

Volunteer Guardians Make All the Difference

By Carrie Mikalauski

When asked to do a feature story on a senior with an interesting job or volunteer work, the first person I immediately thought of was Rhinelander resident, Wilma Cox. Wilma has been a Volunteer Guardian for Oneida County Dept of Social Services for over 30 years! Currently, she is no longer taking any new wards as she wants to be able to spend more of her time with her husband, her dog Rusty and family. When asked what made you decide to become a Volunteer Guardian, Wilma indicated that she was in a job for over 25 years and that company had made some internal changes, which meant Wilma found herself out of a job. She had a friend, Mary Jo Owen, who told Wilma that she thought Wilma would make a great Volunteer Guardian and put Wilma in touch with a Social Worker that Mary Jo knew. Although Wilma was familiar with the court system, she had never been a guardian before so she told the Social Worker that she would want to meet the ward before deciding if this was something she would like to do. The ward that Wilma was introduced to lived in the Minocqua area. At first, this person did not want to let Wilma into her home. Wilma indicated that she knew she had to befriend this person in a strange way. Wilma decided she was going to make her famous chocolate chip cookies and would bring them to this person's home. This was the only way Wilma was able to get her to open the door. Eventually, this person let Wilma into her home. Wilma did become her guardian and over the years they had become friends. Wilma indicated that when this person was on her death bed, Wilma was there holding her hand when she said to Wilma, "You're my only friend." Wilma indicated that from then on, she knew she wanted to continue to be a Volunteer Guardian.

Wilma stated that the most rewarding thing she finds in being a Volunteer Guardian is knowing you are helping people when most families either don't care, or when families are fighting over the individual's money instead of their wellbeing. Wilma indicated one time she was asked to be a guardian for someone who had two adult children that weren't really caring for her. When Wilma went to the house to gather this person's personal belongings, all of her clothes fit into two plastic grocery bags. When Wilma inquired where the rest of her clothing was, the adult children said, "Why would an old person need that many clothes." This example is one of the reasons why Wilma thinks it is so important to be a Volunteer Guardian. Wilma indicates that so many older people are gullible and get taken advantage of and they need someone to advocate for them and protect them sometimes from even their own family. Wilma feels it is our responsibility to take care of these people and sometimes you, as their guardian, are the only person they have in their lives to count on.

Wilma estimates that over the past 30 years she has had over 100 wards. That is so incredible! Wilma feels that anybody can become a Volunteer Guardian. She indicated that you don't need a college degree to become a Volunteer Guardian you just need to be honest and caring. When asked what advice she would give to someone who may be thinking of becoming a Volunteer Guardian, Wilma said, "If you like to make a difference in someone's life, that isn't able to make decisions, and nobody else cares about them, then this would be something you would like to do." Wilma indicates that being a Volunteer Guardian is extremely rewarding, although at times can be very frustrating, but overall so much more rewarding than anything. Wilma also wants people to know that you're not going to get rich being a Volunteer Guardian as you don't get paid for your time and efforts with money (although you may get reimbursed for some things), but you get paid in other ways that is so much more rewarding

than anything money could buy you. When asked how much time she spends on being a Volunteer Guardian, Wilma indicated, "As much as you want to." She said that it really depends on where the ward lives in relation to you and how much need they have. Sometimes when you first get a ward there might be a lot of time involved to get things in order, but once you do, it goes fairly smooth after that. Wilma indicates that she is a "hands on" guardian, meaning that she likes to visit with her wards on a regular basis so she can understand their needs and wants. She likes to take them out for lunch or just sit and visit with them if they're not able to leave for lunch.

There is a great need for Volunteer Guardians in this area of Wisconsin as our population continues to grow with older adults moving here to retire. If you are interested in becoming a Volunteer Guardian, please contact the ADRC of Oneida County to apply to be one. Wilma indicated that she would be willing to sit down with any potential new guardian to "show them the ropes" and make them feel comfortable with their decision to serve others in their community.

We, at Oneida County Dept of Social Services, would like to take this opportunity to thank Wilma for the 30 plus years of dedication, commitment and service to the people you have helped in Oneida County. We truly appreciate everything you have done to make their lives better. Also, we love your famous chocolate chip cookies!!! Thank You Wilma!!!



Wilma and her golden retriever side kick, Rusty!