



Ruth Vaill, left, and her friend Cathy Johnston share a love of nature. The two were paired up through Mercy Care for the Adirondacks, a nonprofit in northeastern New York state that helps elders ward off isolation and loneliness.

Through volunteer program, Mercy Care for the Adirondacks addresses isolation among elders

By **LORI ROSE**

When Ruth Vaill needed to move to a new city to be closer to family after her husband died, she left not only her home of 40 years but also her circle of friends, most of her belongings, and all that was familiar to her.

The move from her longtime home in New Hampshire to Lake Placid, New York, was difficult but coupled with the COVID lockdown that occurred shortly after she

arrived, Vaill found herself reeling from both a loss of independence and from loneliness.

"I had suffered many losses sort of all at once," said Vaill, who is 87 and lives with vision loss from macular degeneration. "I was in pretty bad shape emotionally. It was very discouraging, and I really fell into a dark place. I needed some kind of a lifeline."

Thankfully, she said, her niece recommended Mercy Care for the Adirondacks, a nonprofit whose mission is to help elders

throughout this rural, mountainous region ward off feelings of isolation and loneliness by pairing them with friendship volunteers.

Mercy Care matched Vaill with volunteer Cathy Johnston, 70, and the two hit it off beautifully. Since their first meeting in May 2022, Vaill and Johnston have become walking partners who get together twice a week to discuss nature, books and art, often while strolling along country roads or parkland paths.

"I'm an outdoor person and I really

needed to get out in the natural world,” Vaill said. “And Cathy likes the natural world, too, so we started out walking, and for me it saved my life. Cathy is a wonderful, open person, and she never makes me feel like I’m an elder. She’s never condescending, and we just talk like we are friends, because we are friends.”

Isolation among seniors

Love of God and love of neighbor inspired the Sisters of Mercy to sponsor the establishment of Mercy Care for the Adirondacks in 2007. Mercy Care’s mission to enhance the fullness of life for elders living in their community evolved from discussions with community leaders and others in New York state’s Adirondack Tri-Lakes Region of Lake Placid, Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake. The discussions were about the growing issues of isolation and loneliness among elders and how to meet their needs to help them more successfully age in place.

Studies show that social isolation and loneliness can deeply impact quality of life for older adults and that their physical,

emotional and mental health are directly affected. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem, said Donna Beal, executive director of Mercy Care. She pointed to a recent advisory general warning that people lacking social connections in their lives can have an increased risk for premature death comparable to if they smoked daily.

“People are starting to understand there are real health consequences,” Beal said. “Loneliness and isolation hurt whole communities, as well as individuals.”

A history of caring

The Sisters of Mercy first came to the rugged Adirondacks more than 100 years ago to care for tuberculosis patients. In time, they established care centers in the region. When ownership of the nursing centers was transferred to Adirondack Medical Center in early 2007, leaders of the congregation began to consider what their new mission should be.



Beal

“We looked around and said, ‘What are we going to do?’” recalled Sr. Mary Camillus O’Keefe, a founding board member of Mercy Care. “And we found out that there were a lot of people in the area that were lonely, that just needed somebody to talk to.”



Sr. O’Keefe

And so was born Mercy Care for the Adirondacks. Working with area churches and community organizations and social service agencies, families and physicians, Mercy Care painstakingly pairs elders and volunteers who have similar interests. There are no health, faith or income guidelines required, and all services are provided free of charge. Volunteers visit and call their partners, provide transportation to appointments, assist with grocery shopping and other errands, and help connect them with social services, all to help elders stay connected with their communities.

“Yes, we do tasks, but it is really about making friends,” Beal said. “Just having another person in your life makes your life



Shirley Clark is one of the people who have been matched with a volunteer companion through Mercy Cares for the Adirondacks. Clark says she “was very, very lonely” before she found out about Mercy Cares and was befriended by volunteer Margie Gallagher. “Really I believe in my heart that God sent me Margie and sort of paired us up together,” she adds.

richer and fuller. It makes your heart feel good when you see the relationships and the joy that people get from being part of Mercy Care.”

Never too many friends

For Johnston, nurturing a friendship with Vaill has been easy. “I love multi-generational activities,” she said. “I have friends that are 30, I have friends that are 45, and I have friends that are 80. You get so much out of it because you get all different perspectives.”

Johnston also serves on the board of Mercy Care. She said she was drawn to the organization after retiring as a business owner because she wanted to continue to serve her community in ways that were meaningful to her. And much like Vaill, she said, she wanted to be engaged, rather than simply entertained.

“Ruth had never been to Lake Placid, so it’s easy to show her around,” Johnston said. “We both relate to the natural world, so she is the perfect walking companion. We stop and look at wildlife and plants and we use the Seek app on my phone to figure out what they are. When it gets bitter cold or is pouring rain, Ruth and I frequently do errands



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— Ruth Vaill

— like the library or visit the gallery exhibit at our art center. We seem to always find something to do.”

The friendship is mutual, she said. “I truly believe you can never have too many friends, so having another friend is great.”

‘We’re all in this together’

Volunteers are key, Beal said. From an initial training class of 12, Mercy Care now boasts more than 100 volunteers who com-

plete seven hours of training on topics such as nutrition, dementia, physical activity and spirituality. Mercy Care also hosts events where elders and volunteers socialize while doing something fun, like building a terrarium or enjoying a picnic lunch.

Many of the volunteers are elders themselves who may one day be on the receiving end. “We call it the Circle of Mercy,” Beal said. “Everybody helps everybody at a certain point in life, but we’re all in this together.”

That’s what makes the Mercy Care model, supported entirely by charitable contributions from individuals and private foundations, particularly ideal for rural areas like the Adirondacks. In the region, services are limited, the population is aging, and a growing number of families are economically challenged. That’s why one of Mercy Care’s goals is to help educate communities about health and aging.

“It’s important to look at aging as a whole,” Beal said. “It’s not just one person at a time, but helping our communities to become age-friendly. We like to say, age friendly communities are good places for people to grow up and grow old.”