

Flying Solo

A one-on-one relationship may be the most challenging volunteer work of all. And the most rewarding.

By [ROBBIE SHELL](#)

The first time I met Ruth, I drove her to the Tall Man's shop to look for a leather jacket for her son for Christmas. It was in early December, and the parking lot was already crowded. I had to drive down a one-way alley the wrong way in order to back into a space.

"You're a good driver," Ruth said. We bonded.

The Journal Report

A month before, I had signed up with a community program that matches volunteers with older adults who need assistance -- someone to do their food shopping, take them to a doctor's appointment, clean their apartment. I checked off the box that essentially said, "Just visit."

As it turned out, Ruth and I liked a combination of talking and going to stores, and so our weekly routine became a variation of the following: Pick her up on Sunday from the one-bedroom garden apartment she had lived in since her husband died 40 years ago; drive to TJ Maxx, where Ruth would buy a gift for a family member or return the gift she had bought the previous week; stop at the dollar store next door; cap it all off with a baked potato and coffee at Wendy's.

Going One-on-One

It's a cliché to say that if you volunteer time with others, you get as much out of it as the people you help. And it isn't necessarily true. Volunteering can be boring. You may find you don't actually contribute anything to the object of your good intentions. You may find yourself unexpectedly -- and involuntarily -- pulled into the life of the person or organization whose door you have entered. A friend once told me to be prepared for the equivalent of a thick forearm suddenly reaching out of nowhere, grabbing my wrist and dragging me along his path, not mine.

My volunteer work over the years has almost always focused on children and older people within an institutional setting, such as a children's hospital or a senior-citizen center. It was easier that way: I wasn't responsible for a particular individual over a number of weeks or months. If I couldn't make my volunteer shift, there were always others to fill in. I was committed to the volunteer work, but not to one specific person.

When I thought about joining a community group that assigned volunteers to one-on-one relationships with older people living at home, I knew that the dynamic would change. I would be in charge of managing the interaction, setting up when we would meet and what we would do. There would be no institution to act as a buffer or provide a backup. The relationship could conceivably go on, not for a few weeks or even months, but for years.

Was I ready for that kind of long-term commitment? And what if I didn't like the person I was paired up with? Could I drop that individual and ask for another assignment? Could that person drop me?

Instant Chemistry

As it turned out, Ruth and I liked each other from the moment she leaned out her window and threw me the key to the downstairs door. We talked about everything -- her family, my family, my job, her past jobs, religion, friends we had fallen out with, new friends, our health, our clothes, the sad times we had experienced, people we admired, people who really irritated us. We had the same sense of humor. She could be exasperating and manipulative. I could be short-tempered and compulsive. She was like a girlfriend, like a mother.

Ruth, who was 79 when I met her five years ago, was a bit eccentric. One day, she called and asked if I could help her return some grapes to the local Acme. She opened the freezer door and pointed to a solid chunk of ice filled with what looked like little green rocks. A few of the grapes had been rotten and Ruth had decided that freezing all three pounds of them would preserve the evidence. I carried out what felt like a 50-pound slab of cement, wrestled it into the back of the car and then heaved it up on the Acme customer-service desk.

"I want to return these," Ruth said. "Do you have the receipt?" the customer-service rep asked. Ruth and I looked at each other and then looked at the iceberg. The receipt was frozen inside. Car keys, Ruth said. I took out my car keys and chipped away at the ice until we could reach the little white piece of paper buried inside. Everything on it was blurred except for one line: "Grapes, \$3.27." Ruth got her money. Come on, she said, I'll buy you a muffin and coffee.

What finally pushed me to try volunteering one-on-one was the idea of a relationship I would not have to reinvent each week. I hoped for, and received, the obvious "payoff" -- feeling like I was improving the life of someone who had reached out for help.

But there have been unexpected payoffs, as well. You find yourself rethinking some of the stereotypes associated with people who are lumped together into a group, like the elderly or the homeless. In a long-term relationship, you come to appreciate the nuances and shadows of a person's life. You pay attention to their moods, memories, their sense of humor and the ways in which they handle illness, aging, grief or whatever it is they struggle with on a daily basis.

Ruth, in fact, was anything but my image of an 80-something woman. She rarely complained; she loved good jokes; she didn't become increasingly uninterested in the world around her. Ruth read books. She watched talk shows. She had opinions on all the heads of state. She shopped at Korean food stores. She philosophized about world religions. She liked meeting new people. She always pushed on: She had lived through two bouts of cancer, suffered from heart trouble and gout, was overweight and her knees killed her.

Strong Attachment

Volunteering one-on-one may be unusually challenging, but it has a clarity about it that we don't often experience. You are on your own with a pure and simple mandate: Knock on someone's door and reach out your hand. The person inside will be inclined to take hold. You will both run with it until the time comes for one of you to let go. At least that's how it worked with Ruth.

Her grandson called me at work on a Tuesday last winter to tell me that Ruth had suffered a massive stroke the night before. If I would like to come to the hospital and see her, I should do it soon, he said. I went. She was unconscious and died that evening. I had spent Sunday with her shopping at Lord & Taylor and the local farmer's market. We had talked a lot about her three great-grandchildren who lived in California.

If I had known it was the last time I would see her, would I have done things differently? Would I have told her how much she had gotten under my skin; how an afternoon with her, when we were both on our game, was as good as it gets; how her absence in death would fill me with her presence every time I passed a store we had shopped in or a restaurant she had liked? I regret nothing about us. We had been offered the rare opportunity to connect and we took it. She volunteered many parts of her life to me.

"Everything is still attached," she would always say when we talked on the phone about her health. Nothing has changed, Ruth. You are still attached.

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