

... Heart of our Communities

She adds that it is a current challenge for volunteer centres to attract people to these types of positions, but that once involved, volunteers recognize that the satisfaction from this type of work can be great.

The general sense of satisfaction that results from volunteer work is part of what motivates the volunteer efforts of St. Jerome's psychology professor Peter Naus; the other part of that motivation lies in the responsibility he feels as a faculty member of St. Jerome's. "I have always understood that, as professors, we are responsible for using our expertise for community service endeavours. Yet, I hesitate to use the word responsibility in the sense of obligation, because as long as I have been at university, I have always found volunteering necessary for my own sanity. Working outside the university context has kept me aware of many important issues in the wider community."

Naus is Chair of the Board of Directors of Community Justice Initiatives, an agency that runs programmes in sexual abuse treatment, victim/offender reconciliation, and other programmes related to issues of conflict resolution and social justice. He also tries to honour all requests for talks and workshops, whether they are paid or not. At Freeport Hospital, Naus serves on both the Board of Directors and the Health Care, Research and Education Committee. He is also a board member of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of Canada.

"I've asked the question, 'Where does the job end and the real volunteerism begin?'" says Naus. "I can say with confidence that I enjoy volunteering, and I would do it if I weren't a professor, and I will probably continue to do it when I retire. I don't at all feel this 'do-gooder' mentality because all along I have recognized the mutual benefit to myself and to the organizations I serve."

With the increasing demand for volunteer help, and the diversity of people looking to donate their time and energy, many communities are relying on the co-ordination services of organizations like Waterloo's Volunteer Action Centre to assist in matching volunteers with volunteer positions. Cooper notes that such centres are now present in communities throughout Ontario and across Canada. If you're interested in volunteering your time and effort, check the yellow pages for information about volunteer coordination in your community. You'll be glad you did! ◇

... Portrait of a Volunteer continued

whole idea is to provide friendship and informal support," stresses Heimpel. "The child gets to know a family and visit with them on a regular basis. I see it as having an incredible impact on the lives of everyone involved: the child – who is often segregated in a special school and in special activities with little opportunity to make friends – gets a chance to broaden his or her horizons; the parents of the child get a chance to spend time with their other children; and the volunteer family gets a chance to share their lives with a special needs child. The effect is very long-lasting because friendship is so important to us all – although I don't think we realize that until we are without it."

In the early years, the people involved in developing Extend-A-Family more or less followed their instincts. For Heimpel, it was her first real experience in a leadership capacity, and she forged ahead with what turned out to be a wonderful learning experience. For nearly six years, she played a front-line role, forming the Board of Directors and laying the groundwork for the programme. During this time, Heimpel served two years as volunteer co-ordinator, and then worked as co-ordinator for four years after the programme received funding. Since beginning work at St. Jerome's about eight years ago, Heimpel has remained involved by serving on various boards and committees.

"I don't want to give the impression that I did it alone," she says. "Many wonderful people were involved. It has been thirteen years since Extend-A-Family was incorporated, and while it has become much more than any of us ever envisioned, it has done so without losing that spirit which gave rise to it in the beginning; I'm really proud of it." When the programme first began, most families involved had young children, and therefore many of the original plans centred around the needs of families with young children. Since then, Extend-A-Family has evolved to develop "Circle of Friends" – a programme designed to find people, not necessarily families – to befriend and involve developmentally challenged teens and adults. As well, a respite programme was recently put in place, which is more of a service programme to provide a break for families. Out of this, too, comes strong bonds and friendships.

In 1986, the Heimpels were also among the founding members of Parents for Community Living, whose focus is to provide homes in the community that are linked to a faith community for developmentally challenged adults. The programme – with which the Heimpels are still quite involved – currently has two homes and one

apartment in K-W. Jennifer Heimpel, who is now 24, lives independently from her family in a PCL home.

Throughout all these years of volunteering, Heimpel comments that she feels privileged to have worked with wonderful people, especially individuals and their parents whose stories are often heroic ones. As well, she has been inspired by people she would otherwise never have had the opportunity to meet – those who are at the leading edge of this field at local, provincial, and national levels. But not only leaders in developmental challenges, Heimpel stresses, but also those whose cause is that of all people whom society marginalizes. She sees it in the larger social justice context of trying to develop the kind of inclusive community which benefits us all.

But what impresses Heimpel the most are still the people and families who come into the Extend-A-Family programme and give of themselves to make it all happen. "I never realized people wanted to be involved, nor did I realize that so many parents who had a special needs child would take the risk and open up their families to make it all happen for their child," she says. Naturally, Extend-A-Family remains especially close to Heimpel's heart. She admits, though, that it wasn't easy to make it all work, despite the fact that they believed this kind of outreach should happen naturally in caring communities. "When I think back, I notice now that a lot of things have changed for the better for developmentally challenged children. We do live in a more accepting society. In a perfect world, you wouldn't need Extend-A-Family; I guess in the backs of our minds, we were always hoping we'd do ourselves out of a job." ◇

• Writeback •

January 13, 1994

Dear Editor of *Update!*:

Thanks for all of your efforts on this newsletter. Both my husband and I really look forward to receiving it and devouring it. It allows us to keep in touch with a part of our lives that was instrumental in making us who we are today. St. Jerome's will always hold fond memories and great respect from both of us. Paul and I appreciate all the work you do.

Sincerely,

Marcia Cudmore (BMath '92)

We welcome letters for Writeback.

Let us know what you think of your Grads' Association and its activities. The Editor.