She lived in Georgia for 20 years, and then moved back to the area in 2017 and lived with her son (she also has a daughter in Georgia and 5 grandchildren), until a medical incident led her to move to Charlene Manor.

Donna says, “If a resident had a problem, I would see to it because it would be nice to be able to help somebody.” She also mentions that she enjoys working with the members of the Activities Department, who support her in her role.

Pam remembers speaking to her brother-in-law, who resided at Charlene Manor, through a door during the pandemic, as she couldn’t enter during pandemic restrictions. “I guess it was helping him that got me really thinking about how [the pandemic was a] hard time to be in a nursing home,” says Pam. When I ask what this work does for her, she replies, “I get to meet a lot of really interesting people and I learn from them. I learned about what it takes to age and stand up for yourself as you do. And, you know, how people have to learn how to navigate—

you don’t always have a choice about whether you are in a nursing home, right? Most people wouldn’t choose it. Right? Right. You have to learn how to make friends and get along with people and stand up for yourself. I learn about all of that when I come to visit, plus I just have a chance to hear wonderful stories about people’s lives. And I have an opportunity to help out often in very simple ways.”

Ombudsman volunteers, like Linda and Pam, are caring, compassionate people who are trained and certified by the state of Massachusetts. Join in advocating for quality of care and quality of life for those living in nursing homes and rest homes. To apply to be a volunteer, visit [www.lifepathma.org](http://www.lifepathma.org) and click on “Support Our Mission,” or call 413-773-5555.

*The residents in this article have given their permission to be photographed and their words used.*



**Long-Term Care Ombudsman Volunteer Pam Porter (left) with Resident Council President Donna Thomas (right) at Charlene Manor.**