

'Companion' earns volunteer honor

By Valerie Kincaid
Catholic News Service

CINCINNATI — Harry Tolliver of the Cincinnati area knows what it is like to live in need, so he is quick to help others in dire straits.

That generous spirit has earned the 74-year-old resident of Amelia the title of Catholic Charities USA National Volunteer of the Year.

He was recognized for his involvement with Senior Companion, a program operated by Catholic Social Services of Southwestern Ohio.

"I've been poor all my life, and I appreciated it when people did things for me," Tolliver told the Catholic Telegraph, newspaper of the Cincinnati Archdiocese.

Senior Companion pairs elderly participants with a volunteer who can assist them with simple tasks, such as grocery shopping or traveling to doctors' appointments. The program includes 90 or so volunteers who offer friendship to elderly people who may be ill and isolated.

Tolliver's own experience of hardship came when he was just 5 years old. In a 10-day span, his father died and his two teenage brothers drowned while trying to cross a flood-swollen river.

Beyond the emotional upheaval for the surviving Tollivers, including his mother and three sisters, the deaths were financially crippling for the family.

"I had to drop out of school early," Tolliver recalled, adding that as an adolescent he often worked on local farms for \$1 a day and meals. His modest earnings helped keep his family from becoming homeless.

"He hunted squirrels and rabbits to help feed the family," said Dave Mikkelsen, program director for the Foster Grand-



Mark Bowen/CNS

Harry Tolliver, 74, has earned the title of Catholic Charities USA National Volunteer of the Year for his service to a seniors companion program in southwestern Ohio. He estimates he logs 60 to 70 hours a week assisting the elderly and sick.

parents and Senior Companion programs operated by Catholic Social Services.

Tolliver could easily have let the hardships of his childhood make him a bitter man. Instead, it made him more empathetic to the suffering of others.

"He knows what that feeling is," Mikkelsen added. "He's walked a mile in those shoes."

Tolliver, who attends Batavia Baptist Church with his wife, Virginia, began volunteering with Senior Companion nearly two years ago because he was restless in retirement.

He ran a maintenance and repair busi-

ness, and he also had been the caretaker at several apartment buildings. He always lent a hand to older or disabled residents who needed help with chores such as taking out the garbage.

So becoming a volunteer with Senior Companion was a natural fit.

Tolliver officially spends 20 hours weekly with Senior Companion, but he actually logs 60 to 70 hours each week.

His only concern is how much longer his 1987 Nissan truck with 160,000 miles will last, he said.

He visits elderly residents regularly through Senior Companion, but also helps other people find a place to live or get a meal when they are hungry. He visits the blind, drives the sick to doctors' appointments and stays with elderly residents who cannot be left alone while their spouses do grocery shopping or other errands.

"The ones that can't do it, I go shopping for them," said Tolliver, who was widowed himself when his first wife, Pauline, died after 32 years of marriage. The couple had five children.

This veteran of World War II has created an informal network of helpers. Some local groceries and bakers donate their day-old doughnuts, which he distributes to low-income elderly living in retirement centers in greater Cincinnati.

"I take them to tables in the different buildings," Tolliver said. For those residents too ill to come to the common areas, he delivers doughnuts to their rooms.

Such simple acts of kindness might seem insignificant, but they can mean the world to the elderly and disabled who feel cut off from the world, Mikkelsen said.

"He just really makes a tremendous impact on people's lives," Mikkelsen added. "He's one in a million."

U of R offers smokers help

The University of Rochester is offering a free stop-smoking program for smokers age 50 and over.

Participants in the "Project50" program will be given a self help manual that addresses concerns of smokers over 50, have access to the "Smokers' Victory Lane" hotline, and receive periodic supportive mail and telephone contacts over an 18-month period. In addition, they will receive \$15 just for taking part.

To be eligible, participants must be at least 50, smoke at least 10 cigarettes a day, have smoked for 10 years or more, be planning to quit in the next three months, plan on staying in the calling area for at least 18 months and have a telephone. Participants will also be contacted for three brief follow-up interviews.

The program is open to residents of Cayuga, Chemung, Erie, Genesee, Livingston, Monroe, Niagara, Ontario, Orleans, Schuyler, Seneca, Steuben, Wayne, Wyoming and Yates counties.

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