

Reaching out, checking in and caring –

That's Debra Northey

by Ben Polk

Ready to enter the work force with her business degree, Debra Northey didn't know yet that someday her real passion would be helping people. Her early days in the working world focused on a production company specializing in commercials. In time, she realized it wasn't what she wanted. She discovered she was people-oriented and wanted a position focused on helping others.

As the manager of the Edgewater Senior Center at the Broadway Armory, she found her calling. She said that peoples' needs are extensive, from daily check-in phone calls to reaching out for housing needs to letting people know where they can get food. If they haven't gotten their vaccination yet, she can help navigate that too.

Reaching out is multi-directional

When the Armory closed because of the pandemic, she went to the Levy Center, 2019 W. Lawrence, where she made calls to reach out to see if people were doing okay. Debra mentioned a 91-year-old woman she called who said, "Thank you for calling. I like your voice. It's nice."

Debra also spent time at the Portage Park Senior Center where she made calls to older adults. as there were no volunteers because of the pandemic. Until volunteers return, she'll continue the weekly calls for two people in particular. "I call a few people who could use it," she said.

Now, Debra said, "I'm making my way through the Edgewater Senior Center memberships and those who came in the past few months. My total list is 1,500. I make phone calls. It's important." That's how she thinks. If someone needs something and she can do it, she makes it happen.

Someone has your back

"Some situations are more difficult than others," Debra said. "All you need is one person who has your back." She gave an example of a man who moved here to be with his daughter, but she then moved out of state for work. Now he's here with no family. But, a neighbor who is a

fireman takes him to the store every Friday. She said, "It's important to check in on your neighbors. It's fine for people as long as they know they have someone who will check in on them."

One of the most stressful areas of responsibility is helping someone on a deadline, such as for housing. With resources to call on, Debra knows who to call, where the assistance is, and how to get it done.

All puzzles are different

The other side of the coin is interacting with older adults, finding the different pieces of the puzzle and putting them together. "Everyone ages at different rates. You never know what their needs are," Debra said. "Listening to people on the telephone, one thing really stands out – either the glass is half-empty or half-full. When you get older and the glass is half-empty, it's a hard life to live." Her goal is making peoples' lives easier.

She describes herself as a native Chicagoan who "lives as far north as she grew up south" -- she was born near Midway Airport. She lives in Edgewater with a teenage daughter and her husband, a real estate agent.

"Living in Edgewater is diverse," said Debra. "There are two different groups of people we see: Those in Edgewater Village and those who come to the Senior Center. It's a wide range." It all gives her many opportunities to reach out and help people. That's her special talent.

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