

# Volunteer of the Year – Northeast Wisconsin

## Iris Firgens

### *Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council - Senior Companion Program*

Governor's  
Service Awards



Striving to remain close to her community and embracing tribal values, Iris Firgens makes it a priority to care for elders in the community who need assistance. Iris serves multiple elders on or near the Menominee reservation by volunteering with the Senior Companion Program through the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council.

Iris gives her time to make a difference for multiple people in the community, providing those she serves with companionship, rides to medical appointments, help in their homes, and provides assistance with whatever else they need. One of her clients is very elderly and can no longer drive. Iris assists this elder with trips to and from her the doctor and with whatever other errands she needs help completing, making it possible for the elder to remain in her home. Beyond just helping with these tasks that help her live independently, Iris also takes this elder on outings to keep her feeling connected to the community and makes sure the client knows she can depend on her for assistance.

Iris does not let obstacles get in the way of helping others, always finding ways to maintain connections with those she serves. When a bridge in the community as closed requiring lengthy detours and significantly more time to reach her clients and to run errands with them, Iris was not deterred. During the COVID-19 pandemic, if Iris could not see her clients in person, she still strove to help reduce the isolation her elders were experiencing, calling them frequently on the phone and dropping groceries and other needed items off at their homes. Even during a period when she was staying hours away with her sister was terminally ill in the hospital, Iris continued to stay in touch with her Senior Companion clients by phone and began seeing them again when she returned home.

The elders that she assists report high levels of satisfaction with the help and companionship that she provides, with one elder stating that "she's awesome. She picks up every time I call." When describing her, they reported that "she's one of those gems that you're lucky to find" and that "the world needs more Iris's" because she is a "selfless, wonderful soul, who would give you the shirt off her back." Beyond just the personal connection they forged, one of the elders stressed the tangible impacts of the assistance that Iris provides in allowing them to continue to live independently, stating that "I'm happy I didn't have to go in the nursing home."

Reflecting on the impact that Iris has made for her clients and with their program, Wendy Rozhon from the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council - Senior Companion Program explains that Iris "is a willing volunteer who goes above and beyond for people. Her upbeat, positive attitude and willingness to get involved make her a great example of what true volunteerism is all about."

