

Retirement

Former insurance man finds outlet for skills

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

GREECE — Henry Manfredi was a man in motion the afternoon of March 13.

He circled a long table in the activity room of the Park Ridge Nursing Home, serving coffee and cookies to the dozen men gathered there. Even after he sat down at one end of the table, he popped up regularly to refill cups or the pot.

In between, the St. Lawrence parishioner took part in the freewheeling conversation that included jokes, commentary on a local politician recently arrested on DWI charges near Albany, and reminiscences about local construction projects on which some of the men had worked.

"I join in and sit and participate in whatever they talk about," the 84-year-old Manfredi explained. "Somebody always brings something up. Somebody will tell a little story.

"It gives people an opportunity to listen and participate," he added.

For Manfredi, the weekly gatherings are just one aspect of his volunteer work in the nursing home and in the community.

He is at Park Ridge Nursing Home Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., helping with the men's group, music sessions and a ceramics group.

"The rest of the time I do a lot of visiting," he noted.

In addition, working through LIFESPAN, the former insurance salesman visits seniors' homes to help them manage their finances. He balances checkbooks, and also makes sure their bills are being paid, that they are not being billed for services they don't need and that they are not being financially victimized.

"I do whatever has to be done," he said simply.

Manfredi plunged into the role of volunteer after the death of his wife, Lillian, in 1991.

"I felt I had to do something," he said. "To just stay home not doing anything is not my idea of life. It will just pass you by. You've got to get involved, I think."

So he took a 40-hour course through LIFESPAN — formerly the Regional Council on Aging — on becoming an ombudsman. Ombudsmen, he explained, "work in adult homes or nursing homes to make sure that people are not abused and their rights



Kerry Huller

Volunteer Henry Manfredi (left) talks to residents at Park Ridge Nursing Home March 13 during a weekly mens' group meeting.

are not violated."

After working for a while as an ombudsman at an adult home, he decided to volunteer at Park Ridge Nursing Home, which is not far from his Greece home. He found the residents hungry for visitors.

"They look for someone they can talk to," he said. "It's amazing. When you visit someone in a nursing home, they thank you

when you leave. As a rule, they don't get a lot of visitors from the outside."

He recalled one woman in particular who after lunch always asked to be taken down to the lobby "to sit by the window

waiting for her son or somebody to come. But in all the time I was there, nobody came."

Through volunteering, Manfredi found an outlet to use the financial skills he gleaned through 27 years as an insurance salesman and 10 years he worked as an insurance consultant at a bank.

Among the frequent problem areas for seniors he visits are telephone and cable television bills, he noted. People will accept offers for a free service for a month, then end up keeping services they don't really need and getting billed for them. So Manfredi often contacts the companies to cancel services.

He has also found people who, unfortunately, are victimized by family members. One man, for example, noted happily that his son visited him once a month — but Manfredi found out the visits coincided with when the man received his Social Security check and that the son invariably asked for money.

Another time, Manfredi said he was working with a woman on a tight budget whose daughter asked for a \$200 loan to travel to Florida. The woman was going to tap her burial fund to come up with the money, but asked Manfredi first.

"I suggested she write out an IOU first and have the daughter sign it," he recalled. "That was the last I heard of it."

Manfredi warned that seniors — and their children — need to be aware how easy it is for the elderly to be victimized.

"That's why they need ombudsmen," he said. "Their rights are being violated. There's a lot of that going around."

Consequently, Manfredi will continue to offer his financial services through LIFESPAN. He will also continue his volunteer work at Park Ridge for the foreseeable future.

"I get satisfaction," he explained. "I'm alone. It gets me out of the house. It doesn't allow me to get stagnant."

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