



# Serving seniors through compassion and companionship

*Annual Catholic Appeal*

At age 82, Sheila Benner's vision isn't as good as it used to be. A look around her Brunswick apartment will tell you she still has an artist's eye for decorating, but limited peripheral vision makes it difficult for her to see what is not directly in front of her. She says, with the passing years, she has also become more forgetful.

Without family close by and realizing she could use a hand and occasionally a ride, she signed up for Catholic Charities' SEARCH program. SEARCH, an acronym for Seek Elderly Alone, Renew Courage & Hope, connects seniors with volunteers who provide companionship and assistance with household tasks or transportation, depending on the client's needs.

Sheila was introduced to Joe Pietrowicz last spring. At first, she wasn't too sure about being partnered with a man, but before long, the two just clicked.

"I am very comfortable with him," says Sheila. "It's just been a good match."

"I think that she is a hoot," says Joe. "She's fun to be around."



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checkbook when he saw she was struggling with it.

"I can't read my numbers when I write them down, and just nonchalantly, as we were coming out of the bank, he said, 'If you really need help and you can't figure it out, I'll do it with you.' I didn't ask him, but he just volunteers for these things when he can see I'm in trouble," she says.

Joe will also sometimes accompany Sheila on shopping trips. Although she is able to get rides through People Plus, a program for seniors in town, she says it is helpful to have Joe with her because of her limited vision.

"When I get in a place like Lowe's, and I want light bulbs, for instance, that's just a little thing, but I can't find them because I don't see that well. And he's right there, 'What about this one? What about this one?' He knows what I want, and it's done, and we're out of there. I could be there two hours and still not find it."

One special trip the two took together was to Sheila's hometown of Friendship, where she hadn't been for years.

"I like to laugh, and this is a chance to laugh," says Sheila. "I don't think I've been called a hoot before."

Joe visits Sheila for a few hours once a week. When he arrives, he usually finds a "to do" list awaiting him. Sheila says she tries to write things down, so she doesn't forget them.

"I'll remember it later, but it's too late; he's gone," she says. "He remembers everything, which is great. I wish I did."

The tasks typically are small ones. When daylight saving time arrived, he changed the clock above her sink. He has rearranged pictures on her walls, set up some hanging files, and fixed her recliner chair after the battery pack became disconnected.

"I've got a mirror, and I'm underneath the chair, trying to fix it, and I'm raving all the time I'm doing it," she recalls. "When he came, that's the first thing I said, 'Can you fix my chair?' Well, he did."

"If it's something I feel I can handle, I'll do it," says Joe.

"He's a pretty good all-around handyman. He cleaned my oven and my stove the other day. It shined," she says.

Joe also volunteered to help Sheila balance her

She had planned to visit a cousin suffering from Alzheimer's disease, but when that didn't work out, she gave another cousin a call, hoping to stop by.

"When I walked through the door, here's this crowd of people in there. Some I babysat when they were little, but they were all relatives, some I went to school with," she says. "These people just kept coming in. I was so excited. I was shaking all over. It was so great, because I never expected I would ever see any of them again."

Joe says it gives you a good feeling.

"I just enjoy it," he explains. "There was one day when we were in Bed, Bath, & Beyond, standing in the checkout line, and she was having a bad day. I don't remember what I said to her, but all of a sudden, she smiled. It's that kind of thing."

Joe has been volunteering since 2010 and has been paired with five clients, including three he is currently helping. He says he hesitated about signing up, but it turned out to be a good fit for him.

"I think one thing that encouraged me was my first client," he says. "Even when he got to the point where he was in a hospital bed all the time and could barely speak, right from the first day I met him, he never let me walk out the door without saying thank you."

Joe, who is retired, volunteers during the middle of the week, so that his weekends are free for hiking, backpacking, and other activities he enjoys.

Christine Szalay, the SEARCH program coordinator in the greater Bath area, says schedules, willingness to travel, commonalities, and personalities are all things she considers when making a match between a client and volunteer.

"You're not going to send somebody who is very high-strung with somebody who is very mellow, and vice versa," she explains.

In the case of Sheila and Joe, Christine thought the pairing might work out because Joe and Sheila's husband both served in the military.

Last year, Catholic Charities' SEARCH program served 299 seniors with 157 volunteers, but many more volunteers are needed.

"There is a huge waiting list in terms of folks needing the service in our current locations, and obviously, there is a bigger need in other parts of the state that we really haven't gotten to yet. We're really looking to expand the capacity of both," says Michael Smith, Catholic Charities director of mission.

The program currently serves seniors in Androscoggin, Franklin,



Kennebec, Lincoln, and Sagadahoc counties, along with limited parts of Cumberland County. Lincoln County was added in 2015 and some of Franklin County this year, thanks in part to grants from the Saint Norbert Abbey Augustine Stewardship Fund and the John T. Gorman Foundation, and through a new partnership with Catholic Charities Parish Social Ministry (PSM), which is working with parishes to identify both potential clients and volunteers.

"We have these great programs within Catholic Charities, and I'm really trying to tie them into our parishes," says Michael.

PSM, for instance, worked with Father Paul Dumais, pastor of Saint Rose of Lima Parish in Jay and Saint Joseph Parish in Farmington, along with his predecessor, Father Joseph Daniels, to get the program off the ground there.

"Father Daniels approached us last spring, and we went there and talked with some senior groups from Saint Rose of Lima and Saint Joseph to try to bring SEARCH into that area, and then, when Father Paul took over, he, in turn, gave us free office space at Saint Rose of Lima Parish, right there in

Jay, and they also gave us a little funding to help kick off the program," says Wendy Russell, director of SEARCH.

Next, Catholic Charities is looking to expand into Oxford County.

SEARCH receives support from many agencies, including the United Way, but its primary source of funding is the annual Catholic Appeal, without which the program might not exist.

That would be difficult for clients like Sheila, who have come to depend on volunteers like Joe.

"There is no one else who could do it. I don't have any family," she says. "He is like a brother." †

## Volunteers needed

If you would like to consider becoming a volunteer, or know someone who might benefit from services, please email [SEARCHinfo@ccmaine.org](mailto:SEARCHinfo@ccmaine.org) or call the main office at 207.784.0157. FMI: [www.ccmaine.org/search-program-elderly-services](http://www.ccmaine.org/search-program-elderly-services).