Looking Out for Others

Pasco County resident Jim Vermiglio volunteers as an advocate for residents of elder care facilities.

by Robin L. Baker
Community contributor

Lost dentures. The wrong lift being used to transfer someone from a bed to a chair. Bedbugs. If you’re in a nursing home or an assisted living facility or an adult family care home, who will be your voice if you have concerns or problems such as these? In Trinity, your answer may be Jim Vermiglio, a certified ombudsman since 2007. One of more than 300 statewide, Vermiglio is part of the state’s Department of Elder Affairs’ Florida’s Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.

Vermiglio travels throughout Pasco and North Pinellas as a volunteer ombudsman and this year was named “Ombudsman of the Year” for Pasco and North Pinellas Council and was one of two “Don Hering Excellence In Advocacy” award winners for the state.

“As an ombudsman, I get to talk with residents about their lives during visits and assessments but mostly I investigate complaints on behalf of the residents,” he said. He volunteers, he said, “To advocate for the residents who have no one to speak on their behalf and hopefully I can get the answers to make their life better. I don’t really think about what impact I have, I get the satisfaction of helping residents with issues and make the residents happy.”

Vermiglio, 76, lives in Port Richey. He moved to the Tampa Bay area 10 years ago from Michigan. In the traditional sense of the word he is “retired” but if you look at the hours he puts into volunteering – 1,102.5 hours last year on cases alone (that 92 hours a month, far exceeding the average), you will see he considers this his “work.”

A food director in a nursing home in Michigan for nine years, he said he called about becoming an ombudsman after reading a newspaper article. “I thought it sounded interesting,” he said. Still, he added, “I didn’t know what I was getting into when I volunteered but I was very impressed with the mentors I went out with. When someone has nobody, I get personally involved because I care. The thing I most enjoy about being an ombudsman is the end result: Helping the resident.”

That caring has been recognized by others. In his nomination for the Excellence in Advocacy award, a resident said the lift being used during transfers from one place to another was painful and was fearful of it. “Jim investigated and found the staff had been using the wrong lift,” the resident said. One family member of a resident said of Vermiglio, “You have a true angel working on your behalf and all the others that he has helped. I feel truly blessed to have him on our side.”

Lynn Penley, the District Manager for Pasco and North Pinellas said the council “has come to rely on his tenacious fighting spirit when dealing with issues of all kinds. He works tirelessly for those he advocates for and never backs down until a resolution is found as evidenced in his success rate with food issues, lost dentures and refunds. You could call him the ‘bulldog’ of the council. Jim has the unique distinction in the council of receiving the most fan mail from residents and families over the years.”

Vermiglio believes this advocacy is his job, his passion. He travels five days a week, covering 24 facilities.

He hopes that those who apply to become an ombudsman won’t be daunted by the work. “They can’t think it is all going to be easy; it is a real challenge but the satisfaction is well worth it. It is a ‘pure’ satisfaction – helping others.”

Robin L. Baker is Regional Ombudsman Manager for the West Central Florida Long-term Care Ombudsman Council in Tampa. For more information about becoming an ombudsman, go to ombudsman.myflorida.com.