

# SENIOR COMPANIONS

## Highlights

*"Sharing Friendship At Home"*

Fall 2023 • Issue 94



Black Hills Senior Companions



Aberdeen, Brookings, &  
Watertown Senior Companions



Sioux Falls Area Senior Companions

## Senior Companions of SD RECOGNITION EVENTS

We honored our amazing Senior Companions in three "Home on the Range" themed Recognition Events at the Elks Lodge in Watertown, Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, and the Journey Museum in Rapid City this August. Regina Cobb and Rosemary Kliment, Sioux Falls Senior Companions, received the Lifetime Presidential Volunteer Service Award for serving over 4,000 hours. They received a certificate, a commemorative pin, and a letter from President Biden. Sioux Falls Companions Brian Letourneau, Lucille Middleton, and Alice Sweet received the Bronze Award for serving between 100-249 hours. Steve Ferley, a Rapid City volunteer, and Kelly McConnell, a Sioux Falls volunteer, received the Gold Award by serving 500-3,999 hours.

Representatives from US Congressional offices read letters of appreciation. Director Connie Christensen read letters from the Sioux Falls Mayor, Paul TenHaken, "I want to take a moment to extend my heartfelt congratulations and thank you for your exceptional dedication and service to the aging residents in our communities." Watertown Mayor Ried Holien wrote, "I recognize what an amazing program Senior Companions is and what a tremendous impact it has on our community and across the state of South Dakota. I thank you all for having such a positive impact on our community."

The Program's AmeriCorps Portfolio Manager, Paula Vann, also shared her thoughts in a letter: "One thing I love about AmeriCorps Seniors is that it connects people committed to serving others. Not only are you a part of a community served by the Good Samaritan Society, but you're also a member of a larger national service family comprised of volunteers across the country. Collectively, you have impacted hundreds of thousands of individuals. Last year, more than 140,000 seniors volunteered through the AmeriCorps Senior program, and together, you served 47 million hours."

# Welcome to our Newest Sioux Falls Senior Companions

## Robin Sweeten & Jim Groninger



Our new Senior Companion volunteer, Robin Sweeten, who hails from Boston, Massachusetts, is an avid traveler who relocated to Sioux Falls two years ago. "I was born to travel," she says. Robin has been to all 50 states and six countries and is currently working on visiting all the Canadian provinces. Her love of travel started early as her family traveled often. A highlight of her childhood was listening to her relatives tell of their exciting adventures abroad. In addition to travel, Robin has many other gifts, talents, and passions.

She is a skilled photographer and is known to combine this skill with her love for travel. This past June, she drove nearly 6,000 miles to Glacier National Park up into British Columbia to Vancouver Island. She loves the bare-bones camping and adventure of traveling alone!

In addition to having a passion for adventure, Robin has a gift for working with animals. Robin recalls that when she was seven years old, her neighbor, who owned the local

gas station, parked his car nearby with a window down, and his beautiful and powerful Weimeraner dog was in full view. Robin naturally found herself going to pet the dog by sticking her hand right inside the car. The dog loved the attention and quickly quieted. Meanwhile, the neighbor came up yelling, "Get back! That's a guard dog!" He was shocked that his dog was not barking or being aggressive in the least bit. He told Robin he had never seen his dog so calm near a stranger. He also said he was the only one whom the dog would let pet him. Even though Robin has no animals, you will find her photographing creatures in the wild.

Finding her way to the Senior Companion Program was a natural and easy fit because Robin has always found deep joy in helping others. Early in life, her mother instilled in her to be a helper and to care about others. She says she loves volunteering as a Senior Companion because the clients express much gratitude and appreciation. Robin says she likes to make her visits fun by adding play and bringing joy to her homebound clients. She wants to help make their days a little brighter.



Although Jim does not live far from his childhood stomping grounds of Sherburn, Minnesota, he has traveled and lived far away from the Midwest prairie. As a former over-the-road truck driver, he saw much of the United States, and when serving in the Air Force, he experienced life in East and Southeast Asia. Fresh out of high school, Jim entered the service with his first duty assignment at Okinawa. While stationed there, he witnessed and experienced a historical world event when, on July 30, 1978, the U.S. traffic laws were abolished, and the American currency returned to the Japanese Yen. Jim vividly recalls the immediate switch from driving on the right side of the road to suddenly driving on the left. These events officially signaled the return of Okinawa Island to the Japanese following WWII when the United States assumed administration. Jim also spent time in South Korea and the Philippines, where he experienced other cultures and different ways of thinking. He also recalled his time living in East and Southeast Asia. Jim is thankful for his military experience as it instilled discipline, provided diverse mechanical training, and offered him multicultural exposure.

After exiting the service, Jim began a new career as an over-the-road truck driver, logging over 1,000,000 miles. After 8 or 9 years, he married and settled in Sioux Falls.

He decided to look for a job closer to home and took a janitorial position at Raven Industries. After some time, a Raven executive took Jim under his wing. His mentorship led Jim into a top leadership position and eventually would help run the business.

Jim was fortunate to have retired in his early fifties and took advantage of that time to spend a year and a half with his father, who was suffering from terminal cancer. "The time I was able to spend with my dad was a godsend," Jim shares. They took many trips, the time spent traveling was meaningful, and they grew very close. "It was like I went from being a son to best friend," Jim shared.

Jim has a variety of interests, including cooking, shopping, gardening, and spending time outdoors. He looks forward to connecting with people and building meaningful relationships through his service as a volunteer with the Senior Companion Program.



# Stories of Making a Difference

## Markita McConnell & Tek Thomas



We tell people inquiring about being a Senior Companion that one of the remarkable benefits of being a Companion is becoming good friends with the clients. And, so, it was when Markita and Tekakwitha met in the commons room of an apartment building. Markita was there visiting with another client, and Tek (her preferred nickname) joined the conversation and inquired how she could benefit from visits with a Senior Companion. A short time later, they quickly became friends, shopping and going to Tek's various appointments together.

When Tek was a young girl, her father suggested she adopt the name Tekakwitha, which in the Mohawk language means "She who Stumbles."

Because her family was extensive and spread out between the U.S. and Canada, she moved often and learned to experience the people and places around her. In her mid-thirties, she was introduced to Christianity and continues to observe the customs and traditions of the religion. She moved to Rapid City in 1994 and liked the services available and the friends she made.

Markita was raised on a ranch near Burke, SD, and was happiest barefoot and riding horses. After high school, she married and moved to a cattle ranch near Atkinson, NE, where she had two children. Then she divorced, moved to California, remarried, and gave birth to twin girls. Markita had her hands full, raising four active little girls. The family ended up back in South Dakota, and Markita earned a degree in Travel and Tourism, worked in home health, and eventually Black Hills Works. Shortly after an incident at Black Hills Works, she joined the Senior Companions, where she met Tek.

Together, they go to dollar stores and thrift shops where Tek loves buying things to decorate her "cheesebox" sized apartment. Sometimes, they attend Bible study or play bingo. The women have known each other for over six years, and many untold stories remain to share. They call each other "Spirit Sisters".

## WE NEED YOU

**THOSE RECRUITED IN THE COMING MONTHS ARE ELIGIBLE FOR A \$100 SIGN-ON BONUS.**

As the volunteer recruiter, I have the distinct pleasure of representing the Senior Companion Program in our communities. As with all of us, the pandemic significantly impacted the Senior Companion Program, with more than 50% of our Senior Companions retiring.

Consequently, we find ourselves in a rebuilding mode so that we can continue to provide clients with the support they need and offer Companions the opportunity to discover new friends and make a difference in other people's lives while receiving a stipend for their service.

So, what do I do? My days are filled with seeking. I am seeking ways to connect with individuals who are 55+, meet income eligibility guidelines, and are looking for an opportunity to serve. I am also seeking communities and organizations where I can share program information and potential partners to collaborate with.

For instance, you may have caught my presentation at the Brookings Activity Center or making and serving banana splits at Active Generations in Sioux Falls. I have also presented to the Long Term Services and Support staff and the Senior Luncheon at the Sioux Falls Salvation Army. I have contacted our Referral Stations, subsidized housing apartment managers, Community Health Center staff, and social workers and arranged for our brochures to be distributed with Senior Commodity Boxes. I also have attended many Health Fairs over the last couple of months, visiting with people about our Program.

To that end, I seek your assistance. If you, or anyone you know, might be interested in learning more about becoming a Senior Companion or would like me to present to your organization or group, please call our Sioux Falls office at 605-361-1133 and ask for Mary!!



## HY-VEE Operation Helpful Smile

Operation Helpful Smiles donated \$1215.93 to Senior Companions of South Dakota. This program has given to local non-profit organizations in Sioux Falls and surrounding communities for more than 16 years. Each week, a different area non-profit organization receives a monetary donation from Operation Helpful Smiles. The Sioux Falls Hy-Vee stores match customer contributions collected at check stands up to \$1000.00.

## New Executive Director



Hello! I am Connie Christensen, the new Executive Director of the Senior Companion Program. Though I am new to my role as Director, I am not new to the Senior Companion Program. I was previously the East River Program Coordinator for over nine years.

I have had the privilege to work with an incredible group of people. I am grateful for the relationships formed with coworkers, volunteers, clients, Referral Stations, Fund Board, and Advisory Council members. I look forward to strengthening those relationships and creating new ones.

Our Companions are dedicated and caring people and inspire me every day. I have witnessed how even a small amount of support and compassion can significantly impact someone's life. My passion for the SCP has only grown, and I am eager to take on new responsibilities and learn more about the grant process. I have an amazing new staff and am excited to get to know them better personally and professionally.

A little about me: my husband, Greg, and I just celebrated our 29th wedding Anniversary. Greg has worked for Frito Lay for 32 years and brought us to South Dakota 14 years ago from Nebraska. We have two adult children, Caleb and Emily. Caleb lives in Vermillion and works at the University of SD. Emily is a marketing assistant for a boutique in downtown Sioux Falls.

## Meet the Rapid City Staff



Hi, I am Carol Merbach, and for the last 12 years, I have been the West River Program Coordinator with the Senior Companion Program. I grew up in the Chicago area, married my husband Karl in 1983, and then proceeded to move nine times around the upper Midwest before landing in Rapid City. I earned an undergraduate and master's degree at Northern Illinois University and have worked primarily in the non-profit sector through all those moves. I have worked mostly with community development agencies, victims of domestic abuse, refugees, people with disabilities, and older adults, learning a great deal about people along the way. At 68 years of age and again working with an older population, I find there is still much more to learn about growing old. Who knew?

If you, or anyone you know, might be interested in learning more about becoming a Senior Companion or interested in me presenting to your organization or group, please call our Rapid City office at (605) 721-8884.



# Welcome New Sioux Falls Staff



Hello, I am Anne Land, one of the newer faces at Senior Companions. When the prior Program Coordinator, Connie Christensen, assumed leadership of the Senior Companion Program, I stepped into her position and am now the East River Program Coordinator.

Throughout my life, I have volunteered in many different capacities and with various organizations, including the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra, the Sioux Falls Butterfly House and Aquarium, and the Siouxland Library, to name a few. My grandmother inspired me to volunteer at an early age. She wanted me to learn that service above self and helping others strengthens relationships and communities.

I look forward to meeting and working with the Senior Companions, Referral Stations, and clients. I love hearing the Companions' stories about themselves and their client relationships. I am amazed at our volunteers' dedication and compassion daily when helping their clients.



Hi, I'm Mary McClung, Volunteer Recruiter for Senior Companions of South Dakota, and I also might add.... the eldest staff person in the Sioux Falls office! I am married to my husband of 48 years, Rick, and we live in a twin home in Sioux Falls. We have one son, Eric, and soon to be daughter-in-law, Ragan. I am a graduate of Augustana College. Yes, it was still a college when I graduated and spent my entire professional career in healthcare.

I am truly enjoying working with and for Senior Companions of South Dakota. Call me at (605) 361-1133 for more information about becoming a part of this caring organization!



My name is Lorrie Hammer, and I am the new Office Manager. I have only been in this job since August but I already really enjoy it. I lived in Sioux Falls 40+ years ago and just recently returned. The largest part of my career was at a college in Texas in the accounting/finance area. I have an accounting degree and was fortunate to use that knowledge at the college. I am an animal lover and enjoy spending time outdoors. I am a horrible cook and would rather be outdoors mowing or playing with the dogs.

The Senior Companions Program is an amazing and wonderful service program. I am honored to have the opportunity to be part of this program and look forward to meeting folks.



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*Thank you to our Advisory Council and Fund Board members for the time, talent, and expertise you have given to the Senior Companion Program.*

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