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A fairy godmother for later in life

Program aids those with low income



Those who have been in the program have wished for anything from a balloon ride and photography lessons to a dinner or baseball game with family. “Just because you’re aging doesn’t mean you stop having dreams and wishes,” said director Wendy Miller Backman.

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Ted Gonsiorek, 90, had a wish. He wanted to go to a baseball game with his children and grandchildren, but he was sure it would never come true,

“Ah,” the World War II veteran told his daughter, “that’s one chance in a million.”

Then came the call: “Dad, you’re going to the ball game.”

Wish granted. He, his wife, children and grandchildren would sit in their own box for the Bisons’ game against Georgia.

Joan Barone, 81 with 82 creeping up, also had a wish. She wished that she could host a dinner for her brother, nieces and other family members. Her wish came true, too.

And so did the wish for the older woman who wanted a ride in a hot air balloon with her best friend so she could feel alive again.

As the balloon rose into the sky, she and her friend could be heard singing, “Up, up and away.”

Those and many more wishes from senior citizens are the sort of tasks that Wendy Miller Backman grants.

As the director of the new [Senior Wishes](#) program based in Orchard Park, she has a fairy godmother quality. Her blonde hair curls lightly into a bob. In the midst of serious conversation about the busy business of granting wishes, her face breaks into a wide smile when she talks about people and the 20 or so wishes she’s granted so far.

“Just because you’re aging doesn’t mean you stop having dreams and wishes,” said Backman, a social worker and mother of two.

She chronicles wishers and wishes granted with photos in frames next to her computer, stuck on a display poster leaning against the wall and in a folder that opens into a spread of pictures across her desk.

There is the woman who received a train ticket to Philadelphia to visit the sister she hadn’t seen in 15 years.

And a budding photographer posed with her camera in hand. Finally, she got the lesson she put off while she raised her children.

The United Church Home Society hired Backman to come up with a program that could help local seniors in new ways. She discovered wish-granting organizations in other states and decided that would be the best way to help low-income area residents over 65.

Her office at the Fox Run retirement community, owned by United Church Home Society, is full of cabinets and papers. A committee of six reviews and selects the wishes that will be granted. (Applicants can apply at seniorwishes.org)

Backman then executes the wishes with zeal. She makes photo albums and adds in extras when she can, like the baseball cupcakes she brought to the Gonsioreks' box at the Bisons game two weeks ago.

For a woman who asked for a new set of pots and pans, Backman arranged for the Fox Run chef to come along with the delivery and cook an elegant lunch of beef stroganoff, complete with flowers for the table.

Experiences are the group's preferred kind of wish because memories are more powerful than possessions. There are exceptions, especially when daily living can be improved.

Backman bought orthotic sandals for the woman who wrote to explain that she had been saving for three years but something went wrong with her car. The day they went shopping was the woman's birthday. It was so hot, she took off her regular sneakers and wore the sandals home.

"This is just a small speck of what these people could use," Backman said. "Some of these are very simple things, but if you don't have the resources, you can't do it."

She picked through the pictures, telling the stories as she went.

A woman sitting on a new mattress with a big smile was happy to be rid of the old one with bedsprings that poked her when she slept.

The baking hobbyist posed at her kitchen counter with a new white standing mixer that replaced an old, hard-to-hold hand mixer. Her thank-you note included another photo with the chocolate pound cake and blueberry bread she made for neighbors.

A woman whose old blanket was in shreds held a new paisley comforter on her lap, still sealed in its new plastic.

"It's so nice to have something new," Backman remembered her saying. "I can't remember the last time I had something new."

Money for granting wishes is limited to the revenues – about \$25,000 – from an annual April dessert and drinks fundraiser, "Sips, Suds and Sweets." Now Backman wants to take advantage of the Aug. 21 National Senior Citizens Day by inviting businesses to host a casual dress day and donate the proceeds.

"We're looking for Senior Wish ambassadors," she said.

The generosity of these people and businesses make many people very happy.

Barone, the 81-year-old who was granted the wish of a meal with friends and family, recalled the joy of her wish coming true.

In the last two years, her reflexes have slowed and she hasn't felt safe about making the hour drive to Zoar Valley to see her brother and nieces.

When the Senior Wish people called her Grand Island apartment, it was like winning the lottery. After she asked her first question – “What can I do? What can't I do?” – she was amazed to hear there were no rules. She could invite anyone. She could serve anything. She could go anywhere.

She picked the Millennium Hotel in Cheektowaga because it was near the highway so her nieces from Springville and Pennsylvania could easily find it.

When the menu came in the mail with five pages of options, she called Backman again.

“Are you sure that I can choose anything that I want?”

By the spring afternoon of the big meal, a waitress stood by pouring water and coffee as she caught up with her brother, who had lost his sight from a recent stroke. A niece reminisced about the time, long ago, when they went to see a fancy cat show together. The soup was so good, even her 6-year-old great-nephew ate it all.

The gathering, she said, was the real story of life. She could wish for a fur coat or a new car, but if she got them, what was the point?

“It was just this side of a miracle for me. ... We older people get lost in the shuffle on things,” Barone said. “Nothing, nothing compares to family and that memory that you have.”

It's been two weeks since Gonsiorek's night at the ballpark with his family and he, too, is still talking about what happened. The ball he threw for the first pitch now sits on a cup in his kitchen. He intends to frame the jersey with his name in big letters that the team manager gave him.

At the end of the night, there was another surprise.

As he and his wife waited outside the stadium in wheelchairs for their son-in-law's car, a teenage girl with friends recognized him and whispered, “There he is.”

She then walked over, bent down, looked him in the eye, shook his hand and thanked him for his service in the war.

Then a crowd suddenly gathered, and people stopped for him. Young, old, short, tall, black, white. He was crying. His daughter wept. It was a beautiful night for a wish.

“I think that everybody's really wishing for something,” Gonsiorek said. “I hope it happens to other people.”

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