

Growing in Community: Sherlyn's Story



"I'm Sherlyn Hogenson. I'm a mother of two sons, a grandmother, a retired dietitian, and I've got two cats.

Way back in the 50's when I was about 10, I had started to think about what I wanted to do when I grew up. My mother had a best friend who was a dietitian in the dorms at Michigan State University, and I decided that's what I wanted to do. What really drew me in was being able to help people live a healthy life and building that relationship and connection with them – I wanted to do patient advocacy. At that age, I was just beginning to understand that most girls didn't go on to college then, and I just thought, "I really want to go to college and get a degree, and then be able to support myself." I didn't want to get married right after high school. Now let me tell you about my mother: she grew up during the Depression, but her family did well because they grew and preserved their own food. She then went on to become a registered nurse, which was quite an accomplishment; her life was focused on health and helping others. My mother, now she was independent – she became a nurse. Like her, I wanted to be independent. So that's what I did.

After I retired, I had looked in the paper and all around for volunteer opportunities. I wanted to do something that was helpful to someone, but also something that was meaningful to me. I decided that I would go to the Allen Farmers Market and check it out. Kat Logan, the Volunteer Coordinator, was there to greet me when I walked in last April; I told her it was my first time at the market, so she gave me a tour and told me all about what Allen Neighborhood Center does. After talking with her for a while, she told me there was a volunteer opportunity available that she thought would be perfect for me: distributing food samples and recipes to patrons at the market, and doing a little nutritional education. She also said that I could be a guest presenter

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for the Senior Discovery Group. Kat is a really easy person to get to know and like, which helped me to feel comfortable. It's such a great feeling, getting that kind of welcome. So I said yes!

Since last April, I have done a lot of volunteering with ANC. On a weekly basis, I have been volunteering as a nutrition educator at the Allen Farmers Market. It's marvelous! I can come here, be myself, and just get to know the community. I like being able to come somewhere where people know me and appreciate me - it's just so fun! I also volunteered with the Hunter Park GardenHouse Plant Sale, I have volunteered as a guest presenter for the Senior Discovery Group twice now, and I've come in to fold and tab ANC's newsletter. I was also asked to volunteer with the annual fundraising event, the Big Fuss about Food. Seeing all these people come out to support the center was a lot of fun; I felt like I was truly part of something.

This April, Kat put on a Volunteer Appreciation Dinner for all of the volunteers! She wouldn't let us help set-up or take care of things afterwards because she wanted us to have a day where we relaxed and felt appreciated. We had Eritrean food, she gave us gift bags and a hand-written thank you card, and there was a short program with volunteer pictures and accomplishments. It was so sweet, and a great way to meet other volunteers and learn about what they do. Kat even nominated me as Volunteer of the Year through Capital Area United Way's volunteer recognition program. It was wonderful.

I also started participating with Market Moves and Market Walk. You earn tokens for the farmers market, which is a really great incentive for me to exercise. Sometimes there are people who just start the program and they walk alone. But sooner or later they ask if they can walk with you, and of course they can! After that, it's not even a question anymore. I began walking with a Japanese immigrant who came to practice his English. He explained to me that though his family still lives in Japan, he has been telling them all about the amazing people he's met and the things he has seen; he hopes they'll decide to move. When his family came to visit him and see some of the things he had mentioned, he brought them to Market Walk and introduced them to me.

ANC is a great place for people to make changes to their life; they teach you about what's good in this world, and how you can be a part of making it and keeping it that way. The people that work and serve here, they're here because they want to be. I can't even put into words all that I know the staff does behind the scenes to make it all possible. I am proud to be here and be a part of it - It takes my breath away. What makes me keep coming back? Allen Neighborhood Center is my place to go. I'm here for them. If they call me, I will be there to help with whatever it is that they need - it's part of my life now. It's so refreshing to be at a place where happy is. And to think it all started after talking with Kat; I was completely amazed by her passion and everything that they- well no, everything that we do. We're doing it.

I feel so free here."