

under the sun

Special Person Plans Events For Special People

BY TERRY POPE

A sign on the gray door reads "Special Populations," a title that can stir one's curiosity and also keep Dorene Vereen very active.

But she doesn't mind. She'd rather be out working anyway, traveling with senior citizen groups or organizing activities for Brunswick County's mentally and physically handicapped students, who make up the persons that fall into the "Special Populations" category.

Behind the gray door in the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department in Bolivia is a small office stacked with Special Olympic materials and senior citizen arts and crafts kits. Several medals recently received in Charlotte during the state Special Olympic games are tacked to a bulletin board in the square, windowless office.

Behind the desk, wearing a wide smile, is a package of heavy duty energy, so much energy that it leaves one wondering how the small office has been able to contain it all since last September, when Ms. Vereen first joined the staff. As she starts to discuss her job and experiences since joining the department, her hands and arms add to the conversation, like a conductor's arms that stab and flow to the rhythm of the music.

"I have a lot of energy," Ms. Vereen said. "People say all the time, 'You act just like the kids whenever you're around them.' But I'm the same way around senior citizens. You have to keep them motivated, both

groups. And they keep me motivated, too."

As Special Populations director, Ms. Vereen is constantly planning and coordinating activities for the county's mentally handicapped and senior citizens. Exercises, arts and crafts and traveling help keep the two groups motivated. It takes an active person to show the two groups how to become more active themselves, she said.

Whenever the senior citizens travel, Ms. Vereen is often the driver of their van to such places as historic Charleston, S.C., New Bern, the Charlotte spring show, the state zoo in Asheboro and Williamsburg, Va. But to Ms. Vereen, traveling is fun, more than just a part of the job.

"A lot of them ask if I mind driving, but I always tell them that driving relaxes me," she added. "I enjoy it."

Working with handicapped students and senior citizens was Ms. Vereen's goal when she entered college at UNC-Wilmington. The Bolivia native graduated last year with a degree in recreation administration, specializing in therapeutic work, and returned home to work with residents in her own county and community.

Traveling with the senior citizens and helping them exercise may be viewed by some as "no work and all play," but it is an often complicated job for both Ms. Vereen and the number of volunteers who help carry out the activities.

Sometimes the special people need more than just

directions or instructions on how to carry out a task. They often need care, love and understanding or perhaps just a view of Ms. Vereen's smiling face as she tells them, "Sure, you can do it. I did it, so you can, too."

"It's not play," she adds. "I take it very seriously. It is hard work that benefits me, the athletes and the senior citizens."

It is the kind of job that often sends Ms. Vereen back to her Bolivia home with enough energy left over to relate the day's events to her mother. Or at least she tries to.

"Sometimes when I return home my mother has to tell me, 'Just calm down!'" she said. "I really get into what I'm doing. A lot of times, that's what it takes to keep the senior citizens going."

For many of the senior citizens, getting together and exercising or working with their hands while doing arts and crafts can be vitally important as therapeutic work. Arts and crafts activities often include sandpainting, making corn shuck wreaths or canvas painting, anything that puts mind and hand coordination together.

"I try to work with things that they can do in one session, because they like to be able to see their finished product," Ms. Vereen said. "They like to be able to carry something home with them."

Several Brunswick County senior citizens recently participated in the Senior Games held in Wilmington and came away with gold medals. Many of the senior citizen groups throughout the county gather for group exercises and try to keep pace with Ms. Vereen.

"They enjoy that," she adds, "because how many of them are going to exercise alone at home? Put them together in a group and they'll do it when they see others around them exercising."

Ms. Vereen hopes to get more senior citizens involved in the various Senior Games activities next year. Many participated this year, with most just in one sport. By increasing individual activities, the county should have more athletes to qualify for the state games next year, she said.

"I want to see them more involved," she said. "Sometimes they'll tell me, 'I used to bowl, or I used to go swimming when I lived in Ohio or New York,' and they can still do those things here. If they let me know what they want to do, I can get something worked out where they can still do those activities here."

A group of senior citizens will travel at the end of July to Asheville and Cherokee to see the outdoor drama, "Unto These Hills" and the "Horn In The West" drama in Boone. They will also tour the Biltmore House in Asheville and the Daniel Boone Native Gardens.

"Like I tell a lot of people, the joy comes in being able to work with children and then turn right around and work with senior citizens," Ms. Vereen said. "You have to apply different things to different groups and you don't have to work in the same environment all the time."

Her work involving children often comes in organizing special events for the county's mentally and physically handicapped youths. On Wednesday, July 10, a Brunswick County Special Olympics athletes' day was held where nearly 30 students boarded a bus and went bowling, toured the Fort Fisher State Historic Site and ended with a cookout at one of the county's parks.

"It lets them do things that they normally don't get to do," she said. Looking back, the trip to the state Special



STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

DORENE VEREEN is the special person in charge of Special Populations for the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department. Senior citizens and mentally handicapped athletes are her subjects.

Olympics in Charlotte last month was as "big a thrill for me as it was for the kids," she added.

Ms. Vereen hopes that Brunswick County will have an athlete or athletes to participate in the National Special Olympics in 1988. The program will be held in South Bend, Ind., on the campus of Notre Dame University.

The nine days of activity could include four county athletes who must be chosen in 1987, but should begin training now, she said.

"It's not really that far off," she added. "When you get your choices narrowed down and find out which parents are willing to send their children, two years is a good starting point."

To participate before thousands of fans would benefit the athletes tremendously, she said, as she described what the moment would probably be like for the special athlete.

"You walk in the stadium filled with 5,000 screaming fans and it's just like your day," she said.

It's far, far away from baiting hooks on the Ocean Crest Fishing Pier or touring the mounds at Fort Fisher. But it's still an event planned by a special person for a Special Population.

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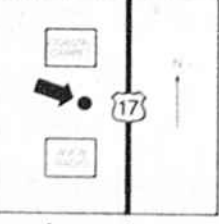


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