

The Silent Helper

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Before the dust settles on the Amtrak platform, when the 5 a.m. train rolls into the Sacramento station, you'll sometimes see 85-year-old Mortimer Schwartz in a blue vest directing traffic and answering questions from the traveling public.

He does this once a week, on a volunteer basis, for the simple reason of contributing to the public. Otherwise, he said, they would "roam" on the platform.



To the passengers who commute on Amtrak, the ones who see an older gentleman assisting the public, the notion that he's a man who strives to help the needy may not cross their minds. But he is.

For more than 60 years, Schwartz has played the role of a silent helper, a man who anonymously gives clothing to a youngster or shoes to a pregnant woman in dire straits. It's no surprise as well to find Schwartz footing the bill every now and then for Amtrak passengers who park their cars without buying a ticket.

"I don't claim anything in particular and it doesn't make me a better person," said Schwartz, a longtime law professor. "It just happens that way. It comes from being part of a family with traditions, and I learned it from my father."

For this humble man, now with thinning blond hair and eyes as clear and blue as a calm sea, the memory of walking with his father on a New York City street 76 years ago remains a pivotal moment in his life.

It was the early 1930's, a time when the nation's economy was essentially dead, that Schwartz and his father were approached by a man in need of money.

"My father reached into his vest pocket, took out some change and handed it to him," Schwartz recalled. "He said to me, 'Son, this is something you must do. When a person is in need, you help them.' I believed him."

It was a defining moment for Schwartz, and it reflects what he refers to as a “sacred obligation.”

“I don’t like to see suffering. If I can do something to help remove the suffering, I will,” he said.

Five years ago, Schwartz and his wife, Giovanna Oettinger, opened a fund at the Solano Community Foundation as a way to express their philanthropic interests. They created the Beacon Fund, intended to make grants for organizations closest to their hearts, such as those that serve the very young and very old.

“I was searching for a way to express my philanthropy and found the Foundation,” he said. “I don’t like the idea of sending my money to Washington and never seeing it again. I wanted to keep it local,” Schwartz said.

Schwartz intends to continue with his volunteer work at Amtrak while silently touching the lives of those who need it most. It might be through his fund at the Foundation or perhaps by sending anonymous gifts. As Schwartz put it, it’s what he “really delights in.” *(Andrea E. Garcia is the Director of Communications for the Solano Community Foundation. She can be reached at 707.280.8771).*