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As a first-generation American, Andy’s remarkable family history has shaped his life. “When my father was 11 years old, his parents and grandparents realized they had no option but to escape from Nazi-occupied Berlin in 1938. This was the time of Kristallnacht\*—the “Night of Broken Glass”. My mother’s family faced similar pressures and escaped from Vienna, Austria, also in 1938. Unfortunately, few countries were accepting refugees. They had little choice but to head to Shanghai, a British protectorate in China. Both families lived in Shanghai, China, for nearly ten years, until the new communist regime, (which was not well disposed toward foreigners), was taking over the country.

“My parents became childhood friends in China and reconnected a few years after coming to America. They settled in San Francisco and my father was drafted into the U.S. Army in the early 50s and, ironically, was sent back to Berlin as part of the Allied occupation force. I was born in the mid-50s in Carmel, CA, and I grew up in Pacific Grove where my father managed the Officers Club at The Naval Post Graduate School. When I was 8, he transferred to the Treasure Island Naval Station in the San Francisco Bay, and I grew up just across the bay in Oakland.”

Andy graduated from the University of California: Berkeley with a Bachelor of Science degree in forestry. “I liked the outdoors, and even though I wasn’t a great student, I still managed to get a degree. I started working for a lumber company in Northern California, although I think I knew that was not to be my career. My wife had always wanted to work for the federal government, so we moved to Washington, D.C. where, after working for a while as a waiter, I got a job with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as an Imagery Analyst, analyzing early Satellite photos. I became something of a Middle East expert. I was with the CIA for 31 years, traveling worldwide until I retired as the Deputy Director of the National Counter-Terrorism Center. We knew we wanted to move back to California after we retired, so we both got jobs with the RAND Corporation and settled in Santa Barbara, just up the coast from Los Angeles. We’ve both been retired from Rand for five years.”

“Since I didn’t want to just sit around, I started looking for volunteer opportunities. My first volunteer position was at the Santa Barbara Zoo, where I worked as a keeper’s aide, cleaning enclosures for the birds, otters, foxes, giraffes, gibbons, and other animals. I have had a lifelong interest in and love for animals, and this was like a dream come true. Observing these creatures close up, and learning the personalities of each animal, was wonderful.

“During the pandemic, the zoo couldn’t have volunteers, and even though I was still volunteering as a mentor and speaker for local high schools, I still wanted new opportunities. Mentoring kids has been an amazing experience; I often tell them I think I get more out of the experience than they do. Many come from hardship, with parents who work multiple jobs to feed and house their families, and the kids never cease to inspire me.

“But I wanted a bit more and discovered Community Partners in Caring (CPC) and their program to assist seniors in the area. They needed new drivers to deliver free food (fresh fruits and vegetables, canned and shelf-stable food, meat, and dairy products) from the local food bank. When they later expanded their services to shopping, I started shopping for clients and running errands, taking them to vaccinations and other doctor’s appointments. Usually, I’d stop by their home to pick up their Electric Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, or cash. If I paid for their groceries, they would reimburse me. Some would join me on the shopping trip, or they would send their shopping list to the office. My clients' ages range from their late 60s to a gentleman who is 99 whom I’ve been helping for 3 ½ years.

“Of course, in the meantime, the Zoo called back and said that while they still weren’t restarting the volunteer program, they desperately needed train drivers. So, I said yes, and I’ve been driving the zoo train several days a week for nearly three years. The zookeepers work so hard to care for their animals—it is often dirty, exhausting work, but I’ve never seen a group of people work harder or care more than these folks, and they are not getting rich doing it. They do it because of their love for their animals.

“My involvement with CPC is so rewarding—first delivering food during the pandemic to people I could see they treasured what I brought. Grandmothers with toddlers playing at their feet, and people who couldn’t leave their homes, were so happy to receive the bags of food from the food bank. It also reinforced how critical government assistance is for families, the elderly, and others who are on the brink of homelessness, hunger, and worse.

“During the past three years, I’ve been shopping and providing transportation for mostly elderly clients who live independently but need a bit of extra help to get by. They are so appreciative. Just this past week, a client said, ‘You guys are a lifesaver’ during our drive to her doctor’s appointment, a comment that will keep me going for a good while. I see four or five people every week, mostly on Wednesday mornings, and I have gotten to know them. If I have time, I often stop and chat, and in the process, I’ve learned a bit about their lives and challenges, and I have learned from them to appreciate what I have. One man in his mid-80s served in the Air Force in the 50s, another has an engineering degree and we have long, interesting conversations about his life and experiences. I’ve learned how dehumanizing and painful it is to be homeless. One of my clients is from Texas, and we have wonderful conversations about so many things—politics, health, and the state of the world. We make each other laugh and we realize we come from such different backgrounds and generations but also have much in common.

“But mostly, what my experiences have shown me is that these people who need a little help are just like the rest of us. Some have good educations, many served in the military, and they’re smart, funny, and interesting, but for some unforeseen reason, they need a helping hand now and then. These small things—a quick shopping trip, a ride to the airport, transportation to the doctor, or a conversation—they’re so easy for me, an hour or two out of my day. Still, they truly are lifesavers for people who have no one else to rely on and few resources at their disposal. I’m just happy I can do what little I do to help.

“My mother was a big believer in volunteering. I remember when I was young, she worked with the Oakland League of Women Voters. Later, she became a docent at a museum, and also worked as a child advocate in San Francisco, always wanting to give a little in return for the good life and the comforts immigrating to America allowed her.

“Perhaps it was karma, but perhaps ‘paying it forward’ really happens, but my mom was also the beneficiary of a wonderful volunteer herself. Mom spent five years in memory care in Santa Barbara and every Wednesday, like clockwork, Frieda would appear at her door, and they would chat or play gin rummy, or listen to music, or just sit together. Sometimes Frieda took Mom to a concert or out for a drive (eventually with me there to help). I visited most other days, but I knew Wednesday was Frieda’s day. Perhaps her friendship with my mother spurred me to volunteer myself.

“They’ve given me an amazing perspective on aging—not always a happy one. Many rely only on Social Security and food stamps to survive. Some were homeless, but now have a home through Section 8 government housing. I occasionally drive someone to the airport or medical appointments—Uber rides here are very expensive. I like to check in with a visit or phone call when they have no one else to help them. Sometimes they’ll ask me to do a Google search if they don’t have access to the Internet.”

“Some people might wonder ‘Why volunteer?’ For me the answer is easy—I want to be useful and keep busy. I enjoy meeting people, and I consider myself lucky to have had a career I loved and a nice pension to live on, so it made sense to do what I could to help people who were less fortunate than me. And I’ve met such amazing people—in all my volunteer experiences. I’m inspired by some of the other volunteers who are quite a bit older than me, and I hope I can do the same!

(\*Kristallnacht or the Crystal Night of Broken Glass was a pogrom carried out by the Nazi Party’s paramilitary forces, with some participation from the Hitler Youth and German citizens throughout Nazi Germany. The name comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets after the windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings, and synagogues were smashed and businesses were set on fire.)