

## Don Strube

### *COVID-19 Response Service Award*

Throughout his life, Don Strube has taken the advice of his father that "If you quit moving, you quit moving" to heart. This dedication to keep going throughout challenges has made a significant difference for older adults in Portage County, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Since a young age, Don has been serving others, enlisting and serving in the Marine Corps for four years. After his service he became a deputy sheriff with the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office, and then a corrections officer until his retirement. Not one to quit moving, Don started volunteering with the Meals on Wheels program in Stevens Point as a substitute driver, before being referred to the Portage County Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) due to his desire to drive more and have a larger impact. For the past eleven years, Don has been a volunteer driver, providing free transportation to older adults who cannot drive to get to medical appointments and other essential business. His service has been crucial to many Portage County seniors, particularly since public transportation is only available in Stevens Point, leaving older residents in rural areas in need of dependable and affordable transportation options to obtain necessary services. He was always willing to take any trip requested regardless of the distance. When combined with the compassionate ear he offered to those he drove through their conversations, it is no surprise that he was one of their most frequently requested drivers.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading, Don's rides became more important than ever. Despite being in the "high-risk" older adult population, Don was one of only a handful of volunteer drivers who continued to serve during the pandemic. He diligently followed all CDC guidelines and program protocols to ensure that he and his riders remained as safe as possible during a very challenging time, with everyone wearing masks, adhering to social distancing as much as possible, and Don sanitizing his vehicle after each ride. By carefully following these practices, Don's riders knew that they could depend on him during their times of need. Additionally, this has allowed him to consistently and safely provide rides throughout the pandemic, as neither he nor any of his riders have contracted COVID-19 from one another.

Over the course of his over eleven years as an RSVP driver, Don has driven 102,547 miles and clocked more than 7,600 hours. As one of the only volunteer drivers still serving after the start of the pandemic, Don drove 24,638 miles while providing 324 trips just during the period from March 2020 through May 2021 alone.

The value of his service is much larger than the numbers on his odometer, as it is truly seen in his impact on the people he transports. One of Don's regular riders is an 80-year-old woman with significant medical challenges. Don's rides allow her to get to her medical appointments without feeling like she is a burden on her relatives, the closest of which lives 50 miles from her. She is certainly not a burden on Don, who she specifically requests when scheduling trips. He shared, "I don't consider them my riders, they're my friends."

Whenever he is driving for RSVP, Don does not just provide a ride to medical appointments or to obtain needed goods and services, he provides social interaction for his riders and a willing listening ear. This was especially important during the pandemic and the growing concerns of social isolation and loneliness it caused, particularly for senior citizens. For many of his passengers, Don was one of the very few people they spoke to face to face for more than a year. Don gave independence and peace of mind to his riders and their families, continuing to answer the call to service, even during one of the most difficult periods in our lifetimes.