

Around San Ramon: Rotary recognizes four volunteers as unsung heroes

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San Ramon residents Jim and Gale Denels have taken the honor of being the first husband-and-wife team to be recognized for their dedication to volunteer service.

Jim is one of four recipients of the San Ramon Rotary's Club 2015 Unsung Hero Award and Gale received that honor just last year for her more than 11 years and 1,150 hours volunteering at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation.

This year's fellow award winners include Jeff Sloan, a volunteer at the San Ramon Regional Medical Center, John O'Hanlon, quartermaster and scoutmaster of Boy Scout Troop 60, and Nido Paras, volunteer coordinator for the San Ramon Senior Center, the City Lights program and other programs throughout the city.

The Rotary Club annually recognizes four volunteers who live in San Ramon or serve the residents of San Ramon and have distinguished themselves in their service, says Hermann Welm, award coordinator.

"The amount of time and effort they give to our community is extraordinary and makes San Ramon a better place to live," he adds.

When Jim Denels retired from his corporate finance job and 30 years working for Levi Strauss, he already had been volunteering through the company's Corporate Involvement Teams and knew he wanted to continue volunteering, something that had been a part of his life since he worked as a social worker for the blind following his graduation from college.

He made the call and volunteered at the Contra Costa Food Bank. Sixteen years later Jim is a staple at the nonprofit that provides food to about 188,000 people each month with the help of 88,000 volunteer hours per year.

At the Food Bank, Jim assists with the Boxing Team, packing food boxes for young children and chronically ill residents, works with the Food Distribution Program, and attends many community events throughout the county as a Food Bank Ambassador where he raises the awareness about hunger in our communities and tells people about volunteer opportunities.

When not at the Food Bank, Jim, an avid hiker, also volunteers teaching English as a second language at the Pleasanton Library, and teaching phonics to children in first and second grade in the Pleasanton schools.

"I volunteer because I have been very fortunate," says Jim. "You owe something to the community. It's payback time," he adds and quotes Albert Schweitzer: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Sloan, who volunteers in the medical/surgical ward at San Ramon Regional Medical Center is "the best thing that could have happened to the area," says Kimi Miyamura, director of volunteer services. The retired former Vietnam War medic has made the trek from his Benicia home to the San Ramon hospital twice a week for the past four years to help respond to the patients' calls for blankets, ice and assistance.

"I enjoy working with the nurses and nurses aides and doing menial (tasks) for them so they can concentrate on the patients," says Sloan. "Their (the nurses') time is better spent with the patients tending to their needs.

Sloan moved to Benicia four years ago from Chicago to be closer to family in Walnut Creek after his retirement in 2010. A daily walker, he also volunteers at the Benicia community theater working as treasurer and stage manager.

"It's important to volunteer," he says. "I have the time and have certain skills to offer in the hospital. It makes me feel good to help others.

"I think the nurses and nurses aides are unsung heroes too," he quickly adds. "They deserve all the praise that people can give them."

O'Hanlon has contributed more than 7,000 hours to the Danville Boy Scout Troop 60, which has 70 scouts and 28 adult volunteers.

According to parent Michelle Lee, "His leadership will have long-term impacts in the development of the boys he has worked with."

Paras is a fixture at the City of San Ramon volunteering in several capacities including volunteer coordinator and photographer for the Senior Center. Paras also created and leads the Trailblazers, the senior hiking group and is moderator at the city's Foreign Film Series.

"The (San Ramon) Parks and Community Services Department can always count on Nido Paras to step up and help out, lending his many talents to a variety of programs," says Mary Ann Wilkman, recreation supervisor.