

BRONX VOICE

A Shout Out to Volunteers Helping NYC Stay Healthy



By Chandra Wilson

This April marks National Volunteer Month, a time to celebrate the important role volunteers play in helping organizations and communities thrive in their mission to help others. At the Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY), volunteers play a crucial role in supporting the health of New York’s diverse communities, and volunteers come from equally varied backgrounds. Volunteers bring their special skills to everything they do, running the gamut from hosting craft classes, providing a friendly call to those in hospice, knitting scarves for ill patients, or helping in less seen, but equally important, background roles like fundraising and clerical work.

Given the many challenges COVID-19 continues to pose for the health of New Yorkers, VNSNY volunteers are needed now more than ever, and their dedication, as well as the gift of time, cannot be understated. Volunteers sacrifice their time and give back to the community simply in the name of kindness. They also bring something to the table that VNSNY staff may not have and can help enrich the lives of those we serve.

As Kimberlyn Kinlock, VNSNY Volunteer Manager for the VNSNY Hospice team put it, “Every volunteer comes to us with unique talents and skills, as well as generosity and the desire to be helpful.” She added, “Together we shape their volunteer role to their abilities and match them with clients accordingly. For example, do you sing? Great—let’s find a way for your talent to benefit a patient or caregiver during this pandemic.”

A perfect example of this in action is one of VNSNY's stellar volunteers, Valerie Salwen, a hospice volunteer since 2018. Valerie is also the music director of the Threshold Choir of New York (TCNYC), and has applied her musical skills to brightening the lives of others. For example, during the pandemic Valerie performed song baths for VNSNY staff and volunteers, made supportive and musical calls to clients and caregivers, offering tunes, compassion, and a listening ear. Valerie also connects with some VNSNY clients as a friendly visitor. One client's daughter asked specifically for Valerie, as she knew her mother would love the soothing repertoire, with the music bringing immense joy and comfort at the end of that patient's life.

For many seniors, isolation is a serious challenge, and has only worsened during the prolonged pandemic lockdown. Loneliness can hurt both mental and even physical health, which is why community programs like VNSNY's friendly visitors are especially helpful right now.

Of course, volunteering is very much a two-way street. "I sometimes think that the volunteers get more out of it than the patients, and everybody I know who's done it agrees," said hospice volunteer Dolores Perin. "Honestly, it is such a privilege. Anybody who has the opportunity to volunteer will reap the rewards."

Another benefit for many volunteers is the opportunity to get tangible career experience and learn more about an organization's work. Douae Habbaoui, a volunteer intern with VNSNY's Business & Development team said, "I gained a lot of valuable hands-on experience and professional exposure, and I was trained in vital skills like Homecare Homebase and face-to-face encounters." She added, "It was a great way to transition from school to a work setting."

These volunteers and many others really do make a difference in the lives of those they serve. While National Volunteer Month is a powerful reminder of the importance of service, organizations like VNSNY are grateful for volunteers every day of the year! To learn more about VNSNY's volunteer program and opportunities, visit www.vnsny.org.

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