

# Adventures In Volunteering

By Marcella Kogan



## Life in the Fast Lane at a Nursing Home

I thought a nursing home was a place where old, sick people went to die.

Which is why, before setting out to visit the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington, in Rockville, Md., for a mother-son "volunteering" activity, I explained to my four year old that we had to be respectful, considerate, polite — and quiet. Ariel promised to behave and stuffed several months worth of paintings he made in preschool into a bag for giveaways.



Ariel was not exactly an angel — and that's why he was such a big hit! He joked with the residents, dared them to chase him and called them silly names. My son's free spirit cheered up the residents and freed me of my own making our volunteering experience a lot more fun and enriching!

I wanted to do volunteer work with my son so I could teach him about giving and goodness. But when we pulled into the driveway of the Smith-Kogod Building and saw a sign that read: "Please Turn Engine Off. Fumes Bother Residents," I wondered if visiting a nursing home was the right choice. Just how sick were these people? How would Ariel react to them? What if he asks someone why they have warts on their faces?

Tempted to call the whole thing off, I turned around to leave. But a cheerful woman with an ID card around her neck greeted us and encouraged us to just walk around "talking to the residents." We followed the signs to the nursing station — the hot spot on the wing. A woman slumped over in a wheelchair, with one leg stretched out, shifted her eyes up to glare at us, then looked down without moving her head. Another woman wearing a housecoat and knee-highs was hard at work trying to

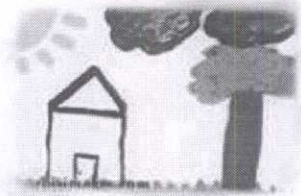
get a straw into a juice container.

I felt awkward standing there. As I pondered our next move, Ariel was already bonding with the residents.

"Whatcha got in that bag?" said a friendly man with no teeth, leaning on the door frame of his room.

Ariel hid behind me and peered at the man from between my legs. Then, taking small steps, he handed over his bag. The man reviewed the artwork as if he were sifting through lithographs.

"Wow, can I have this?" His eyes widened as he pulled out a sheet with Popsicle sticks framing a Jewish star. He returned the bag to Ariel.



A few others shuffled forward. Ariel drew the bag close to him. And then, without warning, he quickly distributed his paintings to the curious onlookers as if he were leafletting at a subway entrance. Ariel then moved on to the TV lounge. Only momentarily put off by the disturbing site of three rows of wheelchair-bound residents in various stages of consciousness, he tossed some of his paintings onto the laps of a few residents, hurling his masterpieces to others in the back row.

At first, I was horrified by my son's cavalier attitude. But if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! Forgetting about the way I was "supposed to act," I ended up going with the flow and had a ball! The fun was just beginning — the next activity was lunch. The nurses asked if we could help wheel people into the lunchroom.

Ariel's face lit up. I grabbed the handrails of a wheelchair whose slouched-over rider was asleep and started heading down the corridor, when Ariel scooted under me to take over the steering. The pace immediately quickened, and he was soon ramming the wheelchair down the hall, skirting around medical equipment. The residents egged him on from the sidelines.

"Way to go!" cheered one resident, who was nearly run over.

"Can we go get some more?" Ariel asked as I parked one resident near a table. I envisioned people toppling over their wheelchairs — brittle bones breaking — and Ariel trampling over them as he returned to pick up the next human missile. But the nurse diverted him back to the lounge before there were any casualties.

Interested in  
Volunteering With Your  
Child to Help the  
Elderly?

- Visit your county government Web site for a listing of volunteering activities.
- Check out [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org) to narrow your search and find volunteer activities that match your needs.
- Call up your synagogue, church or community center and ask for suggestions on which nursing homes to visit.

After two hours of more excitement than I could handle, we said goodbye. Our volunteering activity turned into a real adventure, and we both remember the residents of the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington as old folks living in the fast lane, speeding through life.