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THE NEEDIEST CASES

At 89, She Steps Lively in the Name of Volunteerism



John Marshall Mantel for The New York Times

Mary Shalo, taking a coffee break at home on Staten Island, started doing volunteer work in the '40s and has been at it ever since.

By [KARI HASKELL](#)

Mary Shalo has some sage advice for those seeking the fountain of youth: Volunteer.

"It keeps me young," said Ms. Shalo, a sprightly woman of 89 who wears her hair in a perfect French twist.

"My volunteer work started in '40," she said, sitting in her living room on a recent afternoon. Back then, she worked as a secretary. "We were in the office and four girls said, 'Oh, let's join the Red Cross,' so we did."

At the end of their shift, they helped nurses at a hospital on Staten Island. Ms. Shalo took to the work at once, but the others had their doubts.

"They said to me, 'Mary, we can't understand how can you go up to a stranger and talk to them; we can't do that,'" she said. "I was the only one who stuck it out."

She put in hundreds of volunteer hours, wearing her crisp white uniform and blue hat with a crimson cross. The experience introduced her to many Staten Island residents. Indeed, she felt like a local celebrity when the Red Cross asked her to take part in an Armed Forces Day parade. She rode in a tank. "When the children saw me, they got so excited: 'Oh, I know her,'" she said fondly about that day.

She scanned her living room, which is full of pictures: On the sideboard, a side table and the china cabinet, she looked for a picture of herself in her uniform.

Her blue eyes stopped at an image, in a simple silver frame, of a more important moment — her wedding day in 1942.

“We had a great relationship,” she said.

Walter Shalo, her husband, was a welder. He enjoyed doing handiwork in the two-family house they built 50 years ago on Staten Island, and even cooked for her when she arrived home late from volunteering. The Shalos, who had no children, liked to entertain friends on the weekends. On vacations, they enjoyed, above all, fishing.

Even on their modest salaries, they gave a portion of their paychecks to their parents. Ms. Shalo’s mother and father had immigrated to Staten Island from Ukraine. Her father died when she was 14. Her mother, her older brother and two older sisters are also now gone.

Mr. Shalo died in 1983 of Lou Gehrig’s disease. He was 67.

“I don’t have anyone left,” she said. “I’m living with my memories now.”

But she said she does not feel lonely; she has nieces and nephews, and stays active through her volunteer work. In 1985, she joined R.S.V.P., the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of the Community Service Society. The society is one of the seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#). The fund provides a small stipend and additional insurance for volunteers.

The extra money helps. “I don’t have a pension,” said Ms. Shalo, who lives on her Social Security and the rent she receives from her tenant in the apartment upstairs.

Any day of the week, her calendar is full. As an R.S.V.P. volunteer, she works four days a week in the office at the Swedish Home for the Aged, does mailings for Meals on Wheels, and sets up for civic events. She also does volunteer work at her church and for the Police Department, is on auxiliary boards of several hospitals, and serves dinners sponsored by the [Salvation Army](#). When she can, she runs errands for other elderly people.

Even at home, there are good works to be done. There are items to sift through: old clothes, dented cans, used walkers and cribs. Neighbors and friends regularly drop goods off for her to give to the underprivileged, knowing she will know what to do.

In appreciation of the hundreds of hours, up to 800 in a year, she has donated at R.S.V.P., she received the Dr. Norbert H. Leeseberg Humanitarian Award in 2004, having been selected from among nearly 900 volunteers on Staten Island associated with the program.

“How can you not want to help people?” she asked.