

Several years ago my father-in-law Calvin retired from the KDOT facility in Chanute. His wife Judy had to continue working a bit longer at her job until she finished qualifying for her pension. I recall Calvin telling me how he was looking forward to some time alone at the house to work on his extensive garden, continue his hobby of making stained glass windows, and generally taking it easy. Unfortunately for him, Judy had other plans. He was about to be “volunteered.”

Frequent readers of my column may recall my stories of my over-the-top mother-in-law Judy. She immediately says what comes to mind and will go to extreme to make you laugh. She just doesn't hold back, which is why I love her. But it can be an issue at times. Your strengths are your weaknesses when taken to extreme. And Judy is nothing if not extreme.

With Calvin now retired, Judy became his dispatcher. If someone said they needed a ride to a doctor's appointment 90 miles away, Judy would immediately say, “Calvin will take you. He's retired now and has the time. Need to leave by 5:30am? No problem. He'll be there.” Of course she wouldn't mention this to him until later.

“You want a stained glass window? Calvin will do it.”

“We need a little kid-sized bridge built in three days for vacation bible school? Calvin will make it.” And on and on.

His dream of a quiet retirement slipped away through being volunteered by Judy. But as he would now admit, it was the best thing for him.

It is clear that staying active in your golden years is vital to mental health and overall well-being. People who lock themselves in their homes and watch TV all day are often prone to depression. Getting out and being with people is the best cure for loneliness. Feeling productive through volunteerism is so important to your sense of self-worth, that you still have something to contribute.

But beyond personal benefits is the effect service has to the community. So many events and services could not have happened without a group of individuals coming together and giving of their time and talents.

NCCC believes very strongly in the need to serve its communities. Of course we provide affordable education to help people get employment and better their lives. But we also believe in volunteering and in teaching the importance of service to our students.

We take a page from my Mother-in-Law's book here and volunteer our students to help a wide range of events and activities. All of our activities such as sports and student clubs have a community service requirement. Yes, much like Calvin, our students are expected to lend a hand where it is needed. Setting up assignments and expectations is how we teach, and the lesson of volunteerism is no exception.

Students help with major events acting as crew in many capacities – setting up rooms, helping with children, taking out the trash, putting up lights, manning a table, and filling treat bags. It is our hope that they see that what they are doing helps make these wonderful events happen and makes them want to continue helping after they leave us.

College employees also help in our service area in a variety of ways. Recently we conducted a survey of our employees to see how much they gave of their personal time to serve their favorite causes and organizations. Our employees responded that collectively they volunteer more than 500 hours per month! They serve on church boards, help with the PTA, deliver meals on wheels, are active in civic organizations, and on and on. That's a lot of community service and it makes a difference.

One of my favorite programs we host at the college is the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). This federal grant is part of the Americorps system and it's wonderful! It serves a four-county area by providing a safe and engaging way for those over 55 to volunteer their time and talents in a variety of capacities. Currently they have over 200 volunteers dispatched (with permission, not like Judy does to Calvin) to help with schools and organizations throughout the region. And I'm very happy to announce that RSVP has been fully funded for another three years! Congratulations to Sandy Haggard, the director of that grant, for her work and to all of the RSVP volunteers for keeping this important program going.

The college measures all of our stated purposes but in an oversight, the word "service" does not appear in our purposes. This month I asked the Board of Trustees to add service to our purposes. How better to meet our mission of enriching our communities and our students lives than through service.

One study I read years ago asked college graduates what was the most meaningful assignment they had while completing their degrees. I'm sure the researchers were expecting the former students to mention a particular book they had to read, or skill they picked up that they still use today. But the most common thing mentioned was the time the college made them go volunteer with various organizations. It often opened their eyes to people who maybe had it a bit rougher than they did, and it showed them that they could help make their corner of the world a little better place.

Judy eventually retired herself and joined Calvin on these many taxi runs to the doctor for other people, and all kinds of other volunteer efforts. But secretly, Calvin tells me that those days between the volunteer events when Judy was working were not so bad either.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else please email me at binbody@neosho.edu.