

Passionate Pursuits

by Holly Slegowski

More than ever, today's seniors are making their mark on the world. With plenty of energy and years of valuable life experience, they are pursuing volunteer work with a passion. Here's the story of four Willow Valley Retirement Communities Residents whose volunteer activities are an important part of their life at Willow Valley.

A Warm Feeling Inside and Out

Ralph Wicke gets a lot of satisfaction out of knowing that there are many people who are warmer, safer and drier because of the work he and others are doing. Ralph volunteers with the Appalachia Service Project, a non-profit group that addresses the housing needs of residents in the mountainous Central Appalachian region where nearly one in four people live in poverty.

Ralph has volunteered as an adult leader with the organization for the past 30 years, and in retirement, or as Ralph likes to call it, the "elective phase of working," he's still escorting groups of teens as they spend a week of their summer vacation giving to others.

Each year, about 15,000 Appalachia Service Project (ASP) volunteers repair homes for 400 to 500 low-income families in rural areas of Central Appalachia where Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia meet. The majority of the volunteers are high-school aged youth who perform most of the repairs themselves under the watchful eyes and guidance of adult leaders.

Ralph explains, "As an adult, you bring your building skills and lead your team. Usually there's an adult man and woman and three-to-five teenagers in a work crew."

The home repairs run the gamut of repairing roofs, building room additions, providing wheelchair ramps, installing or repairing plumbing, updating unsafe wiring, securing foundations, digging drainage ditches, constructing porches and steps, installing insulation and siding, and weatherizing homes. The group also provides electricity and indoor plumbing for multiple families each year who were living without it.

Spring Run Resident Ralph Wicke frequently brings home a meaningful rock from each of his Appalachia Service Project worksites.





Appalachia Service Project youth workers

The experience transforms the families being served, volunteers and staff alike.

“How many kids get to jack up a house that is falling down?” asks Ralph. “How many people do you know who don’t have running water or a bathroom in their home? That’s the sort of thing we encounter. It’s an eye-opening experience for our youth. They get to see a totally different way of life. The program provides sensitivity training before they go. They see things they’ve never seen before in their lives. They see people in a new light and they understand in

a new way. They also enjoy an evening of bluegrass music or storytelling that the families being served provide for the volunteers. That’s the sort of thing they come away with, along with the fun of being with other kids and moseying on down there.”

And, says Ralph, it’s very gratifying to him on a number of levels. “To get a hug and ‘thank you’ from a total stranger, to have some-

one look at you and say, ‘I see God in your eyes,’ it’s that type of thing you don’t forget.”

There’s also the interaction with the youth he leads. “Though your kids are grown, you can watch another whole generation growing up,” Ralph says. “There are kids who went with me for four years and were on staff, so I’ve had the joy of seeing these young people mature and grow up and find their place in the world.”

“Though your kids are grown, you can watch another whole generation growing up.” *Ralph Wicke*



In his spare time, Spring Run Resident Ralph Wicke enjoys working in one of Willow Valley’s four woodshops.

Ralph is quick to point out that no matter what your skill level, there’s a service project somewhere you can be involved in.

“There are projects like this all over the world. Look closely at the needs of the community, and pick something you would enjoy and would be an adventure for you. Go out and be active. There are plenty of opportunities. It’s just a matter of going out there; finding something you would enjoy and feel you are contributing to. Whatever your skill level, what’s most important is just a willingness to help.”