

# Everyday Heroes: Westchester Playa Village volunteers fill gaps in senior services

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Jean Campbell made the decision earlier this year to give up driving. At 85, she deals with dizziness at times and has trouble walking - problems she couldn't ignore even though she knew her decision would bring difficult changes.

Without a car, the retired art teacher would need help making it to doctors' appointments, grocery store visits and other errands.

That's where she relies on Westchester Playa Village, a 3-year-old nonprofit that aims to fill a gap in services for people 55 and older in Westchester, Playa del Rey, Playa Vista and surrounding areas.

Campbell signed on in April for a \$500 annual fee, and since then has not only accepted rides, but help sweeping her patio and fixing her printer. She's also attended social functions and lectures - gatherings designed to bring the members together.

"Things change and you get to where your needs change a little bit, too," said Campbell, who has lived in her Del Rey town house for 33 years. "I've met some very interesting people."

The people behind the Village are largely volunteers - numbering more than 70 today - who range in age from high school students to retirees. At the helm is Westchester resident Carol Kitabayashi, who was a volunteer herself before

taking one of three paying positions with the organization that's run on a \$100,000 annual budget.

Her job as executive director - in addition to making occasional visits with members like Campbell - is to find grants and funding sources, recruit new members, and manage an eight-person board and a growing group of volunteers tasked with handling members' needs.

It's a departure from her 20-year career in human resources at Toyota Financial Services in Torrance, where she most recently served as a national manager. But the married mother of two children is passionate about the group she stumbled upon after she left her job to care for her in-laws, both of whom needed help at the same time. Her father-in-law has since passed away.

"I experienced firsthand the help that older adults need," said Kitabayashi, 51, who signed up to volunteer with Culver Palms Meals on Wheels and later, Westchester Playa Village. "They need help taking the trash out, with medical appointments."

Westchester Playa Village was fairly new when Kitabayashi learned about it. Part of the so-called Village network that got its start in the Beacon Hill neighborhood of Boston, the local nonprofit was founded by Pat Brubaker, a former Westchester woman who has since moved to Thousand Oaks. It is among roughly 100 such nonprofits across the country, she said.

The term "village" describes a community of people pitching in to help older adults stay independent at home. That could mean providing transportation to appointments or helping with grocery shopping, chores, minor house repairs, pet care, computer assistance and more.

It can be a benefit to older adults without family nearby, or even those who do

have relatives living locally but are concerned about being a burden, Kitabayashi said. The service area today includes Playa del Rey, Westchester, Marina del Rey, Playa Vista and Del Rey and Ladera Heights, with an eye toward expanding to Culver City, El Segundo and other nearby areas.

"We are really a supplement," Kitabayashi said. "Plus, it's a great way for them to meet new people."

The group's volunteers use their own transportation and, for the most part, pay for gas, although Kitabayashi said the group hands out donated gas cards when possible. Westchester Playa Village recently obtained a used car and may need to hire a driver.

That's because providing transportation is a significant part of what the volunteers do; Kitabayashi said the group has responded to more than 150 such calls per month for the past three to four months, up from about 115 in 2011.

It's not like seniors have no other transit options, she said, referring to Access Paratransit and taxi voucher programs offered in local cities. But sometimes those services are overburdened, she explained, or can't provide the same level of care as a Village volunteer who could help a member into a doctor's waiting room, for example.

Members like Jean Campbell, who contacts the program regularly, sees its value.

"I'm grateful for the things that they're helping me with," she said. "And there is a sense of community involved with it."

The difficulty Kitabayashi faces now is getting the word out and recruiting new members.

Since she became executive director in May, the group has more than doubled its membership and watched its volunteer base swell to five times the previous size. She hopes to boost membership from 30 to 60 by the end of next year, and eventually to 200 participants.

Then, membership fees should cover the Village's operating costs. It's a big goal, but she's up to it: "I'm lucky that I have the opportunity," Kitabayashi said.

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