

S.E.R.V.E. celebrates 2 decades of service



ADVANCE PHOTO/STEVE ZAFFARANO

Mary McMurray, who now lives in the Carmel Richmond Nursing Home, has been a S.E.R.V.E. volunteer since the program began 20 years ago.

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Every week, Mary "Mae" McMurray cuts and pastes colorful pictures onto placemats, to be used in the dining room at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook. Teachers spin stories about the scenes, using them as education tools for the mentally disabled, explained Miss McMurray, one of six members of Serve and Enrich Retirement Through Volunteer Service (S.E.R.V.E.) taking part in the workshop.

This marks the 20th year that the 93-year-old Miss McMurray has been a S.E.R.V.E. volunteer. And since she was among the first 15 recruits, her length of service is as old as the organization itself.

She vividly recalls the tour of the Willowbrook State School in 1966, along with other prospective volunteers from the West Brighton Senior Center. "Some backed out," recalls Miss McMurray, now a resident of the Carmel Richmond Nursing Home, Dongan Hills. But she set about parlaying a decade of sewing experience at the Island's Valco Manufacturing Co. into volunteer work, sewing puff quilts, placemats and night-gowns for the severely retarded youngsters at the school.

Janet Sainer, now commissioner of the city Department for the Aging, who founded the Island S.E.R.V.E. unit two decades ago, recalls those early recruitment days.

"At first, not many volunteers chose working with the children,



Janet Sainer

preferring to do sewing or other duties," Sainer said in a telephone interview from her Manhattan office. "But after a while they felt very warm and friendly towards them, and (ended up) establishing important relationships," she continued. They helped them with meals, activities, exercises — and by just being a friend, she said, something which provided mutual enrichment.

Sainer said she chose Staten Island for the first S.E.R.V.E. unit because of "the wonderful sense of community on Staten Island," which she came to realize during her work with the aging at the city's Community Service Society.

Surveys also revealed that Island agencies were willing, ready and able to use older volunteers on a regular basis for such tasks as taking children out for walks reading to them, helping them with meals, sorting, mending and sewing clothing, among many

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other tasks.

"We knew, therefore, that the work would be varied and interesting," and that there would be enough for everybody to do, Sainer said.

"There were about 6,000 patients at Willowbrook at the time," she continued, "and we were told, 'we could use 6,000 volunteers.'"

The program was so successful, Sainer expanded it to cover Island hospitals and nursing homes.

The Island organization which Sainer founded was to become the prototype for similar ones around the nation, and eventually around the world, as Congress established a national organization, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P.) under the Older Americans Act of 1965.

"It's very important to keep people active and involved in later years," Sainer said. "It leads to a tremendous sense of satisfac-

tion in one's own abilities." She also points out that the volunteers are working with people who are constantly grateful, which is very rewarding. More than anything else, Sainer said, "it's a way of showing the elderly need not be put on the shelf."

"Remember that in Willowbrook the volunteers were the only visitors that some of those children had," Miss McMurray said. "And for the children who did have visits from relatives, extra visits were also welcome."

The commissioner credits R.S.V.P./S.E.R.V.E. with helping to change the image of the aging for the better, both in their families' and in their own eyes.

"It was a wonderful experience," agrees Miss McMurray regarding her S.E.R.V.E. volunteer work, which transformed her solitary retirement into an active life. She was living alone, and although she'd never done volunteer work before, she thoroughly enjoyed it, Miss McMurray said.

That feeling still holds today for the energetic 93-year old nursing home resident. Sometimes she makes patchwork pillows or quilts in her private sixth-floor room, or she joins fellow seniors in the ground-floor crafts room. S.E.R.V.E.'s 20th anniversary celebration will take place at the Shalimar June 6, and at Manhattan's Penta Hotel, June 4, when Sainer will receive the Humanitarian Award for her pioneering efforts on behalf of the elderly.

Said Miss McMurray of the annual Island event: "I hope to make it; I haven't missed one yet."