

The New York Times

January 8, 2010

THE NEEDIEST CASES

Finding Happiness in Helping Those Who Have Less

By Jennifer Mascia



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Sheila Salmon, at rear, with Deborah Dahl, whom she has counseled, and Ms. Dahl's dog, Cara.

Six years ago, Sheila Salmon, a retired educator and librarian, picked up *The New York Times* and read a [Neediest Cases](#) article about a retired bank executive who volunteered at a senior center.

“After I finished the story, I said, ‘That’s for me,’ ” Ms. Salmon, now 76, recalled.

She had just retired from New Visions for Public Schools, where she was a project director. Before that, she spent 10 years helping to establish libraries in impoverished public schools — and she wasn’t about to spend her retirement twiddling her thumbs.

But then, Ms. Salmon had never been one to sit idle. She operated a modern-dance school out of a Brooklyn basement in her younger days and “taught my last class when I was nine months pregnant,” she said proudly. Throughout her child-rearing years she offered dance therapy to the mentally ill.

She called the organization mentioned in the article, ACES, which stands for Advocacy, Counseling and Entitlement Services, and made an appointment. (ACES is operated by the Community Service Society of New York, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of *The New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund.)

After six weeks of intensive training — “I learned a lot of stuff about entitlement programs,” she said — she was placed at the [Women’s Health Project Treatment and Research Center](#), an outpatient mental health clinic at [St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center](#), where she has since become a fixture, attending staff meetings and giving workshops.

“One of the things I really like is that although I’m a volunteer I feel like a valued part of the organization,” she said.

For six hours a week, Ms. Salmon tends to clients who have lost their eligibility for food stamps, need help navigating [Medicare](#) and [Medicaid](#) eligibility, , or are looking to enter a subsidized-housing lottery.

“Housing is the most intractable problem that people have,” she observed.

What Ms. Salmon finds most satisfying are her continuing relationships with clients, like Deborah Dahl, 56, who has been treated for depression and anxiety disorder since the end of her marriage, which she characterized as abusive. Ms. Dahl said that her former husband controlled her finances.

Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and living in a shelter, Ms. Dahl found herself at sea when it came to financial matters, so in 2006 she turned to the Women’s Health Project for guidance.

For example, would she have to pay income tax on her disability benefits? Would her tax refund be big enough to cover the adoption fee for a psychiatric service dog? Puzzling over such questions was “really odious,” an unwelcome reminder of her victimization, she said.

“Sheila pulled out her magical drawer and found the answers,” Ms. Dahl said appreciatively as her service dog, an 8-month-old white Havanese named Cara who makes sure she takes her medicine and doesn’t sleep all day, wriggled in her lap.

Ms. Salmon also found housing for Ms. Dahl and helped her search for scholarships in writing programs. Ms. Dahl plans to turn her experiences into a book, she said, and her weekly sessions with Ms. Salmon have helped her find her voice.

“When you talk to a paid social worker, they don’t even look you in the eye,” Ms. Dahl said. “They look at their computer screen. Sheila does more than just look you in the eye. She helped ground me.”

When Ms. Salmon is not at the Women’s Health Project, in Morningside Heights, or the apartment she shares with her husband in Kips Bay, she offers financial counseling at the [Gay Men’s Health Crisis](#) in Chelsea four hours a week.

Explaining why she donates her time, she said: “It’s deeply satisfying to work, and to be able to do something very directly. It’s easy to donate money, but you don’t see the results of it. Working with people, you feel an instant gratification.”