



Retired Senior Volunteer Julia Williams is friend and companion to patients in a downtown Montgomery, Ala., nursing home. Ms. Williams is also active in the nursing home's division for the mentally retarded.

Older Americans, VISTA Volunteers Brighten Holidays For Fellow Americans

It is friendship to a lonely hospital resident. It is helping a handicapped child experience the holiday spirit. It is making sure yule fires will have wood to keep families warm. In these and other ways, nearly 300,000 Americans — volunteers in VISTA and Older American Programs — are giving meaning to the holiday season.

Two years ago, "John," a middle age resident of Sonoma State Hospital for the Developmentally Disabled in Eldridge, Calif., spent a lonely holiday season. He was so withdrawn that he would not engage in any social activities, or could he in any way support himself.

This year, John will spend the holidays in his foster home, a happier, more sociable and outgoing man increasingly able to provide for his daily needs. The change in John's life stems chiefly from the work of Ron Deas, a Senior Companion volunteer at Sonoma State's Foster Grandparent/Senior Companion (FGP/SCP) volunteer program. Deas worked patiently day after day with John, providing one-on-one care and encouragement, the kind of companionship a hospital's limited staff can't possibly give.

John was the third hospital resident Senior Companion Deas had helped go on to more independent living situations in the community. Deas is one of 97 Foster Grandparent and Senior Companion volunteers serving the residents at the hospital. Around the U.S., more than 290,000 such Older American Volunteers serve their communities in programs sponsored by ACTION, the federal volunteer service agency.

Volunteers like Ron Deas will brighten the holidays of thousands of Americans.

Yule fires of low-income families in Portland, Maine, will literally be kept burning with the help of VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteers.

With Maine's long, harsh winter setting in, Portland's low-income families are struggling to meet the rising costs of home heating. They are assisted by VISTA volunteer Pamela Woodbury, who teaches local families to convert to wood-burning as a backup (and, sometimes, as a primary) source of heat. "I also help organize and conduct neighborhood energy awareness programs," says Ms. Woodbury, who assists the Portland West Neighborhood Planning Council with energy conservation workshops in schools and low-to-moderate income areas.

Although wood-burning is more common in Maine than in many other states, firewood prices there are as high as anywhere else. The Portland Wood-Fuel Cooperative, established through the West

Neighborhood Planning Council, sells firewood at \$75 per cord to 189 member households. A cord of air-dried hardwood measures 4' x 4' x 8' and provides as much energy as 200 gallons of heating oil.

"This is the wood co-op's second year," says VISTA Lynne Mitchell, a recent University of New Hampshire English graduate who helps coordinate the co-op's activities. "We'll process about 1,500 cords of wood this year," Ms. Mitchell says, "delivering anywhere within fifteen miles of the storage lot which was lent us by the State Department of Transportation." For each cord of wood purchased, co-op members work five hours cutting

and splitting wood in the storage yard. "I get high school clubs to donate time working the yard on behalf of disabled and frail elderly people," Ms. Mitchell says.

Wood co-op director Bill Butler was a key organizer of the project, which he helped put together while serving as a VISTA volunteer after thirty years' experience as a Maine woodsman.

Around the U.S., nearly 4,500 VISTA volunteers live and work in poor communities.

In Coles County, Ill., Retired Senior Volunteers will organize their holiday chorus and go caroling in the day care centers, schools, and homes of the frail elderly where they work throughout the year. The Retired Senior

Volunteer Program (RSVP) is another of ACTION's Older American Volunteer Programs.

RSVP Fred Lading loves to play Santa in the local day care center, but his chief job is working daily in the Senior Citizen woodworking shop.

According to RSVP program director, Marilyn Strangeman, volunteers provide a wide range of services to Coles County. "They visit and make daily reassurance calls to other seniors in frail

health," she says. "They call and ask 'Are you up?' or 'Are you okay?' — letting people know they are being thought of and simply being companions. At holiday time," notes Ms. Strangeman, "these personal contacts are very crucial to people who might otherwise spend the days totally alone and isolated."

Other Coles County RSVPs assist in day care centers or tutor slow learners in grade schools. A number of them help

children who have difficulty learning to read. Volunteer Velma Heathcote works coordinating the Piecemeal Program, which provides inexpensive, nutritious hot meals for area seniors. "It's a place to congregate and socialize, as well as get a healthy meal," says Ms. Strangeman of the noon Piecemeal repasts.

Some 55 retired senior citizens of College Station Ark., an isolated community of 3,000 on the outskirts of Little Rock's

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