

Does it come on a stick?
Penny has the answer
By CARRIE JAMES
CORRESPONDENT

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Penny Hinrichs loves the Illinois State Fair.

She and her husband, Bill Hinrichs, traveled from Rochester to take their boys each year when they were young. She visited the many booths and always took the time to enjoy a cinnamon roll.

So in 1999, when she saw an ad in the newspaper asking for fair volunteers, she jumped at the chance.

"I was so enthusiastic about the fair, I want to share that with others," said Hinrichs, 56. "I wanted to help people have fun at the fair."

Hinrichs is one of more than 100 people volunteering during the Illinois State Fair, manning information booths, greeting guests and helping to make thousands of visitors' fair experience a happy one.

The most important function of the fair volunteers, said volunteer coordinator Pam Gray, is providing information to fairgoers at the information booths. Going into her eighth year, Hinrichs has worked annually at one of the fairground's six booths.

Before she started volunteering, Hinrichs said she thought she knew everything there was to know about the fair. She soon realized she didn't.

"Some people came up with where can you rent a wheelchair or where can you buy aspirin," she said. "We didn't know the answers."

Not knowing the answer was not an option for Hinrichs, a veteran Spanish teacher at Williamsville High School. She responded by researching and cataloging answers to numerous questions. Today, her info guide - initially a mere eight pages - has expanded to 21 pages and answers anything anyone might want to know about the fair, including information about the new egg on a stick.

"Penny puts together like a 20-page document on her own time that we use in the info booths," Gray said. "She does hours and hours of research. It's a guide that lists the new things, things for kids to do, things for seniors to do. It's a great help ..."

Hinrichs regularly adds to the guide and plans to include more information before her first shift, which is later this week. She went through the fair last Friday.

Helping fairgoers is a top priority for Hinrichs, who said she's been known to assist confused patrons while on her way to lunch or after her shift.

"You don't want to have a confused look on your face, because I might try to help you," she said.

Like many volunteers who work the 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift, she shows up an hour early. Four years ago, she recruited her husband to volunteer with her. Now they work together in the information booth.

"The best is getting to meet the people. It doesn't matter how hot or humid it is, there's always nice people," she said about why she volunteers. "We all love the fair, and we all have the same heart. We've all been coming since we were little boys and girls. We love the fair."

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