

Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

Interview by Pat Boland

Judith Sarah Rae does service work to grow, to give of the skills she has, and out of a deep curiosity about life, and other people. To her, the richness of volunteer work is being able to use her skills to benefit others, and also to learn something new, often about herself.

“One of my philosophies is that, whenever you contribute, the Gift is always ‘You.’ We sometimes tend to think ‘he knows more about this, or she’s better at that.’ But there should be no comparisons, because you are not them. You are you, and nobody can be you like you can.”

AIDS Massage Project and Pathways

Over the years, Judith’s volunteer choices have flowed naturally out of what she enjoys doing, and out of her curiosity about life. Her writing and editing led to many years of volunteer work as the editor of a synagogue’s weekly bulletin and a women’s running club newsletter. Her artwork and sculpture led her to learning massage and a variety of bodywork modalities. Eventually she spent more than a decade volunteering massage therapy work with the AIDS Massage Project and Pathways, a Health Crisis Center.

“With the AIDS Massage Project (AMP) we each had a weekly client who we stayed with until they died. At that time everyone with AIDS died. Volunteering with AMP dramatically changed my life.

Once at a hospice I gave the weekly massage to a woman dying of AIDS. I quietly held her feet at the conclusion of the evening when suddenly I thought: ‘What makes me think I’m going to live longer than she?’ Often that’s the challenge for caregivers who can find themselves believing, ‘You’re dying, and I’m not.’ What struck me that night was: What ego! What hubris! I could walk out the door tonight and get hit by a truck.”



Alternatives to Violence Project

For the last fifteen years Judith has worked with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). AVP is a prison program (offered in communities, too) with experiential weekend workshops on how to change old violent behaviors. AVP volunteers co-facilitate workshops with inmate facilitators. Her first interest in AVP grew as she witnessed her husband Doug’s passion for the work.

“I started doing prison workshops because of my curiosity about how and why Doug loved it. Since I’m an artist, a writer and an only child, I’m much more comfortable with one-on-one interactions than in a group, unlike my husband.” Here again in AVP, she found she brought her self and her skills to the effort and it was another opportunity for personal growth.

Prisoners self-select to take part in this program, which is advertised in the prison. The workshops use role-plays, interactive exercises, games, and the shared experience of participants to look at ways we all respond to situations where injustice, prejudice, ignorance, frustration and anger can lead to aggressive behavior and violence.

“The people who choose this training are really hungry for change. Ultimately they have the same challenge we all have: How can you find peace and personal fulfillment no matter what your circumstances?”

“We see people who made terrible mistakes when they were young, sometimes with a gang or on drugs. So they find themselves in a very difficult scenario where they need to learn to cope with what, externally, is often not going to change for a number of years. Given that, they can still choose to learn how to change internally and, they tell us, gain a sense of respectful personal power.”

Transforming Old Habits

“It is true for us all that old behaviors, whether learned from family, or environment or peer pressure, have caused us to make some bad choices. These old habits are so entrenched that doing something different is really difficult for any of us to envision.

Just suggest to a man or woman who is in prison to consider that one of a number of possible responses to violence could be to walk away from conflict.

They would incredulously respond, ‘Why would I want to do that?’ As the workshop progresses this and many other creative, non-violent options begin to seem more possible.”

Through her involvement with the prison project, Judith has met “some amazing men and women” and heard hundreds of transformative stories. She sees in herself the commonalities she shares – we all share – with the inmates.

“It took me awhile to realize how subtle this program is. The trust that builds in each group really contributes to the men and women becoming very forthcoming about their struggles, their hopes, dreams and fears. That in itself is so heartwarming and rewarding. We also honor the humanness of the issues we all work on and with which we can all identify.”

“We consider a core question: How can one best live a rich, full life, given that one’s circumstances are more limiting, and narrower than most have?”

Working as an AVP team, rather than one-on-one as she was used to in her previous volunteer work, initially took Judith out of her comfort zone. It was a stretch and a gift she is grateful for.

“AVP is not a one-person show, it is teamwork. I still remember discovering how thrilled I was (and still am) that someone has my back. I found if I was up in front of a group leading and I stumbled, someone would help by adding something, or asking a pertinent question. For me that was delightfully new. I don’t have to be in charge and responsible all the time.”

Yourself First

During her last few years working with the AIDS Massage Project, Judith recognized that she was overwhelmed with grief and sadness at the amount of death she was experiencing. So she took a necessary break to take care of herself.

“There is a wonderful saying by medieval Rabbi Akiba: ‘If I’m not for myself, who will be? If I’m for myself alone, who am I? If not now, when?’ To me that means each one of us is first, then others, because it is essential to take care of yourself before you can truly give to others and to the world. Finally, ‘If not now, when?’ Choice! Action!”