

GIVE A LITTLE BIT

Looking for a way to donate your time to a worthy cause? Start by following the examples of these five Putnam volunteers.

BY JENNY HIGGONS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SETH HARRISON

Forget what you might assume about community service.

These days it's not just for first-time offenders in orange jumpsuits picking up roadside litter. In fact, this county boasts scores of Samaritans who, on a daily basis, mentor our kids, provide disaster relief—even save our lives—*pro bono*. Whether they beautify the environment, like Garrison's Carl Rankel, or care for Putnam's many homeless dogs, like Courtney Aponte of Carmel, every effort strengthens the fabric of our communities. So in the spirit of this holiday season, we'd like to acknowledge a few local heroes who consistently give the greatest gift of all: themselves.

A photograph of Carl Rankel, a man with a mustache, sitting on the grass. He is wearing a grey and white polo shirt and grey pants. His hands are clasped in his lap. In the background, there is a large stone cross with a plaque on it, set against a backdrop of green trees.

CARL RANKEL GARDEN GURU

As the proprietor of Create-escape, a horticultural landscaping and tree business, Rankel offers his expertise to the Graymoor Spiritual Life Center. He not only donates his time to beautifying Graymoor, which is in his hometown, he also sometimes spends his own cash for the plantings and to pay the Create-escape employees who help him.

WHY DOES HE DONATE SO MANY OF HIS DAYS? “It’s all for the glory of God. The Lord has been good to me, and I want to give back some of the talents he gave me, so others can appreciate Graymoor’s grounds.”

PET PROJECTS “In the fall of 2006, I and another volunteer, Mary, did a major renovation. We designed and expanded the four gardens and flowerbeds scattered around the buildings and grounds, giving them a lot more character. We removed deformed, overgrown evergreen bushes, replaced them with flowering dogwood trees, and put in perennials and annuals, all of which created a flowing landscape. Otherwise, the beds would be overgrown and weedy.”

HE WISHES THAT “...more people would step up to join me and lighten my load, because Graymoor is a beautiful and historical place that really helps people.”

JOIN HIM Graymoor Spiritual Life Center; Rte. 9; Garrison; 424-2111; graymoorcenter.org

SUSAN MCNERNEY **4-H HERO**



Six years ago, McNerney became a leader in the Putnam County 4-H Youth Development program, which fosters family cohesiveness through cooperative activities, such as camp-outs, educational projects, and community-service efforts. Besides her work in 4-H (which stands for “Heart, Head, Hands, Health”), this Kent mother of four—ages 3 to 10—has a paying job as a licensed clinical social worker. Twenty-five people make up the seven families in her 4-H group.

WHY VOLUNTEER? “I enjoy surrounding myself with like-minded people and helping children become responsible adults. We have to share the responsibility of raising kids; it’s too hard to do it on your own. It’s wonderful to watch these kids blossom into caring members of the community. Actually, I don’t consider it volunteering as much as living a genuine life and being out in the world. You don’t get paid for just living life.”

HOW DO HER KIDS BENEFIT? “They recognize that they’re adding to the good of the community and that it takes organization and cooperation to make the world go around. My 4-H kids set a great example for others in the community.”

JOIN HER Cornell Cooperative Extension of Putnam County; Terravest Corporate Park; 1 Geneva Rd.; Brewster; 278-6738; nys4h.cce.cornell.edu

BILL GILES **SERIAL VOLUNTEER**

The Putnam/West Point Chapter of the American Red Cross of Greater New York, based in Patterson, is just one of many groups to which this Carmel insurance broker has donated his time. Over the past 30 years, Giles helped the United Way, the American Heart Association, the Carmel/Kent Lions Club, and the county 4-H Fair. He’s also been on the boards of directors of Cornell Cooperative Extension, Iona College, and New Rochelle’s Salesian High School.

HOW HE STARTED VOLUNTEERING “In grammar school and high school in the Bronx, I got involved with my church’s charity projects. As a student at Iona College, I worked on things like a food drive for people who live in Appalachia and food carnivals on behalf of multiple sclerosis.”

WHAT HE DOES FOR THE RED CROSS Since last January, “I’ve been with the Disaster Action Team (DAT). If people have been displaced due to something like a house fire or a natural disaster, I go on site to see what immediate assistance we can give them regarding clothing, food, money, temporary housing, and setting up communications with their family and friends. If needed we’ll deploy to other areas, like Mamaroneck during last spring’s floods. I’m on call for responses twice a month, from midnight Friday to midnight Sunday. I’m also on the board of directors.”

THE DEFINITION OF ALTRUISM “If someone asks for my help, I’ll give it. I just walk away after I do it. It’s all about helping your neighbor and not getting recognition for it; recognition defeats the purpose of volunteering.”

JOIN HIM The American Red Cross of Putnam/West Point; Rtes. 311 and 164; Patterson; 938-4100; nyredcross.org



COURTNEY APONTE **ANIMAL ALTRUIST**



In 2003, this third-grade teacher from Mahopac started giving chunks of her free time—up to four days a week—to the dogs at the Putnam Humane Society in Carmel. Wanting to contribute even more, Aponte, who, with her husband, has a 4-year-old son, Hunter, joined the board in 2006.

AFTER-SCHOOL ACTION "I leave at 3:30 p.m. and am at the shelter from 4 to 9. I started by dropping off supply donations; now I also change the dogs' bedding and brush and walk them."

HOW DOES SHE MAKE TIME? "It's not easy, but when you feel passionate about something and you have a purpose that's for the overall good of whomever you're serving, there's not even a question. I also go there when I'm not feeling well; it bothers me when I can't get there."

THE BIGGEST REWARD "The dogs are excited to see me and depend on me for walks and love. That, in turn, makes me feel good."

HER ROLE MODEL "My father's volunteering at a residence for homeless people was a big influence in my working at the Humane Society."

ON VOLUNTEERING "It's all about doing for your community. I want Hunter to understand that not everything is done for money."

JOIN HER Old Rte. 6/87 Old Brewster Rd.; Carmel; 225-7777; puthumane.org

RAY PHILLIPS, M.D. **CAN-DO DOC**

It's tough pinning Phillips down for an interview. The still-practicing physician gives much of his free time to groups such as the Hudson Highlands Land Trust, Fort Montgomery, Kent Public Library, Peekskill's National Maritime Historical Society, and Kent Fire Department. The Kent Lakes M.D. leads lectures on Hudson Valley history, general health problems, and outdoor medical emergencies—as well as informational hikes into the wilderness. If that weren't enough, Phillips founded a not-for-profit organization, Medical Exchange International, and has so far made 10 trips to Ecuador to conduct TB survey studies.

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHT "It's always exciting to see people's reaction when I tell them the Bear Mountain Bridge was once the world's longest suspension bridge. I want to get them away from the television set, enliven them, and get them to participate in real life. It gives me a nice feeling when I hear that people who've been on my hikes have then later taken their friends on the same hike."

MEDICAL TRAINING ON THE HIKING TRAILS "Some of the professional tour guides from Taconic State Park have told me that when they were listening to my talks on outdoor medical emergencies they learned about situations that they had never thought about happening."

THE DOCTOR'S BIG DREAM "I would like to develop ongoing relationships between the U.S. and developing countries, in which we can exchange students, residents, nurses, and health-care knowledge."

JOIN HIM Hudson Highlands Land Trust; 1180 Rte. 9D; P.O. Box 226; Garrison; 424-3358; hhl.org

