

'If Not Me, Who?'

Cape Cod Women Make Their Mark as Volunteers

March is International Women's Month and writer Jan Young took this opportunity to write about some of the Cape's outstanding women volunteers.

By Jan Young

American women have been known for their selfless "good works" ever since the old-fashioned days of temperance leagues and sewing circles. But today, women are giving freely of their time and talents in ways which might astound and scandalize their forefathers, if not their grandmothers.

As the traditional roles of women have undergone radical changes since the turn of the century, so too have their roles as volunteers. On Cape Cod today, women can be found building low income housing, slogging through marsh mud in search of sea turtles, driving vans full of people into the quagmire of Boston's Big Dig, or standing under a municipal pier at low tide looking for weak spots. What they all share is a devotion to their favorite cause and a matter-of-fact attitude that says, "If not me, who?"

Meadow Beach almost every day from late November through mid-December. She is one of brigade of "turtle walkers" drafted by the Sanctuary each fall.

"That is the time when those turtles which haven't migrated are most likely to be stunned by the cold and wash up," said Ms. Gibbs, who loves walking the beach. "I think being out there is great. It's different every day, and you feel like you're doing something really worthwhile."

At Helping Our Women and the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, women drivers are nothing to joke about. "One of the biggest problems we have [in Provincetown] is transportation," said H.O.W. Administrator Irene Rabinowitz. "It's heartbreaking to have someone who needs chemo getting on the bus to Boston." H.O.W., which provides support services to chronically and terminally ill women, and the Provincetown AIDS Support Group, one of the first organizations in the nation formed to care for AIDS patients, could not survive without their networks of devoted volunteers.

Ruth Gilbert spends an entire day each month, sometimes two, driving AIDS patients to their appointments in Boston. She's been doing it for nearly 10 years. "I love it. It gives you a whole day with people who share their life stories with you," she said. "Everyone becomes a big family for the day. And things have changed so dramatically. In the beginning, there were only two hospitals in Boston—Deaconess and Mass General—which would even see AIDS patients. Due to the new drug therapies, the clients are much healthier now. On my trip the week before Christmas, two of the seven passengers returned from their appointments to announce that their doctors could find no traces of HIV. It made me cry."

Rosemary Hillard, an art therapist, is a newcomer to Provincetown, and an avid volunteer at H.O.W. "I have a car and thought this would be a good way to make some bonds in the community and get to know people. I also have experience with life-threatening illness—it's not scary to me," said Ms. Hillard, who's driven

women everywhere from dialysis appointments in Yarmouth to the Provincetown A&P.

Like lots of organizations in Provincetown and like town governments everywhere, the smooth operation of Town Hall depends to a great extent on its volunteer boards and committees. Right now, one of the busiest is the Harbor Planning Committee which is why Provincetown's municipal MacMillan Pier is one of Gwen Billig's most familiar haunts.

"When we first lived here, and I was working at Flyer's [boat yard], I heard that a huge 'maxi-race' was being proposed which would trace the Pilgrims' original voyage from Holland to Massachusetts," she recalled. "It was going to be one part of a shorefront festival celebrating the 275th anniversary of the Pilgrims' first landing. We're talking about 60- to 80-foot ocean racing sailboats. I went to an organizational meeting for the festival and asked 'What's being done for the boats?' Nobody had considered that these people would be finishing up a grueling trans-Atlantic race and would need all kinds of

facilities that MacMillan Pier simply didn't have."

As it turned out, the race never happened—not enough entrants signed up. But Ms. Billig joined the Harbor Planning Committee anyway and subsequently was elected chairman. Her most important and immediate task is to bring the town's harbor plan to annual town meeting and get it passed. MacMillan Pier, which was built in the 1950's, is in need of reconstruction. The state considers an approved harbor plan a logical first step before major funding is put in place. Another priority, which is an integral part of the harbor plan, is to improve those facilities for boats.

"I did this because I was new to town, interested in the harbor, and everyone in Provincetown was so nice to me," she said. "It was a way to get to know the townspeople who were interested in the same thing I was. I love to learn about as many things as possible. I'm a learner by doing."

Learning by doing. It almost sounds....old fashioned.