

Companions help their neighbors stay out of rest homes



By KELI OSBORN
Of the Emerald

The walls of Mattie Bible's small Eugene apartment are lined with photographs of her 10 children, their children and their children's children. She has hundreds of pictures — in frames, drawers and albums — that tell a history of her 90 years.

She moved to Eugene from Oklahoma to be near her family. But, though they visit her on weekends, she nearly is alone every weekday putting around her apartment.

Consequently, every guest is treasured and rewarded with tea and a look at those pictures.

About three months ago Bible received a visit from Mercy Scarrott, one of her neighbors in the large apartment complex housing low-income, older persons.

"And we've been seeing each other ever since," Scarrott says.

Scarrott is one of Lane County's 59 volunteers in an unique, federally funded program that brings older individuals in need of companionship together with their peers.

"She helps me pass my time away," Bible says, nodding at Scarrott. "I

don't have anyone if I don't see her."

Scarrott, 67, arrived in Oregon 23 years ago from Minnesota, her native state. After retirement from a steam-pressing career, she was "just running around."

"I said to myself, 'No, this isn't for me.' I saw an ad for the senior companion program," she says. "I was attracted by the part about working with old people."

That was two years ago. Scarrott now is a companion to seven persons in their 70s, 80s or 90s. All live in her apartment complex and daily she makes her round of visits — some of them short, others longer.

Scarrott and Bible are friends. They walk around the complex, retrieve the day's mail, visit neighbors and talk over tea.

Other volunteers help their companions in other ways. Some play cards, take their friends shopping or to the doctor's office, read mail for their friends with limited vision or share a hot meal.

The senior companion program is the newest of ACTION's Older Americans Volunteer Programs. Though established in 1973, it wasn't until 1976 that Lane County received



Photos by Suzanne Aigen

Mercy Scarrott has seven official friends she visits daily. One of them is 90-year-old Mattie Bible. Scarrott works with a federally funded program aimed at keeping seniors independent and living on their own.

a grant to operate a pilot program. Still in its developing stages, the program remains unique in Oregon.

The program's first purpose, says Vickie Merkle, administrator for the program in Lane County, is to give low-income older individuals a change to volunteer and contribute in their communities.

The volunteers are provided a small stipend — \$1.60 per hour with a maximum 20 hours of work weekly — and must have an annual income no greater than 125 percent of the poverty level set by the federal government.

All volunteers and their companions are more than 60-years-old. Unlike many programs aimed at the special needs of older persons, this one doesn't couple college age

people with those old enough to be their grandparents.

Such a combination has obvious advantages. "We have much in common," Scarrott says of her relationship with Bible.

"Besides, I'd just be sitting upstairs by myself. It's more than a job. I feel as if I'm getting just as much in return."

One goal of the program is to help keep older persons independent as long as possible, Merkle says. Sometimes just having a companion is enough of a contact with the world outside one's home to prevent an unnecessary move to a nursing home.

But the senior companion program

(Continued on Page 13)

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