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THE GOOD LIFE

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A Lifetime of Hope and Service

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Recently I read a quote by the esteemed Bryan Stevenson in Alabama who said, “*Hope is not a feeling but an attitude of the spirit.*” My interview last month at the Greenfield Public Library with a longtime LifePath volunteer brought me into close contact with someone who has lived a life built on hope and service. Nancy Willis describes herself as someone who “has done alright.” At 85 years old, Nancy has seen a lot, experienced a lot, and contributed a lot to both the Colrain and Greenfield communities where she has spent her life. She has also volunteered with LifePath for the past 13 years.

Nancy grew up in Colrain, MA near Kendall Mills Factory, which produced cotton balls and gauze pads. Her mom worked the 6 a.m.-2 p.m. shift and her grandmother worked the 2 p.m.-10 p.m. shift. Because of their schedules, Nancy and her two siblings, who lived in their home down the road from the factory in Lyonsville, were covered with the love, care, and security that was needed. Her mother or her grandmother were home at all times. Nancy was the middle child and the one that, as she describes, “would always get along.”

Nancy worked at Kendall Mills from 1958-1962. Then her fiancé got out of the military and they married. They had four children. In 1971, Nancy went back to work and became a city-paid employee as a school crossing guard. Then she took on a job at Kennametal Tap & Dye Corporation where she worked for ten years. Her work life encompassed joining the union and becoming a “tool grinder” followed by a change to the “order chaser” position. With her steady effectiveness, Nancy applied for and secured an accounts payable position. Nancy shared, “I liked being on the floor and I was pretty good at it. But when they offered me an office job, I took it because the factory work on the floor included a lot of heavy tools. It was getting harder to do.”

Another opportunity presented itself, and in 1993 Nancy went to work in the Franklin County Courthouse where she stayed until 2003. She worked in the Probate and Family Court Division and she described her job as, “Keeper of Paper.” Nancy worked at the front counter and said it worked out well because “I’m the type of person that doesn’t mind helping someone.” She was exposed to a lot of the tougher side of life as people came in with issues related to divorces, child support, wills, and restraining orders.

Nancy’s life was full at work, at home, and in her Greenfield and Colrain communities.

Nancy decided to retire at age 64 to help her sister care for their mother who was still living in Colrain and having health challenges. Nancy would take her grocery shopping on Saturdays. Changes kept happening and eventually her mother passed. Nancy’s grandmother passed away in 1973. Both Nancy’s mother and grandmother were pivotal, powerful women in her life who impacted Nancy in ways that have held true until this day. Her life has been guided by a code



Nancy Willis (left), LifePath Volunteer for the past 13 years, with Susan White (right), MPH, Lic. CHW, Director of Community & Volunteer Resources at LifePath.

of ethics that they instilled in her about how to approach work, family, life, and helping others. These lessons included: *always keep going; have hope in the opportunities before you; take care of your children; participate in your community; and, help others who aren’t as fortunate as you.*

This code for living also includes having fun. For many years on Saturday nights, Nancy and her husband would go to the Greenfield Moose Club down the street and dance the night away. They made friends and got engaged with local Greenfield community activities like the Annual Greenfield St. Patrick’s meal. She was always focused on helping out neighbors and other people who may

be in need. Nancy shared, “I don’t need anything. I like to help out. I’m not rich but I can take care of things. And now many years later, I have 9 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren. My house is open.”

“*I have enjoyed so much helping and meeting so many seniors. It keeps the body and the mind working.*”
- Nancy Willis, LifePath Volunteer (13 years)

At the recommendation of a friend, Nancy learned about the availability of fuel assistance support. Through the Shelburne Senior Center, Nancy applied to get her mother assistance to pay fuel bills. Nancy shared, “I had no idea I could get help for my mother in this way.” It was a huge support as Nancy navigated the complexities of her mother’s end-of-life period. In July 2011, Nancy’s mother passed away. Soon afterwards, Nancy noticed an advertisement that Franklin County Home Care, which later became LifePath, was looking for volunteers to help with fuel assistance applications. Nancy became a volunteer helping older adults submit applications. She kept doing it for many years because it made a difference to people. Because of her experience with her mother, Nancy eased people’s fears about dying in the cold due to a lack of available personal income.

Nancy said, “I enjoyed people and they depended on me. I was good at helping people get over the shame of being on fuel assistance. I think I was good at it because I had the patience, the time, and people trusted me. They knew I didn’t look down on them and I didn’t pity them. I just helped out and it made things easier.”

Nancy kept volunteering with LifePath for 13 years. Nancy said, “The appreciation people show you for helping them makes every hour you spend volunteering worthwhile. I liked volunteering at LifePath.” Nancy closed our time together saying, “*I have enjoyed so much helping and meeting so many seniors. It keeps the body and the mind working.*” In celebration of National Volunteer Appreciation Week (April 20-26), LifePath celebrates Nancy Willis and her years of dedicated service helping those in need in Franklin County.