

Volunteers get so much more than they give

Key to the Door Weekly

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By Patty Williamson

Because of one of those wonderful coincidences in life that could never be planned, my husband Howard and I first visited Door County in July 1990 – the very month American Folklore Theatre was born. We saw both shows that summer – *Song of the Inland Seas* and *Mule for Breakfast Again* – and knew that we'd found something very special in that little clearing in the woods.

We missed the 1991 season, but in 1992 we bought a cottage on Kangaroo Lake and were often back at AFT. We think we began volunteering about 1994, when we were still just summer people. It was a very informal business in those days. If you had a free night, you just strolled in and someone pointed at something you could do. One blustery night when the cast and crew had dined backstage on chili, Fred Alley served the leftovers to the crowd waiting in line, ladling it out into little paper cups. It's memories like this that keep us coming back. (And we've seen every summer/fall show AFT has done. The ones we missed in 1991 were repeated in later years.)

In 1996 Board Chair Mary Seeberg got volunteers organized and scheduled. No more nights with a feast or famine of willing workers. In those days, when my knees were much younger, my favorite job was handing out programs in the back of the theater, chatting with people until time for the house to open. If they were new to AFT, I told them what a wonderful time they were going to have. I knew, because I always had a wonderful time, too.

Seeing shows over and over – we volunteer at least once a week, summer and fall – means that the dialog becomes very familiar. (*Belgians in Heaven*, AFT's most-repeated show, is playing for the ninth time this summer, and I've seen it dozens of

times.) I know when the big laughs are coming, and it's fun to watch the audience and wait for their reaction.

Now that my knees are just a couple of years away from 80, I have a job that doesn't require so much standing – managing the handicapped seating section near the front of the theater. I greet guests and get them comfortably settled, and there's plenty of time to chat and share memories of past shows.

There are lots of other ways volunteers can help in Peninsula Park in the summer and at indoor venues in the fall and over the winter holidays. You can take tickets, sell concessions, help with parking or (Howard's favorite job) drive the eight-passenger golf cart that transports people who have trouble walking from the parking lot to the backstage area. Volunteers are also needed to help with bulk mailings and archive clippings and photos in the AFT office and to distribute posters and brochures to businesses in Sturgeon Bay and northern Door County.

Twice a summer, we feed the cast, crew and other volunteers between shows on Wednesday nights. (Friends at Zion UMC help with one of the meals.) It's not a usual job for volunteers, but if you really want to feel appreciated, carry in a freezer of home-made ice cream!

Sometimes my knees are achy on evenings when we're scheduled to volunteer and I think, very briefly, that it would sure be easier to stay home. But I don't, and I'm never sorry.

There are more than 250 active volunteers now, and always room for more. If you are interested or want more information, please call Ann at the AFT office, 920.854.6117, Ext. 101, or e-mail volunteer@folkloretheatre.com.



Patty Williamson is the author of "See You Under the Stars," the history of American Folklore Theatre's first 20 years.