

# Didlake

## *Creating Opportunities Through Volunteerism for People with Disabilities*

By Amy Falkofske

**T**hough not extremely well-known, Didlake is a local nonprofit making a big impact by creating opportunities for people with disabilities. Didlake's Vice President of Corporate Communications and Marketing, Erika Spalding, says the organization has been a "quiet partner" in the community for the past 55 years.

"A lot of people are not familiar with us unless they are directly participating or are affected by our program. We're a quiet nonprofit rehabilitative services provider that has had a significant impact on the community by helping thousands of people with disabilities contribute through volunteering or work opportunities. We've also helped [program participants] develop self-esteem, a sense of purpose and excitement about being a part of their community," said Spalding.

Didlake began as the Didlake School in Manassas. It was started by a group of family members who wanted to create a school for their children with special needs. Back then, special education was not mandated by the school system. Once special education was mandated in the mid-70s, Didlake's school-aged students went to public school. The students who had graduated became a part of a vocational rehabilitation program that is a cornerstone of Didlake to this day.

### **Day Support Programs**

One way Didlake serves the Greater Prince William area is through its Day Support Program. This program supports people with significant disabilities in locating and participating in volunteer opportunities within other nonprofit organizations. During fiscal year 2020, 85% of program participants engaged



*Yajairo Arizago working at the House of Mercy food pantry.*

in volunteer opportunities and logged a collective total of 25,447 volunteer hours.

"It's very frequent that individuals with significant disabilities are not afforded the opportunity to be able to be full contributing citizens because of transportation or some other barrier that is in their lives. We're facilitating their ability to give back as members of the community," said Spalding.

Didlake's Day Support Programs not only give participants a way to give back to their community, but it also helps them engage within it.

“This isn't just a group of people with disabilities going to Walmart to go shopping or going to the grocery store, but really fully participating to the extent of our staff modeling to the community how you interact and treat someone with a disability. For example, going to the Starbucks in their community where they live, where they volunteer, where they play and developing relationships with the people that work there,” said Rachel Payne, Didlake's Vice President of Advocacy and Public Policy.

Didlake, which opened its first Day Support Program in Manassas in 1996, now operates five Day Support Programs, including three in Prince William County, one in Fauquier County and one in Roanoke. Altogether, the programs support 170 individuals.

Over the years, Didlake has volunteered for more than 20 local nonprofit agencies such as health and rehabilitation centers, animal shelters and several food banks.

“We do a variety of volunteer work to match interests of individuals in our program,” said Emily Theimer, Didlake's Program Director of Community Services.

## Supporting Those in Need

Didlake coordinates many opportunities for individuals who are history buffs, or who enjoy the great outdoors and gardening. Didlake volunteers help maintain the historic grounds at the Rippon Lodge, one of the oldest homes in Prince William, built in 1747.

Volunteers also manage the garden around another historic Prince William home, the Weems-Botts house, also built in 1747.

Additionally, Didlake volunteers help keep Veterans Memorial Park beautiful by removing trash weekly for Keep Prince William Beautiful as a part of the Adopt-a-Spot Program.

Day Support Program participants help those in need at the Bull Run Universalists food pantry in Manassas by unloading trucks of produce, stocking the pantry, breaking down boxes and maintaining the waiting room.

At the House of Mercy food pantry, volunteers help food donors unload their cars and fill bags with items to be delivered to assisted living facilities or placed on the pantry shelves. Didlake also volunteers at House of Mercy's thrift store, where volunteers sort and hang clothing. You can also find participants helping at Noah's Ark, a thrift store in Bealton, Virginia.

Around Christmas time, you might see a Didlake volunteer ringing a bell for the Salvation Army in Woodbridge, Culpeper or Warrenton. And you may spot some working in Habitat for Humanity ReStores in Manassas and Roanoke.



*David Davis sorts out portions of cereal at the House of Mercy food pantry.*


Didlake also makes a difference in the lives of Virginia's senior citizens through volunteer work at the Fauquier Senior Center in Warrenton, Culpeper Health and Rehabilitation Center and at Orange Senior Center. At these centers, volunteers prepare and lead interactive games and crafts, clean up after the activities, and sometimes help set-up and serve lunch.

At another center, Birmingham Green in Manassas, volunteers socialize with residents and staff, roll silverware into napkins for lunch and distribute ice to residents for their water containers.

## Supporting Greater Prince William and Its Residents

Didlake gives back to Prince William not only through volunteerism and helping individuals with disabilities engage with the community, but also through the business community. Didlake is very active in the Prince William Chamber of Commerce and provides training and consultations to leadership and management teams in the community on increasing employment of and better supporting individuals with disabilities. In the past 10 years, Didlake has supported 1,148 individuals with disabilities in Greater Prince William through their rehabilitative programs.

“We are working continually to connect businesses with individuals with disabilities, whether that's through employment or through volunteer opportunities,” said Spalding. “At the end of the day, our focus is on creating opportunities for people with disabilities, and that community inclusion and engagement aspect is incredibly important.”

If you would like more information about Didlake's Day Support Program, go to [didlake.org](http://didlake.org) and click on Our Program and Volunteerism - A Day Support Activity. 

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