

## GOOD WORKS

## ■ PAIRINGS

## When Rick Met Elena, a Friendship Was Born

**W**HEN Meals on Wheels paired Rick, a volunteer, with Elena, 94 and housebound, it put a spring in the steps of both neighborhood residents.

Elena and Rick like to walk. Whenever they spend time together, it's usually on foot — unless they're driving to another neighborhood in search of a new walking adventure.

Elena used to walk everywhere with her late husband. He died more than 50 years ago, but she kept on walking. A few years ago, she was mugged and stopped getting out as much. But then she met Rick. For more than two years now, he has been her Friendly Visitor through the Meals on Wheels volunteer program.

While San Francisco isn't well known for its flatlands, that doesn't bother Elena. "I don't mind the hills," she says. "I just take it easy."

Says Rick: "She may be 94 years old, but I can barely keep up with her."

The pair have also come to realize they have other things in common. Rick's father and Elena's husband both worked for Chevron in Richmond. Elena, the daughter of an Orthodox priest, was born in the rectory of a Russian Orthodox Church on Geary Street; when she married, she moved across the street from the church and has lived there most of her life. Rick's father was also Russian Orthodox.

Fueled by their walks and talks about Chevron, religion and other shared interests, the two have formed their own mutual admiration society.

"Rick's so polite and cooperative," says Elena.

"Elena is such an interesting person. I really enjoy talking with her," says Rick. "And beyond that, it's just the right thing to do."



*"She may be 94 years old, but  
I can barely keep up with her."*

— RICK, Meals on Wheels volunteer, describing Elena (above)

"Their story is remarkable," says Leslie Nipps, who oversees Meals on Wheels' volunteers. "We always say that Friendly Visitors contribute to the health and well-being of our clients, but in this case we could see it happening. Elena wasn't going out. Having company has made it possible for her to get out now — and a senior who gets out and walks is a healthy person. We could have easily given her five more years in her home just by giving her Rick."

## More Than Meals Come on Wheels

**M**EALS ON WHEELS' name leads most people to pigeonhole it as simply a food delivery service, and that much is true. With an administrative staff of 25 drivers and the help of 400 volunteers, the organization delivered almost a million meals to 1,700 elderly residents throughout the city last year. Most clients get two meals every day of the week.

But volunteers with the organization also lend their time and talents in a number of other ways to enable San Francisco's seniors to live at home independently.

Among them is serving as a Friendly Visitor: making regular visits to homebound residents 60 and older to help with grocery shopping, play cards, watch movies, help write letters, read or just talk. Other volunteers who are handy with home repairs help with simple fixes. Still others ride along to help staffers deliver meals.

Volunteers — who commit to a minimum of two hours of service each month for at least six months — are screened, then paired with a client whose needs match their interests and abilities.

"It's quite an astonishing thing we manage to pull off here," says Leslie Nipps, director of the volunteer program. "Having someone who notices if things aren't going so well becomes essential for many older people."

Nipps tries to match volunteers with clients in the same neighborhood, since the relationship seems to last longer when it's convenient.

"There are two kinds of matches that work beautifully: those in which the client and volunteer have a lot in common, and those in which they have nothing in common," she says. "Volunteers and clients rarely come from the same racial or economic background, and they can often fall in love over the differences."

*For more information about Meals on Wheels, contact volunteer director Leslie Nipps at 343-1325, or visit [mowwsf.org](http://mowwsf.org).*