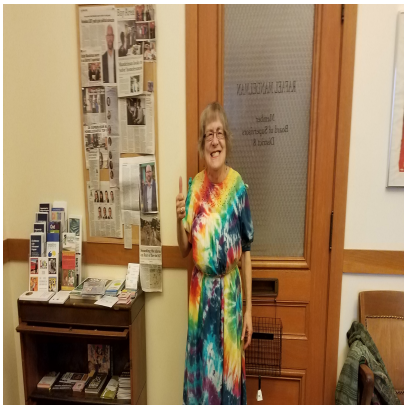

Experience, maturity give senior volunteers a leg up and new life in San Francisco supervisorsâ?? offices

Description

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â??Itâ??s good to be around people and around the supervisor. Iâ??m honored to be in his office. This is the happiest Iâ??ve ever been in my life.â?• â?? Nancy Young

Jesus Barragan remembers a caller to Supervisor Hillary Ronenâ??s office who had received a notice from Medicare saying her payments were going to be reduced. â??She was so frantic she hadnâ??t noticed that there was a call-back number on the letter.â?•

Barragan kept her on the line until she found the number. She called later to let him know it worked out fine. â??I always think, â??What if that was me on the lineâ?? â?• he said. â??I try to treat all our callers with respect and courtesy.â?•

Bruce Johnson, Anne Gallagher and Jesus Barragan volunteer in the District 9 office of Supervisor Hillary Ronen. (Photos by Judy Goddess)

That woman is just one of dozens of citizens who call their local representatives when they have a problem.

Barragan is just one of many volunteers who provide support to San Francisco supervisors. , who are only budgeted for three full-time legislative aides. But he is one of only a few volunteers who can offer something that others canâ??t.

Heâ??s a senior, and that can make a difference in dealing with older constituents.

â??A lot of seniors call with problems,â?• said Alex Long, the retired founder of a software company and a volunteer in the District 2 office of Supervisor Catherine Stefani. â??They donâ??t identify as seniors, but they seem to be more tolerant when they talk to a senior.â?•

Barragan and Long are among seven retired men and women volunteering in supervisorsâ?? offices â?? that is, in the offices of three of San Franciscoâ??s 11 supervisors, for districts 2, 8 and 9. College students, and some high school students, also volunteer in supervisorsâ?? offices for school credit.

Barragan, once a counselor for children in foster care, veterans and other needy populations, works for Supervisor Hillary Ronen along with volunteers Anne Gallagher, a former special education teacher, and Bruce Johnson, a retired IT director, Her Distict 9 emcompasses the Mission District, Bernal Heights and the Portola. â??They each bring experience, maturity and a deep knowledge of District 9 to the office every day,â?• said Ronen. â??They may have stepped back from paid careers, but their labor and contributions are invaluable.â?•

Long and Molly Richardson, who once worked in corporate healthcare, help out in District 2. Supervisor Catherine Stefani represents the Marina, Cow Hollow, Pacific Heights, Seacliff, Lake District, Presidio Heights, Jordan Park, Laurel Heights, Presidio and part of Russian Hill.

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Nancy Young is one of two senior volunteers for Supervisor Rafael Mandelman. His District 8 covers the Castro, Noe Valley, Diamond Heights, Glen Park, Corona Heights, Eureka Valley, Dolores Heights, Mission Dolores, Duboce Triangle, Buena Vista Park and part of Twin Peaks.

All of them think volunteering at City Hall is something more seniors should consider.

A good place to be

â??Itâ??s a place where you can help make a difference for your neighbors and on larger issues,â?• said Long, â??and itâ??s a beautiful place: weddings every day, exhibits, choirs. Itâ??s a good place to come to.â?•

Molly Richardson in the offices of District 2 Supervisor Catherine Stefani.

Richardson thinks many retirees might be afraid to volunteer, afraid they might make a mistake, or donâ??t know how they can work without a title.

â??I tell them, youâ??ve got to take a risk to have fun. Itâ??s wonderful to be appreciated for doing a job, particularly if you havenâ??t been for a long time,â?• she said. â??When youâ??re retired, you can have a worldview that gets smaller or one that gets bigger. If itâ??s smaller, youâ??re missing out on a lot. The now is so exciting.â?•

She and Long together put in about 10 to 12 hours a week for District 2.

â??I recognized how helpful they are from the first day I met them here,â?• said Jack Gallagher, one of Stefaniâ??s legislative aides. â??They have an ability to speak with people and help them navigate the system. Theyâ??re priceless.â?•

Most of their duties involve helping residents with ordinary problems.

â??I had no idea that people call City Hall all the time â?? to complain about potholes, problems with their income tax, their neighbors,â?• Richardson said.

Homeless encampments, dirty streets, empty storefronts, noise and traffic are common complaints in District 9. And not everyone is looking for a solution. Some callers just need to get their frustrations out, said Gallagher. â??When theyâ??re through venting, they thank us for listening, and donâ??t want anything more from us.â?•

In addition to handling constituent complaints, Gallagher supervises interns. She estimates sheâ??s supervised over 37 interns in her two years on board.

Knowing the neighborhoods

Together, the three district 9 volunteers put in over 25 hours a week fielding calls, finding resources â?? and just understanding the problem. â??When someone calls about a troublesome corner, it helps that we know the neighborhood and weâ??re familiar with the problems,â?• Gallagher said. She and Johnson are longtime Bernal Heights residents.

On hearing of a problem, the first thing they do is call the appropriate city department, Johnson said. â??Often, just by saying weâ??re from Hillary Ronenâ??s office, we help things move along. Working in Hillaryâ??s office gives us leverage and a sense of agency.â?•

â??Weâ??re doing real work for real people,â?• he added. â??Maybe itâ??s my business background, but I want anyone who comes away from Hillaryâ??s office to say, â??Iâ??m a satisfied customerâ??.â?•

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Barragan is an experienced community organizer who volunteered for former District 9 Supervisor David Campos until he was termed out. Johnson and Gallagher are new to political work. They began volunteering after hearing Ronen on the campaign trail, drawn to her policies and her ethics, they said.

â??Working for her is something I really believe in, it has my heart. My admiration for Hillary makes me want to work in our office,â?• said Johnson. â??We take the flak for Hillary: Hillary thinks ahead and we run interference.â?•

â??Itâ??s great to feel inspired. Thereâ??s a lot of satisfaction supporting things you believe in. Weâ??re like her groupies,â?• Gallagher added.

Richardson, who has been volunteering in the District 2 office since the previous supervisorâ??s first day on the job. She got involved after meeting Mark Farrellâ??s father, campaigning for his son at the Marina Safeway.

â??The work is interesting, thereâ??s no playbook. You have to figure out how to solve problems,â??â?? she said. â??Thereâ??s also some clerical work, too, and I help train volunteers. Itâ??s different than what I ever did. I want to learn more and do more.â?•

A chance to tackle big problems

Alex Long is a volunteer in the office of District 2 Supervisor Catherine Stefani.

Long got involved soon after his retirement several years ago, when he and his wife moved from Palo Alto to San Francisco. A younger neighbor saw him just â??hanging around, he said, and suggested he volunteer in Farrellâ??s office.

While Long also helps with constituent services, what he seems to most enjoy doing is researching and getting involved with the â??big issues,â?• he said. â??There are so many interesting problems in the city.â?• In his time with Farrell, he researched models for a citywide Internet; joined a City Hall committee on homelessness to purchase a database of homeless shelters and tablets for workers, making it easier to find open beds.

Then there was the Municipal Transit Agencyâ??s 50-year visioning exercise, which he joined after becoming involved with the #3 Jackson bus. â??They wanted to eliminate the line. A thousand people signed petitions and 100 came to the board.â?• The #3 still runs.

â??Alex also found a database for our office that allows us to enter information on constituent issues. Itâ??s made our life so much easier,â?• said Richardson.

Longâ??s newest issue is low-income housing. â??This shouldnâ??t be a city of just the rich and the poor.â?• He is in the early stages of investigating land trusts, a model developed in Burlington, Vt., and is hopeful that something might come of it.

Gaining a feeling of worth

Nancy Young volunteers in the District 8 office of Supervisor Rafael Mandelman.

For Nancy Young, working in Supervisor Mandelmanâ??s District 8 office, has brought her a feeling of worth and a sense of purpose, something sheâ??s been seeking ever since she retired from Bill Graham Presents almost 15 years ago. â??I loved working for Bill Graham. I didnâ??t have a glamorous job, I worked in the accounting department. They called me â??the shredheadâ??.â?•

Her tasks may still not be glamorous â?? she comes in every Friday afternoon to clip articles and fix the bulletin board â?? but being in the office keeps her from feeling helpless and hopeless about the world situation. â??Itâ??s good to be around people and around the supervisor. Iâ??m honored to be in his office. This is the happiest Iâ??ve ever been in my life.â?•

None of them have any thoughts of a second retirement â?? from volunteering.

â??Every day is a gift. Iâ??m doing what I need to do to keep my sanity, and Iâ??m contributing,â?• said Young. â??Youâ??ve got to do things that take you out of yourself.â?•

Gallagher, who went from two to four days of volunteering, talked about the need for a meaningful thing to hang onto when you retire â?? a frame.

â??I always say that working here began a whole new chapter in my life,â?• she said. â??My family teases me about how much I love this work, but I canâ??t wait to get here in the morning.â?•

â??When people want to know how Iâ??m enjoying retirement, volunteering with Hillary is always my first response,â?• said Johnson. â??This office is like a neighborhood. Weâ??re all here to help.â?•

Barragan concurred: â??I want to do this until I drop.â?•

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1. All Posts

Date Created
26/10/2018
Author
jgoddess

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