

The Washington Post

DECEMBER 19, 1993

Magazine



Volunteers

How helping others helps you change your world

By WALT HARRINGTON



'Gray Flannel Suit': The Sequel · Dave Barry, Party Guy

Seeing *the* Light

Volunteers aren't better than the rest of us—just luckier. Because the chance to get outside themselves helps make them whole

My son and I are driving home from our first Friday night volunteering at the Lighthouse shelter. It is later than we had expected to be done, and he is dragging. I pulled him away from a touch football game at Kurt's house hours ago, and now I have also caused him to miss "Hangin' With Mr. Cooper" on TV. He silently complained about this several times during the evening, as we were serving dinner and then cleaning up, by looking directly at me through the crowd and tilting his head and widening his eyes expectantly, as if ask-

BY WALT
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Lighthouse volunteer Jamie Keefer, who says neighborliness, "a need for community," drives her service.

ing in that 11-year-old way, "Going home any time this *century*, Dad?" But he has said nothing.

"So what'd you think?" I ask.

He doesn't answer quickly, and when he does, the sentences come in bits and pieces. "I wish I could have stayed and played with Kurt longer, but I didn't mind going," he

ple may do other things, give clothes to the Salvation Army or give money. Just 'cause they work there doesn't mean they're better."

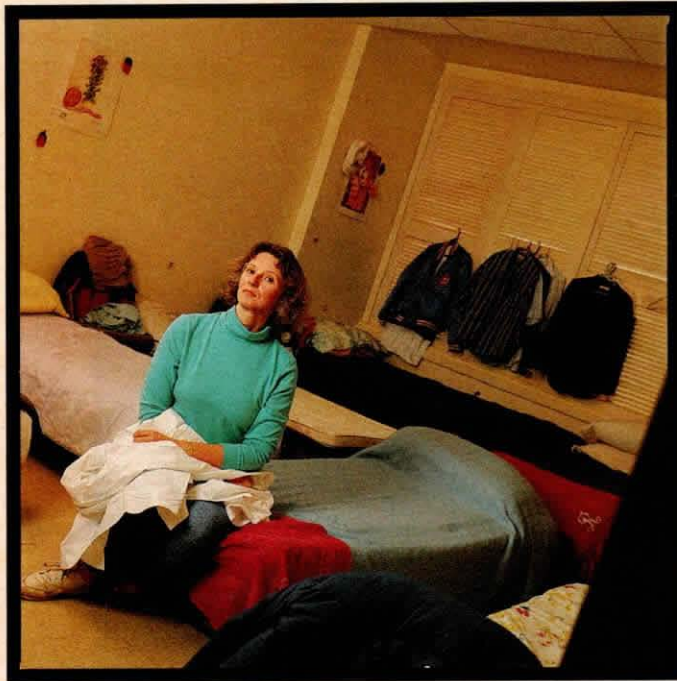
About this, he seems absolutely certain.

But still, I wonder . . .

BEING IN THE LIGHTHOUSE SHELTER is itself like being inside a car in a thick fog: It's easy to lose the sense of where you are in relation to the rest of the world, to feel momentarily as if there is no rest of the world, as if you are in a plane in the clouds. At the Lighthouse, I discover, that feeling can be an oddly pleasing disorientation.

Situated in downtown Annapolis a few miles from my home, the Lighthouse is tucked so discreetly amid the tasteful red brick fronts of West Street that it might easily be mistaken for the workplace of a lawyer or an architect. Inside, two tiny offices sandwich a dim, cavelike foyer stale with years of cigarette smoke. Through the door beyond the foyer is the shelter's living space, a room that shocks the eyes with its fluorescent glare. The place has been recently renovated in the modern drop-ceiling, vinyl-tile style. It is clean, neat and bland, neither warm nor forbidding. It is tiny, and several rooms this size could easily fit inside an average McDonald's.

This early fall morning, with its 20 or so residents out working or walking, the Lighthouse seems abandoned. The room is empty, although I know someone has just been cleaning, because the air carries the scent of fresh Pine-Sol. To the left, five cots reserved for women line the wall. A TV, couch, chairs and waist-high wall separate them from the 15 men's cots that are packed into the room doglegging off to the right. Posted a few feet apart, the cots are neatly made and topped with old blankets or red-flowered or green-flowered sheets, none of which matches any of the others. Out of sync in this meager setting are the happy paintings by children from the nearby planet suburbia—the red-nosed clown with a wild smile, the blazing yellow rendition of van Gogh's "Sunflowers" and



Says Jane Chamberlain, "I had to find a place to cry. Awful things happen to people, awful."

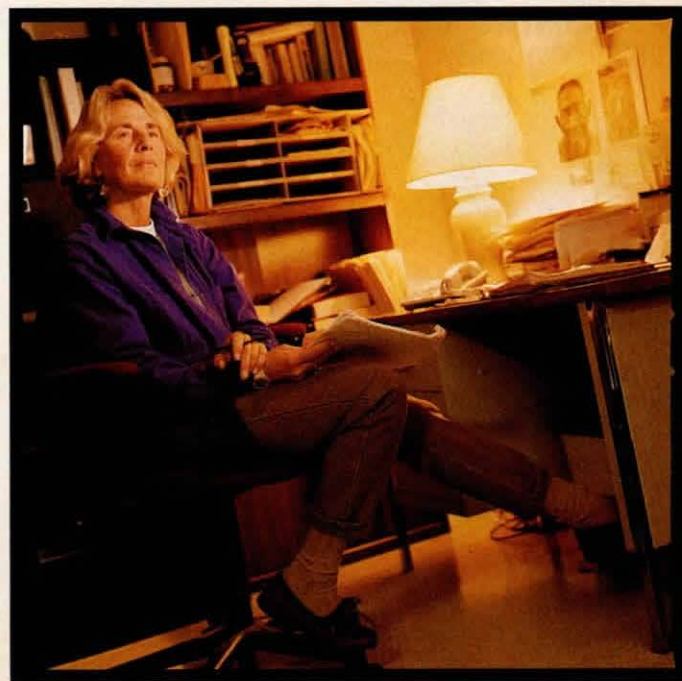
says, I think by way of apology for his impatience. "I met a kid my age, Hispanic kid. And that one guy, the accountant guy, he knew the Titanic sank in 1912. I was like, 'Wow!' He was just like a normal guy, why was he living there? I just kept thinking, like, if they ever had a good job, why would they be homeless? It was interesting, seeing the way people looked. I thought it'd be more, ummm, like 40 bunks with all these people, like bums with big bags of stuff. They had cable TV! And a guy asked me, 'You know anything about the TCI merger?' I said, 'Ah, yeah, what's TCI?'"

On the last half-mile back to our house, the narrow road slices between a small airport runway to the south and a large field of unharvested beans to the north. As it often is at night, the road is socked in with thick fog that envelops us in a cottony white realm. Quite off the subject, and quite out of character, in a gently contemplative tone, my son says, "It looks like we're in a plane in the clouds."

Then, "I thought a homeless shelter would be a place where you come in and then go out, like on 'The Simpsons' when we saw a Thanksgiving show where they had old guys come in, eat a meal and leave. And the guy says, 'See ya in December.' Just Thanksgiving and Christmas. I thought it'd be like that, people'd come off the street, eat and leave. But this is a place they live." He perks up. "It wasn't sad. It was kinda neat. I wouldn't mind going back."

I then raise my own concern, the nagging question that has led me to take my son and myself down to the Lighthouse: "Are people who volunteer to work at a place like that better than people who don't?"

"No," my son says, without moral hesitation. "Other peo-



Deede Rivers, who says she is motivated by Christ's call to help the poor.

the gangly blue-and-green camel with a black hat worn high on its head.

Beyond the living space, past the two pots of freshly made coffee, down a short hallway, is a little kitchen with a stainless steel stove, sink, dishwasher and refrigerator. On the floor are boxes filled with scores of hot dogs in buns—leftovers from the weekend's Navy football game—waiting to be transferred to the fridge. Farther down the hallway, at its dead end, is a narrow food pantry where the old saying "beggars can't be choosers" takes on new meaning. Besides cereal, bread and cans of fruit and vegetables, there's a weird hodgepodge—everything from vanilla Ultra Slim Fast drink to Orville Redenbacher Gourmet Popping & Topping Buttery Flavor Popcorn Oil to Vermont Epicurean Tangy Maple Mustard. A while ago, somebody donated homemade strawberry jam dated 8-8-75.

In the pantry, Betsy Foote is standing with an absent look on her face while examining the shelves, which are more bare than usual. Normally, a morning volunteer like Betsy, a trim, athletic 44-year-old woman in a black-and-white-checked blouse and cuffed chinos, might fill grocery bags and line them up neatly on the floor for delivery to the couple of dozen people who stop by asking for emergency food every day. Or as she did last week, her first week, she might wash, dry, fold and stack sheets and towels. But this morning, she is being dispatched by Lighthouse Director Joe Rock, a tall, bemused-looking 29-year-old man with a shock of unruly brown hair, to make a supply run in her Jeep Cherokee to the Anne Arundel County food bank, 12 miles south of Annapolis in rural Deale.

Betsy is a novice volunteer, but she is clearly well organized and competent, and Joe has high hopes for her. He and the other six paid Lighthouse staffers see new volunteers come and go all the time, and they intuitively judge new people's staying power when they first walk through the door. Most important is whether volunteers seem relaxed and natural in this foreign setting. Can they, Joe asks with a wry humor earned from a decade of working with the homeless, go about their business while a dazed man is lying on his cot growling, "Aaaaargh"? Do they notice that the coffee pots are empty and go make coffee? Or do they ask, "Should I make coffee?" Such little things speak a lot, and Betsy Foote has so far scored well. Last week, she did a bang-up job of straightening up the linen closet.

"I just wanted to feel like I was doing something that was directly helping other people," Betsy says. "You know, you work for years and years and feel sort of unfulfilled. You go, 'Was I missing something here?'" After volunteering for her few hours last week she felt, well, she felt *good*. That's all, just *good*. She can't explain it further.

Betsy is in the early stages of what you might call the volunteer experience. She came to help but is also being helped. Since she turned 40, she has been feeling a kind of confusion in her life. Until a couple of years ago, she and her husband, an engineer, hadn't gone to church regularly, but then they joined one. Betsy found herself thinking more often about her mother, an Indiana housewife who founded a home for troubled teenagers. Then, the architectural firm where Betsy works was hit by the recession and she was cut to part-time hours for the first time

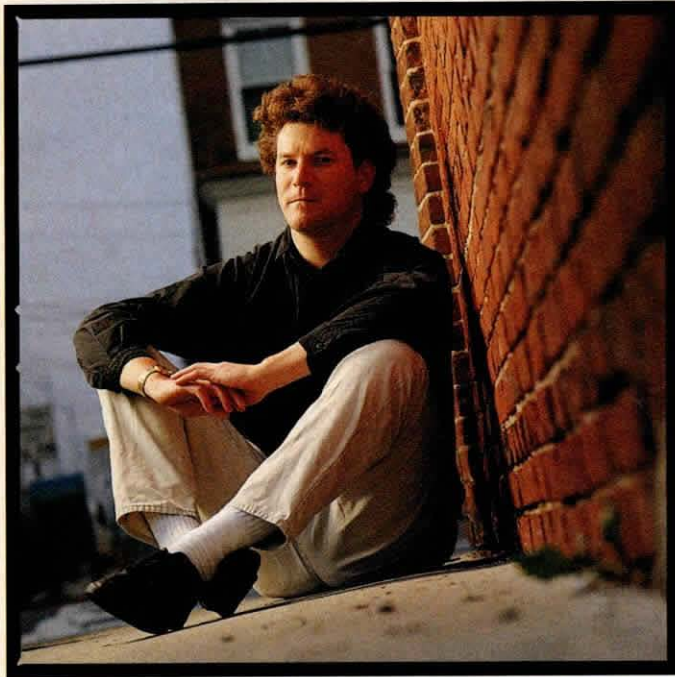


Janice Wolf and John Parham. Lighthouse residents, she says, "make me feel good to be alive."

in her life. Once she got over the irrational feeling that she was to blame—"It's a terrible, terrible feeling"—she saw her misfortune as a rare chance, and she volunteered at the Lighthouse.

At the food bank, Betsy and I and Bruce Michalec, who runs the place, load up the Cherokee—pork for barbecue sandwiches, cans and jars of applesauce, tuna, vegetables, tomato juice, fruit cocktail, peanut butter, beans, sliced

THE BEST volunteers
'have a good-natured
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'It's perspective. They're
not self-conscious.'



After three years directing Lighthouse volunteers, Joe Rock says the good ones see God in every face.

pineapples, diced potatoes, pickles, relish, spaghetti sauce and a huge hunk of pastrami. When we leave, Nellybelle, as Betsy calls her Jeep, is riding low.

"I don't know what I expected," she says of her short time at the Lighthouse. "People strung out on drugs or whatever. But they can hold a perfectly normal conversation." She thinks of what's worrying her lately—the septic system at home that needs to be replaced to the tune of several thousand dollars—and it seems so trivial, especially since there's still enough money in the budget for a country club membership.

"I'm thinking, 'Oh, this is horrible! This is the end of the world!' And then there are *these* people," she says, men and women who don't have even a room, many without jobs, many with mental illnesses and drinking or drug habits. She says softly, "Maybe I'm trying to re-find myself."

JOE ROCK is skeptical of volunteers who are trying to find themselves. Not Betsy necessarily, and not that he doesn't want just about anybody's help, but he's seen so many people going through crises in their lives—people who've lost their jobs or their marriages—volunteer at the Lighthouse all gung-ho, and then quickly lose interest and disappear. It's strange, but once whatever is bothering them clears up, they seem not to need the Lighthouse anymore. As if the place were cheap therapy.

As a man whose mother and father built a soup kitchen in their back yard in Falls Church in the 1940s, as a man who joined VISTA out of college and who volunteered in shelters in Richmond and Washington, as a philosophical devotee of Catholic social activist Dorothy Day, as a man who has asked staffers to read *Anna Karenina*, in which Tolstoy's character Konstantin Levin, a wealthy landowner, feels closer to his natural "inner goodness" when he is working with poor peasants, Joe Rock has his own ideas about the army of volunteers he has known.

"There's an incredible psychology of volunteers, especially around the holidays," he says. "That's when you really

need Dr. Freud to just figure the whole thing out. Last year, this lady, she just called up, she doesn't know us, she wants us to send a couple of homeless children to her house and she'd feed them." Joe shudders at the memory. "We have that taken care of," he told her. "Could you maybe bring in some brownies?" She didn't. "Those kind of things do happen at Christmas, once or twice a day, extraordinary stuff," he says. "People get in these nervous frenzies from maybe guilt."

Joe tells this story: Right after Christmas one year a man came in and said he'd do anything, *anything*, to help at the Lighthouse. He said that on Christmas Eve he was at his mother's house with his family and his brothers and sisters and their families, when his brother got up from the holiday table for a phone call. It was his brother's best friend, who had just been arrested for drunk driving. His brother bailed out his friend and brought him to the house, where the friend, still drunk and distraught, spoke with despair of having no family and children on Christmas Eve. That night, the man who later came to Joe had a vision that this sad, lonely drunk was close to Christ, while he—with the lovely wife and children—was very far away from Him, his Lord.

"So what did he do for you?" I ask.

"Ah, nothing," Joe says.

"They rush in and they expect to see this smelly mass of Ellis Island people begging. Sometimes, people are disappointed when they get in the Lighthouse and see it's a calm environment, it's clean. It kinda doesn't fit." On the other hand, some volunteers find the Lighthouse frightening and bizarre. "You can tell when they are uncomfortable, and we try to make them comfortable." Once, Joe even took bluesman John Lee Hooker off the tape deck and put on Herb Alpert in an attempt to relax a nervous volunteer. "I tried to make it more"—he pauses and smiles wryly—"more San Bernardino."

Those misguided or uptight volunteers pose quite a challenge for Joe and his assistant, Henry Parker, who see their work as a Christian ministry. It's hard for them to feel sympathetic and charitable, to remind themselves that such volunteers, with their wealth and status, can be as spiritually needy as any Lighthouse resident. Joe and Henry must remind themselves that those volunteers—only a small fraction of the folks who come through the door—are a mirror held up to the egotism in all of us. The good volunteers, most volunteers, Joe says, always share one quality: empathy.

"They have a good-natured good humor about them and a sense of the absurd," he says. "Things aren't black and white. It's perspective. A little forest for the trees. There's nothing unusual about some guy talking about the way to clean up the bay is to take all the sea grass and vacuum it. They're not self-referential, they're not self-conscious. Just breezy. As if Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore were coming in to volunteer. Or that urbane couple from 'The Thin Man,' Myrna Loy and Dick Powell.

"You've got to believe in individuals. You don't have to believe in institutions, you don't have to believe in nations, but you've got to love the people you work with. Don't say, 'Why doesn't Bill Clinton do that? Why doesn't Governor Schaefer do this?' If you believe that, you're lost. I don't think you have to be a Christian, but you've got to see God in every face you look into. And that's a challenge."

But that is what Joe Rock believes the good volunteers do, whether they know it or not: They see God—or themselves or humanity—in every face.

THE REAL ACTION at the Lighthouse is at night. The residents have returned and some are sitting around the TV watching "Jeopardy," nibbling on nachos and salsa dip and competing for the answers. One man, an accountant and recovering alcoholic, the man who knew the Titanic sank in 1912, is the hands-down winner. Others are taking showers, changing out of work clothes, combing their hair, getting ready for a walk downtown or an evening Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Two women, one of whom is a nursing student, and their young children who live in Lighthouse apartments upstairs are just coming down to eat. Another woman is on her cot reading the Bible. She will soon announce that she has won \$500 in the lottery, then correct it to \$5,000, then correct it to \$200.

A man, an economic consultant and recovering alcoholic and drug addict, is reading *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. The other night, he was reading Aldous Huxley. Later, a man with an imaginative view of reality will explain that the Chinese and Americans are developing technology that will soon allow jazz club patrons to pay live bands only for the songs they've enjoyed hearing.

The residents, in all their diversity, are at ease now. It's the volunteers who are at work. Each night, several people are scheduled to make food dishes for 30 folks—tonight it's meatloaf, mashed potatoes and a mixture of lima beans, green beans and corn—and drop the chow off at about 6. Each night, several other volunteers are scheduled to set the tables, serve the food, do the dishes and wash the floor. Each night, a male and female volunteer, along with a paid staffer, are scheduled to spend the night and sleep in shifts. The Lighthouse is sponsored by 10 local churches and draws from about 400 volunteers, about two-thirds of

JANE HAS learned to recognize the absolute sincerity in the words 'thank you.' She has learned which canned foods are better for people who use light bulbs to heat their meals.



Mary Anne Johnson and Jeff Stevenson. She marvels at "how much something simple can mean."

whom come in regularly. Still, nobody's too surprised if meal, server or overnighter doesn't show. If the food doesn't arrive, they'll whip out surplus Desert Storm casseroles or warm up the Navy hot dogs. If a server or overnighter doesn't arrive, a staffer will do the job. But tonight, except that the meatloaf is still raw and needs to be popped in the oven, everything goes smoothly.

"Was it mooing?" Joe Rock asks.

"Not quite," answers Jamie Keefer, an overnight volunteer who's also helping with the meal because the three preppie high school girls who were supposed to be helping have made 30 peanut butter-and-jelly lunches for tomorrow, set the tables and, *poof*, disappeared, leaving only one server. So Jamie, a 32-year-old dental hygienist who has been volunteering at the Lighthouse for two years, pitches in. She's afraid people might burn themselves on the lake of hot grease floating over the now cooked meatloaf, and so she pours it off, nearly filling two small coffee cans. A tiny woman wearing jeans, a plain gray sweat shirt and long, frizzy hair pulled back in a bushy ponytail, Jamie is a vegetarian, and the sight of the goop makes her queasy.

"If you're a vegetarian here you might as well be on the Bataan death march," Joe says. "You're gonna die."

"I adore him," Jamie says sarcastically.

Says Joe, "She's the perfect volunteer."

Jamie didn't come to the Lighthouse to look into the face of God, nothing so fantastic. She grew up in little Milton, W.Va., where her folks were schoolteachers who every year helped collect clothing for the children they and their fellow teachers knew would need it. At Christmas, they adopted a family to give gifts and food to. No formal organization, they just did it. In Milton, it was the neighborly thing. Jamie grew up, graduated from hygienist school and, on a whim, took a job in Zurich, Switzerland, where she stayed until two years ago. She lived the high life, jetting to London for parties, hanging

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mound of backfin crab for the fish and mussels.) If roasted bell pepper soup is one of the specials, go for it. This is a velvety jewel with just enough spunk—from the smoky roast pepper, tomato, crab and cayenne—to offset the richness of its cream base and coax you down to the bottom of the bowl. It's quite a drop from there to the New England clam chowder, which we found moderately briny and flavorful on one visit and utterly bland on another. The two salads here—mixed greens and Caesar—are excellent, and at \$2 and \$3 respectively, you can't afford to pass them up.

The regular menu lists salmon, grouper, flounder, swordfish, tuna and halibut, each offered poached, broiled, baked or steamed, and served with a choice of sauces. The flounder is also available stuffed with crab, and there's usually a crab-stuffed fish on the nightly specials list. The fish here is fresh, and it has generally not been overcooked (a major problem in many seafood restaurants). The crab-stuffed grouper and tilapia, both in a simple lemon-butter sauce, are impeccable, as is the poached salmon. Not all the fish specials are as well sauced. One of them was overwhelmed by a saffron-laden sauce that would have been better on pasta. And sometimes the specials are loaded up with extraneous ingredients that don't really add anything—like the shiitake mushrooms that topped a good sea bass fillet one night. The broiled swordfish and tuna were dry—so what else is new? Expecting tuna in a restaurant to be juicy is like expecting the Bullets to have a winning season—somewhere along the line, hope inevitably gives way to disappointment.

An especially nice item is the rainbow brochette, a skewered grill of fish, shrimp and sea scallops, its chunky sauce sparked with garlic and tomato. Note that the scallops in herb butter have a somewhat similar sauce. So does the sometimes-available mahi-mahi in papillote with mussels and scallops, in which all the ingredients are steamed in foil, allowing the robust flavors of the sauce to thoroughly permeate the seafood. This is a top-notch dish, easy to like and worth watching for.

Fish Stories belongs to the pat-'em-like-a-burger school of crab-cake making, whereas we prefer the loosely bound, irregular patties of the barely-touch-'em school. Still, these crab cakes are commendably light, and they're not choked with excess mayo. With more incisive seasoning, they'd be quite good.

Among the several pastas, the champ is the fettuccine with vegetables. Because

they require such careful timing, cream-based primavera pastas such as this are hard to do well in restaurants; they generally end up gluey or monotonous, or both. Not here. The fettuccine is perfectly tender and chewy, the strips of shiitake mushroom, sweet red pepper and broccoli are impeccably cooked, and the cream sauce, with just enough Parmesan to give it some bite, manages to be subtly flavorful. Subtlety gives way to blandness, though, in the penne with chicken, well cooked but flavorless. Linguine with clams is the usual Italian rendition, with a good broth of clam juice, oil, garlic and pepper—fine but unexceptional. The same goes for the "sea shells with angel hair," which turned out to be linguine with clams and mussels in a decent but predictable house marinara sauce, the same one that appears on several other dishes.

The veal medallions here are of high quality, and the best way to have them is with shiitake mushrooms and red peppers in a reduced meat stock sauce with balsamic vinegar. The veal chardonnay, on the other hand, is a somewhat brassy dish with a discordant mixture of capers, fresh tomato, sun-dried tomato, parsley and lots of wine. Chicken pesto is—what else?—a chicken breast with pesto sauce. A nice but unremarkable dish. Ditto for the chicken Madeira, with a smooth, pleasantly winy sauce. Forget the steaks. Our porterhouse was dry and tasteless.

At Fish Stories, you can eat well if you choose wisely. Start with one of the outstanding soups, go on to a salad and one of the top seafood or veal dishes, and you'll end up with a very good meal. A sensible meal. If you crave excitement you can buy a lottery ticket on the way home. ■

Mark and Gail Barnett are freelance restaurant critics. Phyllis C. Richman is on vacation.

Solution to Last Week's Puzzle

WHAM	SWAMP	BALER	ARID
EIRE	TABLE	ELOPE	RENE
BRIDLE	VEIL	LOUISB	MARE
BELIEVED	IDLED	TRADER	
CEES	SCAMS	TROD	
SPEARS	WHALE	SEAWATER	
HASTY	REIN	INSPAIN	ADO
RUSE	BOARS	WARN	CLIO
USE	CLARK	APERY	CHUCK
GENERAL	ARIES	TRUSTS	
MUDDERS	SSUPERIOR		
CERISE	LOTOS	ENCLOSE	
EXALT	MILAN	SHANK	MOM
DICE	PETE	PEARY	VENI
ALE	MANESTREETS	SEGAL	
REDROSES	HERDS	CANARY	
HUTS	MUSSY	MALE	
ARIOSO	PINTO	MACARONI	
FODDERLAND	NEIGHS	SAYER	
ABEE	AERIE	ALLIE	TEAM
ROSS	LAKER	ELECT	EZRA

VOLUNTEERS

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out with an American expatriate crowd. But the longer she stayed, the lonelier she got. She saw how empty were the lives of the party gang. And more and more she yearned for what she calls a "connection"—the kind of neighborliness she remembered from her childhood.

Joe Rock is always talking about how it's the volunteers who take "the edge off the awfulness of what this place is"—the people who bring cloth napkins for dinner, the woman who after surgery stopped by with groceries even before she went home, the man who faithfully delivers the leftover milk every week from the Naval Academy, the woman who drops off five loaves of freshly baked bread every Friday, the man who spends 20 hours a week keeping the Lighthouse finances, the woman who leaves little notes on the dishes she provides, such as, "Don't put the marshmallows on top too soon."

"It's much different than the outside world," Joe says. "It's better."

That spirit is what Jamie Keefer was seeking. "There's just a need of community, to do something other than just go to work and go home," she says. "It's sad, but you don't get it. And there is a need for it." Jamie says she just feels better when she's doing something for somebody else, when she isn't at home thinking about her daily aggravations—not always thinking "me, me, me." Although her one overnight a month at the Lighthouse leaves her tired for days, she says, "I love doing it. Everybody sometimes just needs to talk, and I have a few minutes. But part of this too is a need for me. I feel good when I work here. There's just a sense of purpose. That's what I think it is. I've seen some really great times in here, everybody playing cards or chess, a real sense of togetherness. It's very..." And she hesitates. "This sounds so..." And she hesitates again. "It's a very humbling thing. It keeps my feet on the ground. It isn't only for these people."

Jamie tells this story: Last month she was in the middle of moving. Nobody except her fiancé showed up to help, and boxes were everywhere. So she called the Lighthouse and said, "I don't feel like coming in." She was told politely, "Well, we don't have anybody else." So Jamie, out of guilt, came in. "I just thought I would die," she says. "And I got here and we started cutting up, and, as tired as I was, everything went right out the door. You're thinking of somebody else first: 'Can I get you something?' Or asking the children if they've had enough to eat. And all of a sudden, I had all this energy. And I

had a ball. For a little bit, I wasn't thinking about myself."

When dinner is done, the mess cleaned up, the three high school girls return. Awkwardly trying to explain their absence, one girl says, "I thought we had to wait awhile and then it's, like, dinner's over." Jamie shrugs. These girls are so young, have seen so little. And, besides, they are hardly the worst volunteers. Over the years, there have been volunteers who don't work at all. They read a book, glance at their watches and ask, "When's dinner?" Or take the volunteer who got up and flicked off "GoodFellas" because it was too violent for the residents to watch. Or the woman who offered to donate a VCR if the Lighthouse would promise to play self-improvement videos every night from 8 to 10. To the good volunteers, the tunnel vision (or is it tunnel morality?) of these people is baffling. The Lighthouse residents can be more direct: "The volunteers from hell," one woman jokingly calls them.

"You have volunteers who come here and they're doing it for the wrong reason," says Henry Parker, a round, rumpled 36-year-old man who is both a minister and a social worker.

Says a resident, "You can see it." And other residents nod in agreement.

"Yeah, you can see it," says Henry, sadly. "They only come in here so they can say, 'Well, tonight I stayed at the shelter' or 'I took some food to the shelter.' They're not doing it from their heart."

No, Jamie isn't bothered by the girls who disappeared. Maybe they will learn something just by being here, maybe their hearts will be touched in ways she cannot see and they cannot yet know. Jamie puts the salt and pepper and Tabasco sauce back in the cabinet, makes two new pots of coffee, and then goes to the refrigerator to check the dates on the assorted leftovers. Anything past three days old gets the heave-ho. She laughs and says, "These things will sit in here for the next 200 years if I don't clean them out."

ONE DAY, I am standing inside the Lighthouse front door, in the foyer where several residents are smoking, when an obviously well-heeled man throws open the door, leans inside and hollers, "I need a couple of hands to bring in some canned goods. Right out front." The man turns and walks back to his car. No "Hello," or "Excuse me," or "Please." I look at the residents next to me. "They often do that," a man says. And we all go outside to unload this remarkably rude man's car. He does not say thank you.

Another day, the same place: An elderly woman walks in the door lugging a

heavy grocery bag filled with soups, powdered milk, Swiss Miss hot chocolate, corn and baby food. She read in the paper a few months ago that local churches were collecting food for the Lighthouse. So she picked up an extra item each time she went to the supermarket. She's on Social Security, she says, and can't give much, but whenever her extra-item bag gets full she'd like to drop it off. She is asked if she would like a receipt to take a tax deduction. "No," she says, taken aback. "This is my gift to God."

IT IS MORNING AGAIN, and except for a frail elderly woman with a tired, emotionless face who is still in bed, in her clothes, atop the cot's plastic cover with its sheets and blanket all balled up, the Lighthouse is once more empty of residents. Jane Chamberlain, a 47-year-old woman who is this morning's volunteer, has made toast, coffee and a few bag lunches and done the breakfast dishes and straightened up the pantry. But the whole time, she has been keeping an eye on the elderly woman, who finally gets out of bed to go to the bathroom. In a rush, Jane runs to her cot, rips off the old sheets and begins to make up her bed.

"Gonna fix that bed for ya," Jane says cheerfully when the woman returns. "Did you have some coffee or juice?"

The woman's voice is a whisper. "Yeah, coffee."

"We've got some nice orange juice."

"Ya got any milk?"

"Yeah, you want some?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." And off Jane goes to get the milk.

If Jane's old co-workers could only see her now. As a computer engineer, Jane was a Tasmanian devil, did everything in fast forward. She called it "multi-tasking," which meant if she was talking to a colleague in her office, she was also talking on the phone and also typing on her computer. "I used to get on 495 and I'd be tearin' up," she says, laughing. "Oh, I loved it." Then, "I have sometimes thought that it was the hand of God that reached out and said, 'Stop!'"

That happened a few years ago, when Jane was hit with a disabling illness. Her recuperation was long, and she was no longer a Tasmanian devil. But she needed to do *something*, and so she volunteered at the Lighthouse, where she has worked a day a week for several years now.

"I try to learn something from the people here," she says. "I've learned a lot." She has learned, for instance, to recognize the absolute sincerity in the words "thank you" after she tells a mother she can have a bag of free groceries. She has learned which canned foods are better for people who have only a light bulb with

which to heat their meals. She has learned that there are people who do not realize that some jobs carry health benefits. She has learned to listen differently to throwaway jokes, as when she heard a deep sadness behind a homeless alcoholic man's quip that he had been waiting all his 36 years for the right woman to come along. She has learned that women live under bridges and that men left out in the cold will die. She knows these truths firsthand.

"My husband came down and looked around pretty good and thought it might be too much," Jane says. "But I got so much out of it that he could see. I just felt so great."

"What did you come away with?" I ask.

"Oh!" she says, pausing for an instant. "There's nothing to compare it to. Most people work for a paycheck and it doesn't even compare. It's just so *good*. I come in here sometimes and somebody will stop by who has left the Lighthouse, they're doing great. You see 'em on the street: 'Oh, Miss Jane,' and they're glad to see you and they remember the smallest kindness you've shown them. You just talked to them, maybe you gave them encouragement, you said, 'You look great today.' It could be just the most ordinary little common courtesy and they never forget it. . . . Just to see them doing great, and they have a job. One guy told me, 'Oh, yeah, I'm painting my apartment.' You see that you can really do something to help people. Most people think you can't do anything, and you can."

Jane is now done making the elderly woman's bed, and the woman has finished her milk. She is headed toward her cot so slowly it's as if she is the opposite of Jane's old persona: Instead of fast forward, she is moving in slow motion. Jane asks, "You want me to help you take a shower later?" The elderly woman stops and turns her emotionless face toward Jane. She whispers, "Yeah." Then she smiles, ever so slightly, but still she smiles, and climbs into bed. Jane whispers, "I think you could do a lot with her."

"CHEF'S SURPRISE!" hollers Janice Wolf, and everyone in the kitchen knows what that means—the evening meal is on its way but nobody has a clue what it will be. The smart money is on lasagna, always is. Once, the Lighthouse served lasagna 10 nights in a row. That's the record. Then comes chili. Then chicken. There's even chicken as a side dish tonight, leftovers from a St. Mary's Catholic Church dinner, warming in the oven now.

"Did we get the milk and juice on?" Janice hollers again, her voice large for so small a woman. She's 46 years old, a nurse and, as Joe calls her, the First Lady

of the Lighthouse. She has volunteered every week for almost two years now and she shows no signs of fatigue. If anything, she's more energized than ever.

"Is curfew still at 7:30?" she asks Joe.

"Midnight, 1 a.m., depending," Joe says, deadpan.

"Depending?" Janice asks, confused.

"Depending on what kind of time they're having," Joe says, his sardonic humor catching the ever-zealous Janice off guard.

"Joe!" she laughs, waving the tongs with which she is just now transferring the St. Mary's chicken to a serving plate.

Tonight boasts a good crew. Besides Janice, there are also Mary Anne Johnson and Jeff Stevenson, who are 28 years old and the co-owners of Paradise Bay Yacht Charters in Annapolis. They too have volunteered regularly for several years. There also are other volunteers tonight, and people are bumping into one another in the kitchen, which rings with laughter and clanking pans and a swooshing dishwasher. Janice talks over the din.

"I come because it fills a need."

"For them or for you?" I ask.

"For me," she says, surprised at the question. "Most of my life I've gone through big depressions, and when I found the shelter it filled a void. It made me feel good about myself and about what I was doing. I have a very supportive husband, a very loving daughter, but I still have this void. When I don't come down here, it's like a part of me is missing. I'm saying that very honestly because it's real important to me. They make me feel good to be alive. I can connect with them. I don't know why. I like to think that a sentence or a word might actually make a difference in someone's life, but it makes a difference in mine. I have an inner peace when I walk out of here." A year ago—a year after Janice started at the Lighthouse—she stopped seeing her therapist, who told her, "You don't need me anymore."

"Without the shelter," Janice says, "I don't know where I would have been. Or who I would have been."

"Lasagna!" somebody suddenly yells when the Chef's Surprise arrives. To everyone's amazement, it's vegetarian lasagna—and delicious. After dinner, after the glaring fluorescent ceiling lights are flicked off and the soft-glow table lamps are flicked on, after Henry's Bible devotional gathering is completed, Mary Anne Johnson and Jeff Stevenson sit in a quiet corner and explain why they volunteer at the Lighthouse.

"You tend to get self-absorbed in your own problems and forget that there's other people out there, and you can help

Where You Can Help

For anyone interested in volunteering, there are a host of bureaus throughout the area that will match applicants with appropriate jobs at nonprofit organizations. In searching for the optimum match, bureau counselors weigh individual skills, interests, location and time availability.

While the volunteer spirit runs highest during the holiday season—people start to reflect and "realize they haven't done as much as they wanted, so they offer to help," explains one bureau director—the centers operate year-round and welcome applications at all times:

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Greater D.C. Cares: 202-663-9207.

MARYLAND

Montgomery County Volunteer and Community Service Center: 301-217-4949.

Prince George's Voluntary Action Center: 301-779-9444.

Columbia Volunteer Corps: 410-715-3163.

United Way of Central Maryland (includes Anne Arundel County): 410-659-0050.

Volunteer Center of Frederick County: 301-663-9096.

Hands On Baltimore: 410-547-8810.

Governor's Office on Volunteerism: 410-225-4496.

Volunteer Maryland: 410-514-7270.

VIRGINIA

Alexandria Volunteer Bureau: 703-836-2176.

Arlington County Volunteer Office: 703-358-3222.

Volunteer Center of Fairfax County: 703-246-3460.

Loudoun Volunteer Center: 703-777-0113.

Voluntary Action Center of the Prince William Area: 703-369-5292.

them and it will help your own existence," Jeff says. "You can step into somebody else's world for a while."

"Whenever I've been stressed," Mary Anne says, "he'll tell me that's the time I need to go give. And I come back charged up. Any time in my life that I've given back I've always felt comfort. It makes you feel stronger when you're giving."

Mary Anne had volunteered in the past—as a candy striper in high school, with poor city kids when she lived in Washington. But starting up a new business a few years ago had consumed her attention for too long.

She tells this story: She and Jeff had a bunch of poor kids from a church in Washington out to their place on Back Creek for an afternoon. They took the kids on a water taxi ride in the Annapolis harbor, and a woman with the kids said they'd have to repay them in some way. "You can sing for me," Mary Anne joked. Later that afternoon, when the sun was nearly down and the day nearly done, the woman lined up the children, called Mary Anne over, and they sang for her—gospel hymns sung so beautifully that heads popped up out of the boats docked all around them.

"If I had a camera," says Mary Anne, tears coming to her eyes recalling the moment. "It was moving. It was unbelievable. But you don't realize it when you're stuck in the daily grind, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. That's when we decided we were gonna give back."

IT IS THE SAME SONG . . . From the people I have mentioned, and from so many others, including Rusty Porter and his wife, Virginia, and Deede Rivers and John and Andrea Parham. People's motives vary—for Rusty, Virginia and Deede, it is Christ's call to help the poor; for John and Andrea, it is their desire to make certain that the Lighthouse's black residents also see black volunteers. But no matter the motive, people's reaction is the same: Working at the Lighthouse makes them feel, well, *better*. In a way that is always difficult to put into words. Todd Vizcarondo, a 17-year-old volunteering to meet the graduation requirements of St. Mary's High School, couldn't describe the good feeling he got working at the Lighthouse, other than to say that when he leaves at night, he has the same sensation he feels when he leaves the Catholic confessional having just been absolved of his sins.

Folks volunteer at the Lighthouse—and, no doubt, hundreds of other shelters, nursing homes, schools, hospitals, thrift stores and food banks—in Washington and across America, looking to give a little something back, or to assuage their guilt for living in prosperity while others do not, or to meet the textbook requirements of their faith.

And they are changed.

Isn't it an upside-down notion to think that 20 homeless men and women who need help can have helped so many? It seems almost unfair that in return they get only a place to sleep, a free bag lunch and a home-cooked meal each day. One

Lighthouse volunteer, 34-year-old Paul Gonzalez, a men's clothing salesman at Hecht's, says he even feels a bit guilty that people are so grateful to him when he has really done so little. Yet the evening I met Paul, he was spending the night at the Lighthouse, even though that very week the many inspections for a day care center he and his wife were opening were being done. He said simply, "When you make a commitment, you don't just back out of it."

I suppose there are those who would reduce the acts of Paul and Betsy, Jamie, Jane, Janice, Mary Anne and Jeff to mere selfishness: They get to feel good by doing good. I think of a passage in a short story titled "The Volunteer" by James Lasdun: "Were our motives ones of simple charity, or did we suffer from some morbid wish to enact within our own psyches, to illuminate by our own lives, the essential relations between one part of society and another, just as the sin-eaters of another century elected to absorb into themselves both the wrongs and the due punishment of their sinning brethren?" Is it all just morbid penance?

I don't buy it for a moment, neither by calculation nor even unconscious intent, not for the volunteers I met anyway, those who have crossed over and been touched. I believe their experience is closer to the sentiment in the book that Joe Rock recommends to his staffers, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in which Konstantin Levin says, "Knowledge, unattainable by reasoning, has been revealed to me personally, to my heart, openly and beyond a doubt." In the book's final passage Levin reflects, "My whole life, independently of anything that may happen to me, every moment of it, is no longer meaningless as it was before, but has an incontestable meaning of goodness, with which I have the power to invest it."

The power to invest it . . .

That's what these people have done, chosen to step outside themselves, to forget themselves for a few hours, to shed the adornments of status, achievement and social class. When a rich woman helps an old lady take a shower, she is judged no differently than when a poor woman helps an old lady take a shower. She is judged only on how well and with how much care she does the task. The volunteers I met, like Tolstoy's Levin, have stopped *thinking* for a few moments, stopped worrying about changing the world or even changing themselves. And by shedding all pretense, all philosophy, all politics, they have changed the world and themselves without setting out to do so.

"Scripture says that if you pour out your heart for the hungry, if you take the homeless poor into your house, you will

be like a 'watered garden,' " says Deede Rivers, who volunteers at the Lighthouse at least one day a week. "Well, you don't do it to *be* like a watered garden, but still you *are*."

You have invested your life with goodness.

MY SON AND I HAVE served dinner at the Lighthouse on four Friday nights now, and I have come to see the truth of Joe Rock's remark that a homeless shelter is "like a ship at sea," a place where life seems forever unchanged but always changing. Since we began our visits two months ago, Betsy Foote has gone back to full-time work and won't be able to volunteer every Monday morning anymore. Joe Rock, after running the Lighthouse for three grueling years, has left the job and Henry Parker has taken over. My son has learned to make bag lunches on his own. He has found the Tabasco sauce in the cabinet when none of us could. He has learned to his amazement that no contestant on "Jeopardy" knows more about the Bible than the woman who so often reads it on her cot. He has been glad that two of his favorite residents—the Titanic expert and the man who was reading Thoreau—have found good jobs. He has learned the meaning of the word "detox." The other day, he told me that it felt strange for us to be out shopping for a new car, when the folks he had met at the Lighthouse have no place to live.

I have decided this: My son was right that people who volunteer at places like the Lighthouse are not better than people who don't. There are so many other ways to matter. Let's face it, running a business that employs thousands of people, that gives those people the dignity of not needing the Lighthouse, not to mention the ability to contribute time and money to the place, balances powerfully against serving a few free meals.

No, the volunteers I met at the Lighthouse feel better about themselves not because they are better than anyone else, but because they are better than the people they used to be. They are more reflective and less self-obsessed. They are better in the way that a mother or father is better after having rocked a crying child to sleep in the middle of the night. The act may *feel* good to the mother or father, but it also *is* good—a beautifully pure moment when selfish and selfless are indistinguishable.

So now, when my son and I drive home from the Lighthouse, whether we are tired, whether we have missed "Hangin' With Mr. Cooper," we feel good. We are in a plane in the clouds.

That's all and everything there is to it. ■

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