

IN

Ross Township

**Ross
Community
Days!**



Volunteer Peggy Hughes (left) with Penny Fleckenstein and her guide dog Bryanna.

Friendship with a Purpose

Pittsburgh Friendship Group lends support and guidance to the visually impaired.

BY JENNIFER BROZAK



Volunteer Pam Tetter with Maggie Ostrowski and her guide dog Flirt.

Whether through illness or injury, elderly folks who are robbed of their vision later in life often worry that their best years are behind them, or that they'll become a burden to friends and family who care for them.

Dr. Andrea Schwartz is on a mission to change those misconceptions.

Schwartz, 72, founded the all-volunteer Pittsburgh Friendship Group about six years ago. The group connects those with vision impairment to volunteers—and to one another. Schwartz, who founded the Valley Center for the Blind in Fresno, California, more than 40 years ago, recognized the need for a similar organization here in Pittsburgh.

“Eventually, the Valley Center for the Blind became a big organization that does many things to help those with visual impairment,” says Schwartz, who lives in Hampton Township. “We needed a place for seniors who are visually impaired here in Pittsburgh, a place that provides an opportunity for them to get together with others who are facing—or who have already faced—similar obstacles.”

The group meets throughout the month at the Berkeley Hills Lutheran Church in Ross Township, which Schwartz calls the “wind beneath our wings.” A team of about 50 volunteers provides group members with a myriad of activities, including monthly “Yes I Can” support groups, a book club, a knitting/crocheting club, lunch trips and mall walking. The group also volunteers for other local nonprofit organizations, helping with mailings and other events. All of the programs are free and require no commitment from any of the members.

While some of the group's members have been blind since birth, others suffer from conditions such as macular degeneration,

which can rob people of their vision over time.

“The biggest transformation comes from those who once had normal vision, but now feel like the good part of their lives are completely over,” says Schwartz. “Upon joining our group, they establish both close and casual friendships, and discover that they have a place to go and something meaningful to take part in.”

Schwartz, who has a Ph.D. in human development, says that many of her members benefit from connections with others who are farther along in the journey.

“There's just something wonderful to see in the connection between people who are going through what you are, who are experiencing what you are experiencing,” she explains.

She also sees a change in those who serve as “mentors” for newer members.

“Our members gain something by being role models for someone else,” she says. “When they get involved in helping others, their demeanor becomes livelier, happier.”

While most of the group's 50 members are seniors, they've welcomed members who are in their 20s, as well as those who are 100 or older. The approximately 50 volunteers are matched with members who share personal interests.

“Our members and our volunteers are what make this group so magical,” says Schwartz. “Our volunteers are our gifts to the world.”

There is no minimum time requirement to volunteer with the group, and no experience with visual impairment is necessary. The only requirement, she says, is that members are caring, compassionate, and willing to interact with members respectfully.

Schwartz provides one warning, however: “I tell any potential volunteer that

volunteering with our group can become an addiction,” she says with a laugh.

Volunteers are always needed to help with group activities and to transport members. The group especially needs volunteers to help with “behind the scenes” administrative tasks. Anyone interested in joining the group as a member or volunteer should contact Dr. Schwartz at 724.444.0064.

“Through our group, our members start to realize that just because they've lost some or all of their vision, it doesn't mean they can't have a full life,” Schwartz says. “They learn that they can continue to contribute a lot to the world and are worthy of respect.” ■

CURRENT PROGRAMS

For more information and a complete list of programs, call 724.444.0064.

MONTHLY MEETING

Second Thursday of each month from 1 to 3 p.m.

Entertainment, speakers, celebrations, special events, visiting and refreshments available.

LUNCH BRUNCH

Fourth Thursday of each month from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Venture out to lunch at inexpensive and moderately priced restaurants with new and old friends.

MEN'S GROUP

Third Wednesday of each month from 1 to 3 p.m.

Enjoy camaraderie with a great group of fellows who discuss issues, topics and general “guy talk.”

FRIENDSHIP VOLUNTEERS

Third Monday of each month from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Visually impaired members serve as volunteers for important nonprofit organizations in Pittsburgh.

YES I CAN!

Six consecutive Tuesdays at times throughout the year, from 1 to 3:30 p.m.

A class and support group for women regarding recovery from loss, and happiness.

KNITTING, CROCHETING, HANDIWORK

First and third Wednesdays of each month from 1 to 3 p.m.

No sight or experience needed. One-on-one teaching to knit or crochet. Yarn provided! Learn to make lovely items!



After walking around Ross Park Mall for exercise, members and volunteers of the Pittsburgh Friendship Group enjoy lunch together at the food court.