



Nohl Martin is a Hired Buddy

By **CONSTANCE SOMMER**, Post-Intelligencer Reporter

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Outside, the sky above Lower Queen Anne passes from clouds to sunshine to clouds again. Inside, June Duquet sits.

A phone rings. A nurse fusses with a wheelchair. Visitors walk by. And still, this 82-year-old lady with a man's blunt haircut sits bolt upright in the nursing home's corner easychair, eyes fixed straight ahead, face vacant. Until Nohl Martin arrives at 11:15 a.m. Suddenly, Duquet's face creases into a smile. It's obvious that Martin is already making someone else's day.

That's a good thing, since Martin is not Duquet's daughter or niece. She's not even a friend. The young Seattle woman striding across the room - in business-like trousers and Oxford shoes - is getting paid for her morning. She's there to bring some sparkle to a life confined by the floors and walls of a 10-story retirement facility. She's a hired buddy.

In a world where those who can't keep up the pace often get shoved aside, Martin's business, *My New Friend*, operates on the edges of society. The unorthodox service tries to plug holes in the lives of elderly and disabled who find they can no longer manage their affairs themselves.

Martin and her four employees fill in where friends and family cannot or will not. They take clients to doctor's appointments, museums, restaurants or just outside to smell the flowers.

"I don't know what I'd do without her," says Barbara Baggenstos, director of health services for Madison House, a Kirkland retirement home. Baggenstos calls on Martin regularly for a variety of services, from helping new residents make friends and feel at home in the community, to accompanying an elderly man to chemotherapy appointments and making sure he finds the right kinds of foods in his refrigerator when he returns to his room.

"What if I didn't have Nohl?" Baggenstos exclaimed. "Holy moley!"

Martin has worked with the elderly and disabled since she was 14. A 28-year-old native of San Diego, California, she started the business three years ago.

"This is not a money-making thing," Martin says. "It is something I do because I

love to do it."

Today, she estimates that about 15 percent of her clients are disabled. The rest are elderly. She manages the business out of shared offices on Queen Anne Hill, but travels to clients' homes all around the metropolitan area.

Last Thursday, she arrived at Bayview Manor on Lower Queen Anne Hill 45 minutes before lunch - just in time to jump-start Duquet's morning. It has happened to Duquet before, a long morning merging into afternoon without a single interesting activity to bring her out of the doldrums.

"For three years, I didn't realize she wasn't getting out," said Duquet's niece, Pat Campbell, who hired Martin to look after her aunt. Campbell and the rest of her family live in Denver.

As Duquet aged, suffering a series of minor strokes and major illnesses, none of the childless woman's relatives lived close enough to check in on her regularly.

By the time Campbell realized how her Aunt's situation had deteriorated, Duquet had practically shut down. Never a big talker, she hoarded her words and began to experience memory impairment. "She was just laying in her bed, waiting to die," Campbell says. Desperate, Campbell phoned Martin on the recommendation of a social worker.

According to Martin, the job was tough right from the start. "For the first two months I worked with her, she was blank-faced all the time," Martin said, shaking her head. "Nothing. Nothing."

Martin filled time with Duquet by telling her stories, since Duquet would not talk. Slowly, according to Martin, the older woman began to remember some events of her youth and began to communicate.

"She was on a whole bunch of medications - for strokes, for diabetes, anti-depressants. Now, the meds are starting to go down," Campbell says. "She's living life in the here and now, rather than coated by a whole bunch of drugs. She's having fun again."

Or, as Duquet puts it, "Where I'm staying is very monotonous and boring. I like some life around me." She and Martin have gone shopping at Nordstrom's, driven around town looking at Christmas lights, and dined at Duquet's favorite Chinese restaurants.

Martin also organized an activity board for Duquet. So, if Duquet wants an activity to attend that day, she knows exactly where to look it up. Together, they also read letters from Duquet's family in Colorado and look at the photos they send with the letters.

Last Thursday, the two sat in an upstairs lounge overlooking downtown Seattle and Elliott Bay. Martin asked Duquet for stories and memories of her past. Instead, Duquet sang her young companion a song: "It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go . . ."

Later, as Martin prepared to leave Duquet in her easy chair at the nursing home, Duquet insisted on following Martin to the nursing home's automatic front doors. Then watched as Martin walked to her car.

It's lunchtime for Duquet. For Martin, it's time for her next appointment. A few blocks up the hill, 80-year-old Tom Perry awaits her dressed in a blue blazer. He will join her for lunch at a restaurant, then a stroll together through the Pike Place Market.

It's sure not as lucrative or glamorous as her friends' work at Microsoft, Martin admits. She says "It's not easy getting people's lives in order; juggling their other personal needs; giving a stranger a reason to get up in the morning and a smile to go to bed with at night."

But when a curmudgeon like Duquet begins to talk and laugh again, Martin says she knows her efforts are reaping results.

"The kind of reward I get from the work I do," Martin says, "I wouldn't trade it for the world."