

March 2015 - Vanessa Bennett

Star Volunteer “Brings Happiness Wherever She Goes” - by Barbara Huebner



Vanessa Bennett, midway through her daily 45-minute walk, was asked her age. The reply: 56/29.

All of her volunteer work, she said, “keeps me young. I actually feel 29, because I stay busy.”

“Busy” is to Vanessa Bennett what “actress” is to Meryl Streep or “runner” is to Haile Gebrselassie: a word that, while accurate, is far from adequate.

The 2014 recipient of Atlanta Track Club’s Clarence W. May Jr. Community Service Award, Bennett has been a volunteer at club events for the past 12 years. Citing her talent for bringing people together, volunteer coordinator Caryn Lamphier says Bennett “has this spirit about her that’s contagious. She just makes people smile, and brings happiness wherever she goes.”

And she goes a lot of places. In addition to Atlanta Track Club, Bennett does volunteer

work for the Atlanta Harm Reduction Coalition, Inc.; the First Baptist Church of Atlanta Missions Department; Operation Christmas Child; Santa's Village; Georgia Publix Marathon; the March of Dimes; AT&T Pioneers; the American Diabetes Association; Susan G. Komen; the American Cancer Society; the Epilepsy Foundation; Leadercast; the Catalyst Conference; and Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

“I’m truly blessed to be able to do it,” said Bennett. “I live for it. I have a favorite scripture, Galatians 6:10. ‘Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.’ That’s kind of like my mission statement.”

Tracing her volunteer spirit back to her mother, Bennett remembers helping out at her church from the time she was old enough to walk, back in her native Westlake, LA. By the time she was 8 years old, she was volunteering at the local Head Start program where her mother worked as a teacher’s aide.

“She didn’t let us sit idly and become couch potatoes,” said Bennett, who not only does volunteer work every weekend but even uses vacation time from AT&T BellSouth, where she is a service technician, to help out.

It was her AT&T job that introduced her to the AJC Peachtree Road Race, where for several years she was involved in getting phone lines operating at the start. Her interest piqued, Bennett was soon rising at 4 a.m. on race day to help at packet pickup, for which she has become crew chief. Once the runners are off, she walks the race—to no one’s surprise, often pausing to help and encourage others along the way.

The highlights of volunteering, Bennett said, are meeting people, being sure they have everything they need, and having the chance to brighten someone’s day. A perfect example: At packet pickup for the Atlanta 10-Miler last fall, a man with apparent special needs came in unannounced and, with difficulty, asked if he could help. Not only did Bennett find a small project and watch over him, but she even gave him her string backpack for volunteering.

“She was so kind,” said Lamphier. “She has a great talent for bringing people together.”

As she wrapped up her walk on the day before Christmas Eve, Bennett was looking forward volunteering that afternoon at the food pantry of a friend’s church. To celebrate the holiday, she would have dinner on Christmas Eve with her son, Charles, and then work on Christmas Day.

Work on Christmas Day with more than 36 years of seniority?

“One of my co-workers has younger children,” she explained, “and I volunteered to take his place.”