

FISH NEWSLETTER

January 2015

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Several of you were unable to attend the FISH Annual Meeting on January 8th, so the message for this newsletter will be a summary of my remarks from that meeting. First let me thank you for all you do for those in need in our community.

In 2014 your Board of Directors focused on reducing risk for our organization. Actions taken were as follows:

- Developed policies on confidentiality and sexual harassment prevention
- Revised Orientation Guide, added policies, and required a signature
- Held a training session with Weekly Coordinators and Lead Volunteers
- Reviewed Insurance Coverage
 - Determined General Liability was appropriate and at an excellent rate
 - Identified need for Director and Officer Insurance; and added this coverage
- Continue to review our risks for transporting clients to non-emergency medical appointments
- Prepared to implement a client data base that does not include the full social security number

Additionally the Board reviewed our Mission Statement and Bylaws. Amendments to the Bylaws were drafted for your consideration.

Thanks to Farm Fresh, we implemented a system of having our purchased food delivered, rather than having to pick it up.

Vacant positions created by resignations that were filled included:

- Two Board Positions
- Board Secretary
- Board Vice President
- Food Coordinator
- Newsletter Editor

During 2015 your Board will focus on FISH's long term financial stability. Expenses exceeded income in 2012 and 2013. Figures are not completed for 2014, but it is likely that expenses have exceeded income. The Board will consider:

- Cost reduction opportunities to include:
 - Receiving some food from the VA Peninsula Food Bank
 - Providing eligibility guidance to referring agencies
 - Eliminating some food and hygiene items currently offered
 - Reducing the amount of food provided from 15 meals to a lesser amount
- Opportunities to increase income:
 - More attention to print and online newspaper articles – Gene Bruss will take the lead in these efforts.
 - Actively persueing grant opportunities – Ray Scharfenberger will lead this activity.

Thank you again for all you do for FISH and for those in our community who need our services.

Don Butts,
President

2014 SERVICE SUMMARY

Food Requests: 4,957; Total Fed: 11,585; # of Meals: 173,775; Total Clothed: 3,759 (Adults: 2,171; Children: 1,588); # of Outfits: 10,597; Housewares: 638; Rides for medical appointments: 569.

SPECIAL: FISH EARLY HISTORY

Preceding the Annual Meeting, Karen Berquist and Sally Fisk presented a short history of FISH from 1975 to 2015. Karen hopes to create a written history for the 40th anniversary of FISH that she will share with the Williamsburg community. She asks that anyone who has information, records and reports please share them with her. (kabergq@wm.edu)

Fish in Williamsburg - A History of the Founding and Early Years - 1975 - 1986

Text by Karen Berquist; Photography by Sally Fisk

Presented to the Board of Directors and volunteers on January 8, 2015

On a fall afternoon in 2014 a group of women met at the Historic Triangle Building to recall the early days of the organization Fish. Marian Bennett, Ling Ngo, Nancy Lubrano and Sherry Welter were among the first organizers of Fish in Williamsburg. Although it had been years since they had worked together as Fish volunteers, they expressed great joy at rekindling their friendships formed decades ago.

The task at hand was to recollect the founding and early days of Fish:

- How did these founders come together?
- Who volunteered in those first years?
- What services did they provide?
- What support did they receive from local churches and organizations?

And perhaps most of all,

- Why did these busy young women feel compelled to action?

Karen Berquist took notes and recorded the conversations and Sally Fisk took candid photos. This narrative is composed from their recollections. We hope it preserves a useful history of the founding and first decade of Fish, the contributions of its many volunteers and the collective community support that helped many neighbors in times of need. Few documents remain from the first years, but included with this text are a copy of the original article that appeared in Reader's Digest in January 1969; directions for volunteers dated 1979 – 1980; lists of volunteers by service category from the early 1980s; and a directory from the mid-1980s.

1969 - Inspiration from Reader's Digest: In 1960, Reggie and Ling Ngo moved to Newport News and became parishioners at the mission church which later became St. Jerome Catholic Church. It was winter of 1969 when Ling read the Readers Digest article titled "A Friendly Neighbor Called Fish" describing the grassroots efforts of an Anglican minister, Reverend Derek Eastman and his congregation in Old Headington, near Oxford, England.

The story moved Ling to action. Within the Catholic Church, Vatican II had put forth a call to lay ministry. Although the call to acts of mercy is centuries old, there was something new and exciting in the spirit of Vatican II. The call also resonated with the spirit of compassion and caring that Ling had learned from her Buddhist grandmother. Ling wrote to Reverend Derek Eastman and received a lengthy letter in reply. He encouraged her to do what she could in her community to establish a volunteer service group using his simple project as a model.

In addition to information brochures and suggestions for organizing, Reverend Eastman shared the spirit of how the work should be done. Ling recalls that he told them to "work simply, as caring neighbors." He reminded her that although actions would be helpful to others, there would also be times when the most important thing a person could do for another was to 'just listen'.

St. Jerome's pastor, Father Frank Hendrick, supported the idea of a Fish volunteer program in his parish and meetings to organize and recruit volunteers soon followed. Volunteers signed up to cook and deliver meals, provide transportation, babysit, or supply clothes. That year, Fish at St. Jerome's became one of hundreds of volunteer groups that sprang up as a result of this one Reader's Digest story.

1974 - Fish Comes to Williamsburg: The Ngo family moved to Williamsburg in 1974 and joined the congregation at St. Bede Catholic Church. There Ling met Sister Nancy Lydon who is remembered as a young nun from the Sisters of Mercy who taught at Walsingham Academy, served as Social Ministry organizer at St. Bede and played the drums in the folk group. Sister Nancy encouraged Ling to start a Fish program in Williamsburg. St. Bede pastor, Father Anthony Warner agreed and, as at St. Jerome's a few years earlier, meetings were held and volunteers recruited. By 1975 Williamsburg had its first group of Fish volunteers.

How it Worked: Calls for assistance were infrequent in those first years, perhaps two or three per month. An answering service was the only paid expense and the few volunteers rotated their days on-call. Requests for food, clothes, shelter, and other assistance were forwarded to the volunteers. Individuals were responsible for all requests that came on their on-call day, but they would also contact other volunteers to help gather clothes, cook a meal, or help in any way needed. If the request included items like gas, hotel stay, or bus tickets the volunteers paid for these from their own pocket. Sherry Welter recalled that in the early years an arrangement was in place with Mr. Washington, the owner of the Exxon, to provide gas on credit and later be reimbursed by the volunteers.

Shortly after I moved to Williamsburg in 1978 I experienced how this small group of volunteers worked. My children and I were at Marian Bennett's house when she received a phone call from Nancy Lubrano, the Fish volunteer on duty that week. Nancy had received a request for children's clothes. She knew Marian's son was about the same size as the young boy in need of clothing; did Marian have something to offer from her son's closet? It was that simple. Marian gathered a few gently-used items to deliver to the Lubrano's house. Then Nancy gathered clothes from her own children's dressers. She sorted, folded, and delivered the clothing, as requested.

This simple gesture of neighborly concern for a stranger's family left me deeply impressed. I wanted to take part in this kind of sharing and helping. And so did dozens of others who heard about Fish or saw these volunteers in action. Over the years the roster of volunteers grew.

A directory from 1979-1980 includes guidelines for volunteers, the steering committee members, and lists of people who would provide cooked meals, clothes, transportation. Others signed up to babysit, read to the blind, do housework, and provide companionship for seniors and teenagers.

Some requests did not fall into these neat categories. An additional list in the 1979-1980 directory is titled: 24 Hours. People on this list might be called on at any time for any reason. Ling Ngo recalled serving as a translator for speakers of Tagalog and Chinese. Sherry Welter remembered when she and her husband Bill, along with Ling and her husband Reggie, gathered and delivered blankets, food and clothes for a family who lost their home in a fire on New Year's Eve. In another case, the Welters delivered food and chopped wood for an elderly man who heated his home with a wood stove. Each volunteer had memories of taking her children along as helpers to visit shut-ins, deliver food and clothes, or provide a hot meal. They believed these experiences of seeing others in need and providing help would make their children more aware of the world around them and more generous and caring.

The structure was simple and effective. Both the roster of volunteers and the number of calls per week grew as police, social services, and churches became aware of the many ways Fish volunteers were willing to help their neighbors in need.

1980 - 1984 Growing Years: Many events in the early 1980's impacted social service needs in Williamsburg. Among them, Eastern State Mental Health facility lost funding and eliminated housing services dramatically. At the same time Williamsburg's hotel and restaurant industries were expanding. Those who worked in low-paying service industry jobs often worked several part-time jobs to bring home a wage that barely covered basic expenses. An unexpected setback -- an illness, broken-down vehicle, or unanticipated expenses could push families from Just-Getting-By to In-Need of assistance.

Churches found an increasing number of people coming directly to their doorsteps asking for help with food, clothes, and bills. As the needs grew, church referrals to Fish volunteers increased. These same church communities became an important source for volunteers, food and clothes donations, and funding. A few churches provided the space necessary to establish a food pantry and a supply of clothes.

Tracing the locations for the food pantry and clothes closet from the early 1980s to 1994 reflects the growing support from area churches. The food pantry's first homes were in the St. Bede rectory basement and later in a room in St. Bede parish center. When St. Bede could no longer host the pantry, the Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists provided space in Fahs house, their newly-purchased property on Ironbound Road. The pantry remained in the Fahs House until its move to the Historic Triangle Building in 1994.

The clothes closet also moved between many locations. The first clothes closet was in a volunteer's home. Later, Williamsburg Baptist Church on Richmond Rd provided the first church location, organized and cared for by Petey Pope and her husband George. When the need for more space grew, the clothes closet relocated and expanded into a house at the corner of Burns Lane and Jamestown Road owned by the First Church of Christ, Scientist. Every inch of space was in use by the next move -- and timing was perfect. When the church was ready to raze the house for new construction in 1994, the Historic Triangle Building was ready for use. Finally food and clothes were located in the same space!

In addition to providing homes for the growing food pantry and clothes closets, churches offered to meet specific types of support. For several years, St. Stephen Lutheran Church, St. Bede, and Wellspring Methodist Church provided space for overnight stays. A volunteer unlocked the church rooms, helped the person get settled in for the night and returned the next morning - often with a hot breakfast - to send the lodger on his or her way.

The local Quaker community formed the core of the transportation service for many years. Their volunteers recruited drivers and made countless calls to assign drivers to ride requests.

Eventually, an additional food pantry was established at Hickory Neck Episcopal Church to serve those in the western part of James City County. Money for emergency purchases, generally under \$20, was available from Walnut Hills Baptist Church, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, and St. Bede. Sister Berenice, a teacher at Walsingham Academy took on an increasingly important role in local affairs as St. Bede's Social Ministry director. Sister worked closely with Fish volunteers and obtained vouchers for meals for those in the overnight shelters. Her years of dedicated ministry brought her the title of Williamsburg's own Mother Theresa.

The 1980's: A New Decade, a New Routine: With official spaces for food and clothes in place, volunteers no longer raided their own pantries or shopped for food requests. Finding clothes became easier with items organized in a tidy, well-run Clothes Closet. Even so, a day on call was demanding. The number of calls per day increased to two to five requests on weekdays. Enough volunteers were recruited to serve on a specific day of the month. To fill requests, they made separate trips to gather food from the food pantry and select clothes from the clothes closet. Working with the age, size, and

gender for each request, the volunteers would select three outfits for every-day use, including underwear, shoes, and coats or other specific items. A fourth outfit for church, dress occasions, or job interviews would also be provided.

Bags in tow, the volunteers might leave items for pick-up in the foyer at St. Bede Parish Center or deliver food and clothes directly to the recipient. A typical schedule for a day would be to take calls at home from morning until about 3pm; travel to the food pantry to pack groceries and load them into the car; travel to the clothes closet to select clothes and pack them in the car; start deliveries around 5pm. In the evening, the volunteer would forward details for transportation requests to the person on call that week. The day on-call became busier each year. It would still be many years before the move to a central location in the Historic Triangle Building in 1994 brought efficiencies for volunteers and clients.

The routine for food and clothes was time-consuming and volunteers rarely had time to personally provide special services, like emergency babysitting, transportation, hot meals or companionship. Instead, the volunteer relied on contacts in the directory. Referrals to other helping organizations became another part of the Fish volunteer routine.

1982 - The Covenant – Fish and Ecumenical Outreach Ministries (E.O.M.): The Covenant between Fish and E.O.M. was intended to be a pledge of solidarity and cooperation between these two service organizations. Each one worked independently; each was supported by a core of churches and individuals; each relied on dedicated volunteers to reach out to provide food, clothes, and other assistance. In 1982, E.O.M. director Carletha Morris approached St. Bede pastor, Father George Zahn with the idea of a covenant. The Williamsburg Pastoral Council embraced this gesture of solidarity between two growing, all-volunteer service organizations. Each would retain its name and board of directors. E.O.M. would offer screening services for requests for money for fuel and utilities. Food and clothes requests would be met from the well-established Fish pantry and clothes closet as well as the auxiliary pantries at E.O.M. and Hickory Neck Episcopal Church. Members of the clergy, volunteers from E.O.M. and Fish and many community service workers joined in a beautiful service to commemorate their covenant at the church on Jamestown Island in September, 1982. The covenant pledged our faith and prayer support as we joined in serving the poor and needy in Williamsburg.

The 1986 Fish directory reflects the joined resources of Fish and E.O.M. and a newsletter article from 1985 recalls the spirit and purpose of the covenant.

Small Gestures, Big Changes: It is stunning to reflect on the outcome from one person inspired by a small article in a popular magazine.

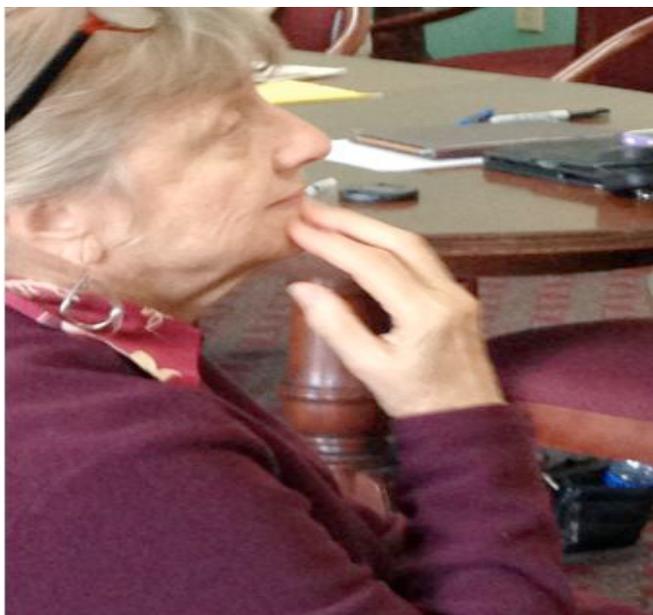
Between 1975 and 1986, Fish in Williamsburg grew from a few dedicated volunteers to a prominent, reliable and well-respected community resource. Every major church group and many smaller ones were drawn to recruit volunteers and provide support for Fish. Among the things that didn't change are an all-volunteer staff and the deep commitment volunteers share for the spirit of caring and compassion for their neighbors.

This history is unfinished and remains a draft. We invite others to supply additional details and correct errors and omissions. We welcome and recollections of the events that began in the late 1980's leading to the current location in the Historic Triangle Building and operations today.

On December 1 2014, the founders and first volunteers of Fish in Williamsburg met to recall early years.



Ling Ngo and Nancy Lubrano browse a directory of volunteers titled: *St. Bede's Fish Organization, 1979-1980.*



Marian Bennett recalls the first volunteers.



Marian Bennett and Karen Berquist.



Ling Ngo, Karen Berquist, and Sherry Welter at work.



Ling Ngo, Marian Bennett, Nancy Lubrano, and Sherry Welter at the recollections work session.