

The Grouchy Groundskeeper

I volunteered at the senior housing complex to take care of the lawns, not the people. But someone had other ideas

By PAUL DeLISLE, Carleton, Michigan

It was early May, my first day in my volunteer job as groundskeeper for an affordable senior housing complex, a way for me to stay busy during retirement. Besides, I was doing a favor for my son Joshua, who's the housing manager here.

I'd told him I would help out on one condition: I wouldn't have to deal with people. Before retiring, I'd been a township building inspector, and I'd handled enough complaints to last a lifetime. I had also served in the Army, raised four kids, taken care of my mom, who had dementia. I'd seen a lot in my 76 years, and Lord knows, there wasn't much that could surprise me at this point, especially about my fellow human beings.

I was minding my own business, trimming weeds around the trees and shrubs, when a group of glowering ladies motioned for me to cut the motor. "Stay away from our flower bed," one woman said, glaring through her

glasses and wagging her finger at me. I gave them a nod and went back to work. Did they think I was stupid?

Not 10 minutes later, a man in a wheelchair with a little dog on his lap waved at me frantically from the door of his apartment. I cut the motor again. "What?" I said, maybe a little more sharply than I intended.

"Watch out for my raspberry plants by the fence," he told me. "I put signs by them."

Seriously? I gave him a thumbs-up and cranked up the weed trimmer before anyone else could chime in. Next time, I'd work at lunch, when these busybodies would be inside eating.

On the way to my car, I stopped by Joshua's office. His regular groundskeeper had quit, leaving the place

AT HIS Happiest Paul loves working outside with his lawn mower roaring—and now he doesn't even mind if folks stop to chat.

PHOTOS BY STEVE KOSS





looking like a jungle, and I was grateful to have something to do outdoors. But there were a few things we needed to get straight.

"I told you if the residents have complaints, they need to take them to you," I said. "You're the people person."

Joshua looked up from his computer and grinned. "Off to a good start already, huh?" he said. "You're going to fit right in here, Pops."

A kind of growl escaped my lips, something like Clint Eastwood's character in the movie *Gran Torino*. At dinner, I told my wife about my day. "I wish these residents would just leave me be and let me do my job."

"You sound more like a grouch-keeper than a groundskeeper," Debby said, laughing. "You know it's their home, right? Of course, they have strong feelings about it."

"They can keep their feelings to themselves," I said.

I went back to work at lunchtime the next day, only to find the flower ladies waiting for me.

"We told you to be careful around

our flower bed," the finger wagger said, pointing menacingly at a patch of green I'd cut.

"Oops," I said. "I thought those were weeds." They spun on their heels and stalked off, muttering. I thought I heard one of them say, "Idiot."

The guy in the wheelchair was looking at something down by the fence. *Uh-oh.* He wheeled away, and I slunk over to the fence. Crouching low, I saw the remains of some plants. Raspberry seedlings, not bushes. How was I supposed to see them? Where were the signs he said he'd posted? A few feet away, I spied two mangled plastic straws with paper taped to them. "Raspberry Plant" was written neatly on the paper.

My heart sank. I'd made a mess of things already. But I didn't tell anyone. I was sorry. That would have meant more interaction. Instead, I just avoided them and made sure to be extra careful where I mowed.

Summer came. I was glad when it got hot. People stayed inside, and I could work uninterrupted. I had gotten to know a few folks. There was Max,

the maintenance guy, who was friendly and laid-back. And a resident named Harvey, who didn't get on my nerves.

One day, I was sweeping the balcony when I noticed Harvey watching the river that flowed by the complex.

"You like fishing?" I asked.

"Yep. Back in the day, my buddies and I fished this river," he said. "What I wouldn't do to fish it one last time."

I stopped sweeping. In my mind's eye, I could see my brother Dave and me as kids fishing. Dave had died a few years back, and I wished we'd had a chance to fish one last time this side of heaven. "I know what you mean," I said to Harvey.

Later that day, I ran into Joshua. "What if I built a fishing pier for the residents?"

"I heard there's a concrete one," he said. "It's just buried in weeds. Why don't you get Max and check it out?"

Max and I pushed through the overgrown hedge along the riverfront and found the concrete pier still intact. We cleared the hedge and repaired the railings to make the pier safe again.

PEOPLE PERSON Paul may have gotten off to a rough start, but today Lois Dean (far left), Harvey Lindsey (center) and James Gemmill, with dog Maggie, sing his praises.

Harvey came out to see what we were doing. "Now that I can fish here, what do you think about me making a worm bed?" he said.

A worm bed would be an unsightly heap of shredded cardboard, soil and decaying leaves. "Fine," I said. "But someplace out of the way. I don't want it messing up my grass."

"Got it, boss," Harvey said, chuckling.

After he left, I groused to Max. "Why can't he just be happy I got him a pier?"

"I hear you," Max said. "But this is their home. They just want to make it their own." It was the same thing Debby had told me, but this time it sank in a little more.

That night, a huge storm brought down trees and power lines. I got to the housing complex early the next morning knowing there would be cleanup to be done. I cleared branches and chainsawed downed trees. The

residents busied themselves righting toppled lawn chairs, picking up trash and cleaning up ruined flower beds. I didn't need to avoid those folks. Their home had taken a hit, and no one was up for chitchat. To my surprise, I found myself hurting for them too.

At dinner, I told Debby how bad I felt for the residents. "You hide under this gruff exterior," she said. "But God and I know what a softy you really are."

I hadn't told Debby about the mess-ups I'd made my first day. Now I confessed. "I never even told them I'm sorry," I said.

"Well, Paul, you know what you need to do," she said.

The next morning, I went to the garden center and bought two large raspberry bushes. At the complex, I planted them along the fence where the seedlings had been. The flower bed ladies were watching, and I went up to them.

"I'm sorry I destroyed your flowers," I said. "I should have been more careful."

The finger wagger eyed me through her glasses as if trying to judge my sincerity. "Don't let it happen again," she said. Then she patted my arm. "The truth is, they did look like weeds."

"I'll steer clear of your garden," I said.

"Actually, we could use your help with mulching," she said. "You don't have to be a stranger. We don't bite. Not hard, anyway." I nodded, not wanting to commit myself. "By the way, did you know James is in the hospital?" she asked.

"The guy with the raspberries?"
"Yes, he has an infection in his leg."
"Thanks for telling me," I said—and I meant it. "I'll take care of the raspberry bushes until he's able to. And let me know when I can help with mulching."

The next few weeks brought a perfect blend of rain and sun. The trees were extra green, the damage from the storm less evident. The residents' gardens exploded with color. James's bushes were heavy with ripe berries. Something seemed to be changing in me too. I found myself at the complex at all hours of the day, taking care of the grounds and not minding if residents stopped to chat.

I was trimming weeds one day when I saw James and his dog wheeling toward me. I cut the motor, shook his hand and welcomed him back.

"Everyone said I had to come see my raspberry bushes," he said. "I heard you bought them and tended to them all this time. Thanks, Paul."

"I'm sorry I wrecked them in the first place," I said.

"It was an honest mistake," James said. "I appreciate all the work you're doing. This place looks so nice now. It's obvious you care."

I'd thought, at 76, I'd seen it all, but God surprised me. He showed me there's still plenty to look forward to. Meaningful work. New friendships with good people. Chances to be a better version of myself.

"I'm headed over to the worm bed," I said to James. "Harvey and I are going fishing. Why don't you come too?" ▶