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The hands behind the HELPING HANDS

Volunteer coordinators help nonprofits find the right fit

BY JIM MERRITT
Special to Newsday

On any given day, volunteers pitch in across Long Island to serve food at soup kitchens, walk rescue dogs in parks, or point out museum showpieces to art lovers — and much more. Yet behind all these helping hands, the hidden hand of a volunteer coordinator might also be at work.

Generally unheralded, often working behind the scenes for long hours, volunteer coordinators have become essential as Long Island's nonprofit organizations look ahead to a near pre-pandemic normal.

Volunteer coordinators are “the backbone of many nonprofits that wouldn't exist without volunteers extending their reach and impact,” said Diana O'Neill, executive director of Long Island Volunteer Center, a Garden City organization that advocates for volunteer service on Long Island. O'Neill said that volunteer coordinators' “organizational, communications and people skills” are vital to nonprofit organizations seeking to resume or add programming.

“Our inquiries from youth, families and corporate groups



have been ticking up since last fall,” added O'Neill, whose organization serves as a “matchmaker” for 450 organizations in Nassau and Suffolk counties looking for volunteers.

Janet Romeo, co-president of

the Association of Professional Volunteer Administrators in North Massapequa, said the job of volunteer coordinator — also known as a volunteer manager, director of volunteer services or part of another title

— involves more than recruitment. “It's also vetting them, training them, finding out what are that volunteer's strong points and what do they want to do with their volunteer time,” she said.



I get everyone involved, even my granddaughters, because it feels so good when you give to the community.”

— Millie Colon of Pronto

Yet, Romeo said, the position has historically been “terribly undervalued.” In addition to being seen as a “fluff job . . . the pay has been very low, traditionally, adding to the low number of men in the field,” she said.

Here are five Long Islanders who are on the job now, doing their best to fulfill what O'Neill calls “the three R's of volunteer management” — recruiting, retention and recognition.

GROWING A COMMUNITY

As the office manager at the busy Pronto of Long Island food pantry and thrift center in Bay Shore, Millie Colon breathes new life into the old saying “many hands make light work.”

“I believe in teamwork,” said Colon, 47, a lifelong resident of nearby Brentwood. “I get everyone involved, even my granddaughters, because it feels so good when you give to the community.”

About 1,500 families per month pick up a cart packed with meat, vegetables, canned



ON THE COVER. Millie Colon manages between 50 and 80 volunteers a month as office manager at Pronto of Long Island food pantry and thrift center in Bay Shore.

goods, bread and other staples — enough food for a week, Colon said. “We clothe about 180 families per month at the thrift store,” she added.

In recruiting volunteers, Colon can call on strong local ties — 12 years in Brentwood public schools (Class of 1991) and owning and operating an auto body shop for the past 25 years with her husband. “I have a lot of local contacts, so when I need student volunteers for events, I can email guidance counselors who know my children from Brentwood schools. I’m on a first-name basis with auto dealers, who are always willing to put out my flyers in a place where

people will find them.”

Pronto’s volunteer base is as diverse as the western Suffolk communities it serves, including immigrants from Central America and the Caribbean. Many of its volunteers — about 50 to 80 a month — are college students, but there are also high schoolers logging community service hours, nonviolent offenders performing court-ordered community service and 21 adults with Down syndrome who volunteer as part of developmental disability rehabilitation programs, Colon said.

Volunteers help fill shopping baskets, pack diapers for new parents, or vacuum, clean tables or clean out a closet at the center, a task Colon recently assigned to one of her 22-year-old twin daughters. (Colon and her husband have five children, ages 22 to 31.)

Through it all, Colon said, she relies on teamwork — “I

Beth Chiarelli, above, assistant director of education at the Long Island Museum in Stony Brook, and below with new volunteers getting a tour of the carriage collection from veteran docent John Sciacchitano.



See COVER on E8

Finding the right fit



Vanessa Glover, who has been coordinating volunteers at The INN since November, checks in with volunteers in the kitchen. **Video:** [newsday.com/LiLife](https://www.newsday.com/LiLife)



Try it for a day so that you can see if it's a fit for you, and if you are a fit for us."

— Vanessa Glover says of her approach to volunteers at The INN



COVER from E6

welcome them and say, 'Let's do this together.' I never leave them stranded."

FINDING ANIMAL LOVERS

Christopher Muller, manager of volunteer programs at Bideawee in Westhampton, has a habit of taking his work home with him. He's adopted two dogs from Bideawee's animal shelter to add to his menagerie of tortoises and other reptiles at his home on a Patchogue horse farm.

"I've always been an animal person. My friends call me the gay Dr. Doolittle," Muller, 38, said with a laugh.

At the adoption center, Muller shepherds a corps of about 120 animal care volunteers who range in age from 10 to 92. They travel from as far as Babylon and Montauk to walk, brush and socialize Bideawee's ever-changing canine and feline population.

Muller's duties include canvassing for volunteers at dog-friendly businesses, such as Greenport Harbor Brewing Co. in Peconic, marching with shelter dogs in parades and hosting open houses at Bideawee.

But before you get to scratch Fluffy's tummy or take Coco for a run, there's a vetting process. It begins with taking an online orientation followed by a test — "to see if you were paying attention," Muller said. Then comes on-site training. "That's so you have all the tools you need at your disposal right up front," Muller said.

Successful applicants enjoy perks like signing out a pet for Doggie Day Out, a program in which volunteers drive dogs to a walk in a village square or other green space. That's so the dogs "experience the sights and sounds of everyday life," Muller said.

Said Muller, "I love showing people the vast difference they can make even by socializing with the cats or taking a dog for a walk."

KEEP THEM COMING BACK

Vanessa Glover, hired in November as the temporary volunteer coordinator at The INN in Hempstead, is learning her job one volunteer shift at a



RANDEE DADDONA



RANDEE DADDONA

Glover screens potential volunteers — The INN has about 1,000 volunteers a year — by telephone after they complete an online application. She said that one of the first questions she asks is, “What are they looking for at this point in their life?” College students are often looking for something to do during a semester break, Glover said, while volunteers from churches, synagogues and mosques, and employees of area businesses, want to give back to the community.

Glover said she tells them, “Try it for a day so that you can see if it’s a fit for you, and if you are a fit for us.”

Careful screening and matching volunteers with work that fits their goals help make their “first day memorable,” Glover said, “so on their way home they can say, ‘Wow, this was really good, I’m going back.’”

As The INN marks its 40th anniversary this year, veteran “boots” are also returning. The dining room, which closed in

Above, Christopher Muller, right, manager of volunteers at Bideawee in Westhampton, goes for a walk with volunteer Gregg Portelli and Wendy.

Left, volunteer Charlie Renna gets some tips from Muller on handling Frosty.

To get involved

Learn more by contacting one of the organizations in this story:

- **Bethany House of Nassau County**, 516-824-2753, bhny.org
- **Bideawee**, 631-684-0079, bideawee.org
- **The INN**, the-inn.org
- **Long Island Museum**, 631-751-0066, longislandmuseum.org
- **Long Island Volunteer Center**, 516-564-5482, longislandvolunteercenter.org
- **Pronto of Long Island**, 631-231-8290, prontolongisland.org

time.

On a recent workday, making sandwiches for bag lunches and handing them out at The INN’s to-go window was on-the-job-training for Glover, 65, of Jamaica, Queens. She has a

bachelor of arts in psychology from York College in Jamaica, Queens, and a master of human services from Lincoln University, a historically Black university in Pennsylvania.

She has used that learning in

decades of work at area non-profits mainly addressing housing and mental health needs. At The INN, she said, “I’m interested in boots on the ground and what it takes us to keep running day to day.”

See COVER on E10

3 R's: Recruit, retain, recognize

COVER from E9

March 2020 to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (guests continued to be served with to-go meals), has been renovated with a shiny new serving station, flooring, tables and chairs, according to spokeswoman Dana Lopez.

The returning volunteers “are really excited that we’re open again and that they are seeing some guests they haven’t seen in a while,” Glover said. “There have been some very happy reunions.”

FROM VOLUNTEER TO STAFF

“From a conversation, you are never sure what’s going to happen,” said Jane McCabe, volunteer coordinator for Bethany House of Nassau County, which runs three emergency shelters and two transitional homes for single women and women with children.

McCabe, 66, of Rockville Centre, who is married and has two grown children, began volunteering at Bethany House in 2011, two years after leaving a 30-year career at a trade journal. Volunteering to bake cakes, set the dinner table and help babysit children one night a week offered McCabe an opportunity to listen to personal stories, helping her “understand the women and children better and see what they needed.”

After in-shelter volunteering was suspended as a pandemic precaution in 2020, McCabe still wanted to contribute. “I posted about volunteer opportunities often on the local RVC Moms Facebook page, and as a result people often contacted me and asked how they can help,” she said. Aware of McCabe’s social networking savvy, Bethany House hired her as a part-time volunteer coordinator in 2020.

As COVID-19 cases waned in the summer of 2021, volunteers returned and now number about 55 regular volunteers, she said. Nowadays she’s fielding inquiries from about 50 prospective volunteers each month. McCabe said she will “size up what they like to do, what they can do and what we need them to do.”

Among her fans is Ryan King, 16, a member of South Side High School’s Bethany Buddies, a student club. Ryan said he felt



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Coordinator Jane McCabe with volunteers Ryan King and Juliana Rom at Bethany West in Baldwin. McCabe “made me feel welcome,” King says.



People often contacted me and asked how they can help.”

— Jane McCabe says of her Bethany House volunteer outreach

“terrified” on the first day he volunteered until McCabe “made me feel welcome.”

“She walked me in, and basically she showed me around the house and introduced me to everyone, which made me feel more at home,” Ryan said.

Volunteers also include Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, college students, and about 100 individ-

uals and organizations, McCabe said. For her efforts at Bethany House, McCabe was recognized as a 2019 Woman of Distinction at a New York State Capitol ceremony.

“Bethany House has been around since 1978 and is very well known in the surrounding neighborhoods,” said McCabe. That, along with McCabe’s people skills, has yielded un-

usual donations: fresh-baked cupcakes, free hairstyle makeovers for the women, and a 55-inch smart TV.

“The residents are loving it,” McCabe said of the TV. “And it all came from a phone call.”

BRINGING PAINTINGS TO LIFE

When volunteer docents guide visitors through the galleries of the Long Island

Museum in Stony Brook, which reopens for the season Feb. 17 with exhibitions including Sag Harbor’s Black artists and Harlem Renaissance figure Romare Bearden, they won’t need to spellbind visitors with their art smarts.

“We don’t expect our docents to be experts on the collection when they start, but instead their knowledge grows over time due to their own love of learning,” said Beth Chiarelli, the museum’s assistant director of education. “What is most important is their ability to connect with visitors through conversation and shared interest in history and art,” Chiarelli tells her 20-member volunteer corps, which includes docents.

“The idea of arts education has always been important to me,” said Chiarelli, who grew up in Kings Park, earned a bachelor of arts in theater at Smith College in Massachusetts and a master of science and education at Bank Street College of Education in Manhattan. While at Bank Street in 2007, Chiarelli took a semester off to visit family in Atlanta, where she had her first taste of volunteering as a docent at the Atlanta History Center, then exhibiting “I Have a Dream: The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection.”

“I was interacting with visitors, approaching them when they entered the galleries and sharing information about the exhibition,” she recalled. “Having time to learn from and discuss Dr. King’s papers was incredible and helped me understand firsthand how meaningful museum experiences can be for both visitors and volunteers.”

Chiarelli worked at nonprofits in Manhattan and taught in public and private schools before joining the Long Island Museum six years ago.

She said she looks for volunteers “with an interest in sharing a love of learning with other folks” and who can help visitors “use paintings as primary sources to learn about life on Long Island, to bring those paintings to life.” Volunteers are also needed to work with schoolchildren and with people with dementia and their caregivers in the “In the Moment” program.