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[Marin library volunteers keep seniors in circulation](#)

[Elderly receive deliveries of books, videos](#)

- Emily Wilson, Special to The Chronicle
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Novato resident Mary Resnik hates the expression "shut-in."

"It's like you're in prison," she said. "I've had several illnesses over the last 10 years, and they left me without the ability to pay for a car."

Resnik was one of the first people to sign up for a new program with the Marin County Free Library, Library Beyond Walls, in which volunteers bring books to seniors who have a hard time getting to the library.

Resnik, who has Parkinson's disease, was delighted when a staff member at the library told her about the program. At 60, Resnik describes herself as a curious person who has lived an active life. A design contractor, she refurbished houses and boats, including a 55-foot yacht she sailed to Mexico. Now, she says, reading is her way to stay involved.

"She's quite a reader," said Steve Garrett, who has met with Resnik twice. "She's into politics lately and looking at things about Palestine and the Middle East."

Garrett, who lives in San Rafael and works as a gardener at the College of Marin, found out about the program from a flyer at the library.

"I enjoy the library myself," he said. "It seems like a nice thing to do for others who can't get there. ... I like working with seniors and hearing about their pasts."

Along with books, Resnik asked Garrett to bring her the May 24 New Yorker magazine with Seymour Hersh's article on the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. She has big plans to get some movies as well.

"He has a list of videos I'd like to get my hands on," she said. "Foreign films and documentaries. ... It's a very nice way to stir people when you bring media into the house."

Besides the books, magazines and videos, volunteers bring something else with them, says Cathe Smeland, the director of the Foster Grandparent/Senior Companion program in

Marin.

"This is filling more than a resource need," she said. "There's also the emotional need of being connected."

Smeland said the senior volunteers in her program are perfect candidates to bring books to other seniors.

"Everybody in the volunteer core reads a lot," she said. "These are people who don't want to sit and vegetate in front of TV. This keeps them alive and connected."

That connection is an important part of the program, according to Rachel Peterson, the coordinator.

"I find that it's so incredible how excited people are when you show up for that first meeting," she said. "They love having books brought to them."

The qualification to become a volunteer is simple, Peterson said: enthusiasm for working with seniors. Also, the time commitment is flexible and doesn't require a lot of hours.

That's one of the things that appealed to Janet Mercer, a freelance film producer who lives in Mill Valley.

"Somebody sent me an e-mail about the program, and I thought 'That's a really wonderful, worthwhile thing and an easy thing to do,' " she said. "A lot of volunteer work, you have to commit to exact hours and exact amounts of time."

Mercer meets with Clarice Blum, who describes herself as an avid reader.

"I like biographies and autobiographies," Blum said. "I love stories. No Danielle Steel, please." Blum had been getting along with the books her friends and granddaughter lent her.

"I had to take what they had chosen," she said. "Of course it's very kind of them, but you like to have a choice."

Currently, Blum, who at 95 can no longer drive, is reading a biography of John Adams and the novel "Middlesex," about a hermaphrodite.

"I've been up to 2 in the morning the last two nights, reading it," she said. "There's great detail and wonderful feeling about people and families."

Blum and Resnik are just the kind of people the program wants to reach, said Eva Patterson, director of Library Beyond Walls and branch manager at the Marin City library.

"Our goal in doing this is to reach an audience that hasn't been able to come to us," she said. "We're worried about isolation, and we try and relieve that isolation through materials to read and contact with others."

With the population of Marin growing older, these services are needed, said Liz Rottger, director of the Marin County Division on Aging. Rottger said Marin had the second-highest growth rate in the state for people over 80. With 1 in 5 people in Marin 60 years or older, Rottger said programs such as Library Beyond Walls are important.

"It's a wonderful new approach to making sure libraries are still a part of people's lives as they grow older," she said. "Books nurture the soul, but they are also part of a person's identity. I happen to be a reader, and if I couldn't get to the library anymore, I'd feel like a part of my identity was cut off."

The program brings something to the volunteers as well as the clients, Rottger said, by connecting them with elders.

Even if the clients have family and friends close by, the volunteers are performing a valuable service by bringing them books, said Chris Prusiner, a librarian at the Corte Madera branch who is coordinating the program there.

"When you have a volunteer (who) comes on a regular basis, you develop a relationship," she said. "And it's someone who is dedicated just to getting them books. A family member might have other things to do like taking them to the doctor or doing the shopping. This is a service we can offer so their family doesn't have to."

Check it out

For more information on Library Beyond Walls, call Rachel Peterson at (415) 332-6157, Ext. 14.

E-mail comments to nbayfriday@sfchronicle.com.

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