

Age in Action

By Jenna Brogan

Engaging their communities, seniors and nonprofits thrive on volunteerism.

They say, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” but for several local seniors, volunteering is the best anti-aging medicine of all.

Whether it’s the benefits of the social interaction, the exercise, the chance to give back, or the excuse to leave the house that motivates them, volunteering gives seniors the chance to forget about their health concerns— if even for a short time—and have some fun.

For 90-year-old Paul Croonquist of Pebble Beach, that means showing visitors around the Monterey Bay Aquarium, something he’s done for 26 years.



Out of His Shell: Long-time volunteer Paul Croonquist explains abalone characteristics using the touch pool at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

“I like to tell visitors something interesting about an animal—not just that it’s a fish, but something unique,” says Croonquist. “Sometimes people don’t know what to ask, so I just start talking to them.”

A retired U.S. Army unit commander, Croonquist became interested in marine life in his late adulthood and found that the Aquarium’s creed resonated with him.

“It has a mission to make people aware of the necessity of conservation,” he says. “It offers such wonderful insight into the ocean.” That passion got him in the door, but it’s his fellow volunteers—the Aquarium has about 900 total, according to its website—that keep him coming back. “They’re fun to be around,” says Croonquist. “There’s a lot of enthusiasm.”

In addition to providing positive experiences, volunteering can also help seniors live longer, according to Teresa Sullivan, executive director of Alliance on Aging of Monterey County.

“Volunteering improves self-esteem and empowerment; it leads to greater longevity, higher functionality and less depression,” she explains.

Perhaps that’s why Wayne Kelley of Carmel, an 86-year-old docent at Point Lobos, still leads visitors



Long View: Wayne Kelley has led Point Lobos tours for three decades.

(including school children) on nature walks at the scenic state park after 30 years.

“Even if someone is from Switzerland or somewhere else, they’re always taken by the beauty of Point Lobos,” says Kelley.

While he enjoys pointing out marine life, Kelley’s favorite part of the job is a learning tool he invented called the Rope Trick. Before starting a nature walk, he shows his group a 60-foot rope to compare the lengths of a humpback whale, a gray whale and an otter. “It’s very rewarding,” he says.

Connecting to the community is essential in breaking senior isolation, according to Jacquie DePetris, executive director of Elder Focus, LLC, a geriatric care management practice in Monterey.

“As people age, their world shrinks and life becomes a medical merry-go-round,” she says. “If they’re focused on something outside of their failing health, they’ll be more engaged with the world.”

Joe and Doris Bragdon use age to their advantage at the Steinbeck Center.

The Salinas couple—ages 94 and 92, respectively—became docents when the center opened so they could share their knowledge of local history during John Steinbeck’s era.

In addition to answering questions about the author, the pair have the added benefit of being able to point out where they lived in the exhibit photographs.

“They have pictures of the cannery I worked in, and one photo I might have been in if it wasn’t cropped,” laughs Joe.

“There aren’t too many people who lived through those times,” says Doris, who remembers when Salinas was called “Little Oklahoma” during the Dust Bowl migration. “It wasn’t an exaggeration,” she says.

Though they’re big fans of the author—they claim “Steinbeck got us into the Soviet Union” after a dicey situation at the border turned friendly when Doris mentioned they lived in Steinbeck Country—it’s the social interaction that keeps the couple volunteering. “Steinbeck touches the hearts of people, no matter what country they live in,” says Doris.

With a reported 15 million senior volunteers in America in 2009, according to Sullivan, Monterey County’s elderly volunteers are obviously not alone in their drive to serve. She hopes the trend will continue and

notes their essential contribution with a very simple statement: “We couldn’t do what we do without volunteers.”

Interested in volunteering at the Alliance on Aging? Call 646-1458 or visit www.allianceonaging.org.