

# Position at Ayer elderly facility fulfills journey of caring for Groton woman

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GROTON -- Kimberley Dee knows firsthand that stay-at-home mothers take care of more than just their children.

Over the past 20 years, Dee, a former travel agent, took many of her aunts and uncles grocery shopping and to medical appointments in between her volunteer work at schools and church.

Those experiences helped when she had to care for her mother, who died of ovarian cancer in 2004. It was during that time as a caregiver she also found the passion for a new journey in life.

"Seniors seem to appreciate what you do for them so much more than kids," Dee said. "That (elder care) was something God called me into."

Dee now has a chance to explore those interests and talents as the new social activities director for Nashoba Park Assisted and Independent Living Residence, a 73-unit facility that the nonprofit organization Volunteers of America operates on Winthrop Street in Ayer.

Dee, who has worked as the administrative assistant for the Groton Council on Aging for the past 2 1/2 years, is one of many women going into the elder-care field to pursue their second career after raising their children.

Long-term care, for example, is "a welcoming field" for those who are seeking a mid-life career change because life experience is valuable to succeeding, said Carolyn Blanks, spokeswoman for Massachusetts Extended Care Federation.

The federation provides scholarships from the state Department of Public Health to those who are pursuing a career in long-term care.

Of those 3,500 people who received the scholarship over the past two years, 48 percent are over age 30 and 25 percent are over age 40. Martha Campbell, Groton Council on Aging director who has taught courses in long-term care, assisted living and senior-care program management for the past 12 years, said 40 percent to 50 percent of her students are women entering the field after raising their children.

Dee, for one, set her path in elder care as a volunteer first. After becoming a staff member at the Groton Senior Center, she also held a part-time job as an activity assistant at Cooperative Elder Services Inc. on West Main Street in Groton.

The senior-care industry is growing as baby boomers begin to retire. And these still active and healthy retirees are raising awareness about the importance of senior activities, Dee said.

"It's not just playing bingo any more," Dee said.

"The goal of an activity department is to make sure all clients have the opportunity to express themselves and to provide them with activities of their choice," Campbell said, adding that Dee's has what it takes to do it. "Kim is respectful and truly loves to see seniors," Campbell said.

Dee, who has a bachelor's degree from Salem State College, has used her experience as a travel agent to coordinate cultural trips for Groton seniors. And she is looking forward to providing even more creative programs at Nashoba Park. Putting a smile on seniors' faces "makes you feel worthwhile," Dee said.