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Joan Avery -- ultimate volunteer

Joan Avery

It would be virtually impossible to find anyone who has so selflessly devoted more time to Rossmoor and surrounding social service institutions than Joan Avery. Since she and her husband Jim moved to our community in 2002, this New Rochelle native has been an active volunteer for no less than 18 organizations. At the same time she has kept tabs on an extended family which includes three children, two stepchildren, ten grandchildren, and two step-great-grandchildren. "I love people," she tells us. "Any time I'm involved with an organization I learn something about how it works. Also, I get to meet new people. There are such lovely people in Rossmoor. They are talented and supportive."

Joan graduated from La Salle College in Massachusetts with a degree in liberal arts, "But I also took a course in the medical secretarial field," she adds. "I thought I would never take advantage of it, but as it turned out I've used it all my life. I worked in Bellevue Hospital for Cornell University in New York, I ran the medical staff office for Norwalk (Conn.) Hospital, and I worked for 18 years at Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield, N.J., in the Gastroenterology Department."

Joan's secretarial skills go well beyond the medical field. Of the 18 organizations she has been associated with since moving to Rossmoor, she has served as secretary to 11 of them, plus she is currently president of her Mutual (4-C), serving on the R.C.A.I. Board of Governors.

"The two passions in my life have been horseback riding and music," Joan reports. "I taught riding to both children and adults. I appeared in riding shows when I was a child and a teenager. I worked at every job including mucking out the stables, but back surgery at the age of 40 forced me to give up riding.

"As for music, I began studying piano and violin at the age of four under the tutelage of my grandfather who was a professional musician. I played in chamber music groups up until the age of 18. Then I began to concentrate more on the piano. I liked playing by ear, but it made my grandfather furious. 'Professional musicians don't want to hear you play by ear!' he would say."

But Joan's ability to improvise around practically any tune has served her well. "I discovered from playing in hospitals and community centers that day care and psychiatric patients really benefitted from the music. I used to tell them to pick out any five notes within an octave and we would write a song. The next time I came they would remember that they had composed a song, and they would want me to play it again.

"I also worked with people who had Alzheimer's disease and strokes. One person who hadn't been able to talk at all suddenly asked me to play 'Memories' from the musical *Cats,* and he sang along with me. Music is a wonderful thing for people who are suffering."

Joan also contributes her considerable musical talents to local cultural and civic events, but she considers her most important job to be the editor of her husband's speeches and his most recent book, an autobiography titled *Others Thought I Could Lead.* Jim Avery, who *Ebony* magazine has included in its list of the 100 most influential African Americans, (*Rossmoor News, July 2004),* has been somewhat restricted by health problems in recent months, but he credits Joan's help and encouragement for allowing him to continue an ambitious schedule of speaking engagements and writing projects.

Speaking for Jim and the rest of us Rossmoorites, it's comforting to know that Joan Avery will always be there to lend us a helping hand.

—Bob Huber

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