

A Servant Heart



Bill Wagner / The Daily News Nursing care ombudsman J.J. Martin, center, talks with residents Glen Meeker, left, and Debbie Odell at the Evergreen Americana nursing home in Longview.

By Cathy Zimmerman / The Daily News | Posted: Monday, May 31, 2010

When J.J. Martin worked at one of Mother Teresa's orphanages in Cairo, Egypt, toddlers would sidle up to her and find a place to cuddle.

Today, Martin serves vulnerable people at the other end of life, and she waits before she proffers a handshake or a hug.

"I generally hold my hand out and let them touch if they want to," said the former missionary. "They get to choose."

Now 79, Martin volunteers as an ombudsman and advocates for residents of adult care facilities, including homes for veterans.

She worked in Egypt, Jordan, Cypress, Lebanon and Syria before returning in 1998 to Longview, where she first moved at the age of 3, to volunteer in CAP's ombudsman program.

She spends about four hours a week visiting residents, observing and monitoring the quality of care in licensed, longterm facilities for the elderly.

"I need to be aware of the rights of residents," Martin said last week.

If someone looks bruised, or is strapped down without a good reason, or gets green beans for lunch when her card says she can't stand them — Martin notices.

Whatever seems amiss, "I will ask," the ombudsman said, in her quiet but strong voice.

"Part of our training is to learn how to access regulations governing adult family homes, assisted living facilities and nursing homes. I need to know if residents' rights are being violated."

Martin and other area ombudsmen receive more hours of training than a certified nurse's assistant, she said, in a program funded by state and local governments.

An ombudsmen training is planned for later this month, and Martin and regional supervisor Teresa Sadler hope to interest new volunteers in the four-day preparation.

"People who do this have a 'servant heart,' " Sadler said. "They want to serve and better their community."

A good way of asking

The best ombudsmen know the law, build trust with residents — and listen, listen, listen.

"There's a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth," Sadler said. "He wants us to listen twice as much as we talk."

Ombudsmen do need to speak up, and Sadler said Martin "has a really good way of asking questions.

She's so sincere She asks not to point a finger, but to get more information."

Part of ombudsmen's effectiveness is the fact they visit on a regular basis.

When Martin drops in once a week, "the staff knows she will be looking," the supervisor added. "She keeps them on their toes."

If Martin hears a complaint, she checks it out with an administrator at that site.

If something needs to be done, she checks during her next visit to make sure the issue has been resolved.

If the problem still exists, Martin said she files a report that might result in a fine or jump-start an investigation.

Ombudsmen follow through on residents' complaints regardless of dementia or memory problems.

Although the law does not require them to report possible abuse, they pass on that information to the care facility staff, who do have a legal obligation to follow through.

The ombudsman doesn't confine her attentions to the residents, either.

"If I need to, I will advocate for a staff person," Martin said. "They work very hard, and if they are being exploited or abused, I will go to bat for them, too."

She stays in touch with residents' family members, who may have questions or concerns, Martin said.

She tries to get information about resident rights into the hands of their relatives, and it's comforting to relatives to know Martin is on the lookout for everything from bed restraints to cold french fries.

"I want them to know we exist," she said. "They can call us any time."

Sometimes, it's the families who need to be investigated.

"Financial exploitation usually happens from a family member," Sadler said. "The resident may talk about it to us. It's sad, and it's wrong."

Fish, laughter and a dog named Pearl

Many times, the ombudsman is important because he or she shows up like clockwork and takes time to visit.

Residents "have lost a lot of control about choices and things going on," Martin said. "We try to make things better for them. ..."

"They may be bed-ridden, but their brains are still working," she said. "They miss their houses, they may be grieving for the pet they left behind."

"I once saw a photo of one of the men in his room, holding up a fish. I said, 'Are you a fisherman?' And we talked about the fishing season. He became so alert."

Making that connection means that if that man ever has a problem, "he is going to share it with me."

She brings her white schnauzer Pearl along to Americana, Martin said, and the dog seems to delight everyone in the place.

A blind resident who wanted the dog to be placed on her bed "started laughing.

They said it was the first time she had laughed in two years."

For Martin, ombudsman visits can be emotional in a personal context. Her husband, Bob, who served as an ombudsman alongside her, died two years ago.

"We had good times together," she said.

How long does she plan to remain volunteering?

"As long as I am able," Martin said. "I think I'm making a difference, at least with a few people, so their last years will be pleasant."

What is an ombudsman?

The Washington State Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program exists "because dignity and quality of life are a right, not a privilege," according to program information.

The word ombudsman (OM-buds-mun) is a Swedish word that means advocate, or go-between.

To reach the hotline for reporting suspected neglect or abuse of residents of care facilities, call 1-800-562-6028.

For more information on adult care facilities, the rights of residents or the tasks and training for ombudsmen...

How to become an ombudsman

What: Long Term Care Ombudsman Training

When: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. June 16, 18, 21 and 24

Where: CAP Office, 7732 NE Hazel Dell Ave., Vancouver

Contact: Teresa Sadler, Assistant Regional Long Term Care Ombudsman (Longview), 360-425-3430 ext 204, or Cheryl Cody, Regional Ombudsman (Vancouver), 1-360-694-9007