



TOUCHING Lives

Tireless top fraternalist teaches and entertains all ages with a very special personal touch

AFTER 34 YEARS IN THE profession, Violet Bergum retired from teaching elementary school in 1995. But she didn't retire to sit around and reminisce about the past. She wanted to continue teaching about the past. It's been said before that once a teacher, always a teacher, and this certainly is true of Vi Bergum. To those who know and love her, the word "retired" does not begin to describe her. A better word would be "tireless."

Vi has 49 different presentations that she makes at various schools, nursing homes, and other senior facilities in Madison, Wisconsin. She is always in costume when giving a presentation, whether she is playing Miss Liberty, Mother Earth, or the Irish Emerald Queen, and feels that this makes a huge

impact on youth and adults alike. Her hat collection alone takes up nearly a whole room in her house!

"Sometimes a costume makes people imagine, laugh, and get caught up with whatever I'm doing. It helps them forget about their problems for the moment, and for the seniors, it often jogs a precious memory from the past," Vi reflects.

Because of her commitment to continually teaching youth and adults, Vi Bergum was named National Mutual Benefit's Fraternalist of the Year and recipient of the 2005 President's Award. For her outstanding volunteer achievements, she was also recognized as first runner-up for the 2005 Fraternalist of the Year Award presented by the National Fraternal Congress of America, the association of America's fraternal benefit societies. This is the highest level of recognition an NMB volunteer has ever received at the national level!

"I was truly speechless," shares Vi. "I didn't expect to be rewarded for doing something that is so rewarding in itself."

Joining NMB in 1997, Vi quickly

became an active member of the Madison area service chapter, Branch 400. When she lost her husband in 2003, she counteracted her loneliness by becoming even more involved in her volunteer efforts with the branch and in the community.

There are so many reasons Vi enjoys volunteering and teaching new things to both children and seniors.

"I love working with youth because they are so innocent and comical. I try to touch their lives so they will have the attitude of wanting to learn, and to care about other people. I always try to be a good role model, especially for the children," she exclaims.

"At nursing homes, I don't just entertain. First I teach them, then I entertain them, and I always stay and visit with them, sometimes for two hours after the program. Paid entertainers don't do that. That's the personal touch that a volunteer can offer," she proudly adds.

"It is also very touching to be with elderly people because they are very sincere in how they respond to what I do. It's easier to make little children laugh



INTERESTING FACTS ABOUT VIOLET BERGUM

Favorite characters portrayed: Mother Goose, Frog, Countess of Coffee, Duchess of Mustard, Mrs. Spud, Potato Princess, Hat Baroness, Ice Cream Baroness, Miss Liberty, Green Bay Packer Cheerleader, Mrs. USA, Mrs. Ting-a-ling, Mother Earth, Madame Butterfly, Corn Queen, Irish Emerald Queen.

A star is born: Ellen DeGeneres called and invited Vi to be a guest on her program as the Duchess of Mustard, but Vi declined because she would be too nervous.

Collections: One bedroom of her home holds her collection of 219 hats and the assortment of animated toys she uses in her presentations. Her family room holds all of her costumes.

Volunteer schedule: Not every day, but sometimes two to three programs in one day.

Goal: To touch lives and encourage people to use their talents to help others as well.

Most gratifying reward: Making the elderly laugh.

Best quote: "Whenever you can touch someone's life to make it a little better, that's so important."

Even better quote: "If you have a bad hair day, just put on a hat and you'll feel like a million dollars. If you feel good, you can do a good job and you know that you're touching people's hearts."

than older adults, so I have to be creative and come up with unusual ways to engage the older groups.

"In nursing homes, it's especially important to be a good listener, because I can always learn something from the residents. I'm always so touched when they tell me stories from their childhood, because I know I'm getting through to them. I dance with those who can stand up, but I also dance with those in wheelchairs. I take their hands and we sway to the music. That personal contact makes it more meaningful to them. When you involve the people in the program, it makes it more fun and interesting. They love music. It gets their feet tapping and their hands clapping.

"Every time I make a new program, I do a lot of research on the computer and want to share what I learn. It's important to keep minds stimulated, no matter what age. I have that opportunity in my volunteer work," she explains.

Probably best known for portraying Betsy Ross, Vi Bergum can be found teaching the history of the U.S. flag every

year at National Mutual Benefit's annual Flag Day ceremony on the Capitol Square in downtown Madison. In 2005, she was interviewed by and appeared on the local TV stations as Betsy.

"It was Branch 400 that got me started with my costumes. One of my fellow members made a flippant remark that I should dress up as Betsy Ross at the Flag Day ceremony. It started as kind of a joke, but I thought it would be fun, so I made a costume and the momentum kept evolving into more and more characters," Vi explains. Since then, she has spent endless hours creating unique costumes, working on craft projects, making dolls, searching for just the right props, and planning her presentations.

Vi also participates in parades around the area as the famous flag seamstress and is often accompanied by one of her twin daughters, Jani, dressed like Uncle Sam. Jani's twin sister, Susi, likes to wear beautiful formal dresses and go with Vi when she entertains at senior facilities. Her oldest daughter, Ann, works in assisted living facilities and nursing

homes. She knows and understands the needs of the residents and shares that information with her mother.

Age is no barrier where this special woman is involved. One would never guess that Vi celebrated her 75th birthday on May 23, 2006. One of our editors, who recently had the privilege of attending and participating in one of Vi's presentations at an assisted living facility, can attest to that fact.

Just watching Vi in action can wear the average person out. She yodels, dances with her life-size dolls, plays accordion, and twirls baton. That's the short list!

Vi Bergum is a petite bundle of energy, enthusiasm, and talent, who imparts a wealth of knowledge and caring. Seeing her interact with and touch each of the residents was indeed inspiring. After entertaining for an hour and a half, she went to every resident's room to visit—hugging, holding hands, and patting cheeks. They loved her and she obviously loved them! "When I found out how much I was touching people's lives," states Vi, "I couldn't stop doing what I do." ♦