

## PROFILES IN VOLUNTEERISM: SUSAN VAN GORDER

“I volunteer because it’s a good feeling,” says Susan Van Gorder. “You see people arrive needing answers, and leave looking satisfied, relieved, and even hopeful.” Susan has a personal connection with the quest for answers and for hope: her husband of 45 years, Matt, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2008, and Susan says that volunteering at the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health helps her as a caregiver.

“The Center has a caregiver support group every Wednesday,” reports Susan. “The caregivers arrive for group sometimes looking sad or tired. Then, when greeted by our little puppy, Jordan, they begin to look more relaxed. When group is over and they step off the elevator, they can’t wait to talk about their experience. They appear calm and relieved, as if some weight has been lifted off their shoulders. You can tell they feel as if they’ve finally found the right place.”

When she wants the weight of the world removed from her own shoulders, Susan heads to the gym. While her husband goes six days a week because the exercise helps reduce the symptoms of his Parkinson’s, Susan accompanies him at least five days. She likes the exercise ball, while her husband enjoys weightlifting. Both agree that time spent on the treadmill is purely a necessary evil! Outside of it all, Susan is most proud of being the only adult able to successfully shop for her 12-year-old granddaughter.

When asked which of the many volunteer hats she most enjoys at the Center, Susan says, “Most of all, I enjoy that there’s no such thing as ‘I’m just a volunteer.’ [Director of Volunteer Services] Dee King has a knack for making all of her volunteers feel appreciated and needed.”

Susan met Dee King while volunteering at a local hospice where Dee was director of volunteer services, then followed Dee to the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health. Susan herself has a knack for making employees and fellow volunteers feel cared for, routinely checking to see who has been to the gym that day and making certain that everyone has packed healthy choices for lunch.

Susan reports, “I enjoy meeting and working with other volunteers. Everyone is so interesting. It’s fun to exchange experiences with them.”





## PROFILES IN VOLUNTEERISM: JEAN GEORGES

Jean Georges knows full well the physical toll of being a caregiver. Two years ago, while at the Mayo Clinic with her husband, Leonard, for his routine Alzheimer's/vascular dementia visit, she suffered a stress-induced heart attack. Despite having been told for years during annual physicals that she was the picture of heart health with low cholesterol, a healthy diet, and plenty of physical exercise, Jean found herself undergoing a quadruple bypass the next morning.

Jean, who has since recovered fully, is delighted that the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health has come to Las Vegas. Now, rather than traveling to Mayo, her husband is being treated locally by Dr. Bernick. Jean herself attends the weekly caregiver support group at the Center. But being a full-time caregiver is not enough for Jean. She feels compelled to educate others on the subject of dementia, and says, "I talk about my husband's disease because it gives others permission to talk about it. I want to educate people so that they, too, can heed the early warning signs. Early detection is critical, and something that I wasn't aware of myself."

Jean says that volunteering at the Center is a wonderful way to continue that education, adding, "I'm just

thrilled to be a part of what is going on within these walls. It's truly first class. Things are going on here that I feel will bring a solution to dementia."

Given her lifelong interest in reading and in education, it's not a surprise that when presented with the array of volunteer opportunities at Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, Jean chose the library. She says it's full of knowledge about the various forms of dementia, and contains helpful information for caregivers themselves. She is proud that the Center's collection is already believed to be the largest of its kind in the state of Nevada.

"Alzheimer's is a terrible disease, but a fascinating one," Jean proclaims. "It's another frontier, and I've been fascinated by frontiers since my husband and I moved to Las Vegas 50 years ago when the city itself was a frontier. The Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health is now an oasis in the desert."

She says that back when her husband was first diagnosed over six years ago, prevailing philosophy at the time dictated that the Alzheimer's patient not be told of his condition. Jean comments, "If the patient knows, the couple can walk down the road together. If not, the burden is entirely on the caregiver."