

Help from the heart

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Jerry Johnson recognized for service to others

Whether it's pushing folks in wheelchairs to potluck dinners or slicing up and taking cucumbers to neighbors, Jerry Johnson never quits.

“Whether it's carrying out someone's trash, collecting items for the recycle bins, hanging curtains, grilling for a special Hillcrest dinner or delivering fresh vegetables from the garden, you'll see Jerry with a smile on his face and a warm greeting for everyone he meets,” said Anne Franzen, director of Gothenburg Housing Authority that oversees Hillcrest Apartments where Jerry lives.

Johnson's caring ways recently earned him the “Resident of the Year” award from more than 100 housing authority organizations across the state.

The prestigious recognition is by the Nebraska Chapter of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials.

Johnson said he was speechless when the award was announced in Kearney. He traveled to a fall conference banquet under the ruse he was accepting an award for Hillcrest.

During a cake and coffee reception for Johnson at Hillcrest, several residents shared their thoughts about Jerry's thoughtfulness.

Gloria Makey talked about a community garden behind Hillcrest tended by several Hilltop residents.

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“Jerry rototills between the rows of everyone’s gardens and hauls off trailers full of debris in the fall,” Makey said. “When I need to be away, he waters and tends my vegetables.”

Makey went on to describe Johnson as a “spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment kind of person” who invites neighbors over for visits in the apartment he shares with his wife, Lois.

The 73-year-old also gives away all of the produce he raises to Hillcrest residents and to friends and acquaintances in the community.

“He found out what kind of squash I liked and left some on my table,” said Pauline Sukraw. “He’s a generous and giving man.”

Marge Plank tells how Johnson has sliced and peeled cucumbers and watermelon and put the garden treats in her refrigerator.



Another Hillcrest resident, Gary Everitt, said Johnson has gotten him “unstuck” a few times in his apartment.

Everitt, who has cerebral palsy, is in a wheelchair.

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The two are also “bingo buddies” that meet at the Senior Center to play the game each Tuesday.

Franzen described Johnson as “our bingo guy” when residents play the game monthly in the Hillcrest community center.

Lori Edwards recalls a time when residents were having a carry-in dinner and no one brought a meat dish.

She ordered deli chicken from Peterson’s Supermarket but her car wouldn’t start to pick it up.

“Jerry gave me a ride.”

For the most part, Johnson shrugs off what he does for people but did acknowledge that something inside makes him do what he does.

“It comes from here,” he said, patting his heart. “I’ve always been that way.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m healthy,” Johnson quipped.

Environment may also have influenced his behavior, Johnson said, noting that he used to usher in the United Methodist Church in Cairo where he grew up.

When the family moved to Wood River, Johnson served on the church board.

In 1974, Johnson took a job at the Farmland feed mill and the family ended up in Gothenburg

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where he and Lois have lived ever since.

Giving is part of his makeup.

“It’s just a good feeling,” Johnson said. “When I give, I get it back tenfold.”

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