
Leisure Worlder

OF THE MONTH

IRENE PUHLMANN

The woman who runs Leisure World's busy Information Center brings impressive credentials to the job. Irene Puhlmann began her career as director of a government training school for girls before becoming the first woman supervisor at a World War II atomic bomb plant. Later she worked at disaster sites with the American National Red Cross.

While these qualifications are not basic requirements for her current position, it is easy to see how they enabled Mrs. Puhlmann to handle the bombardment of 36,000 calls and visitors recorded last year at the Information Center. Before she established the service in 1979, the wide-ranging queries of her fellow residents were rerouted by Leisure World's overworked Security and Service Desk staffs. Thus the center has become a cost-effective program as well as a convenience for those it serves.

Mrs. Puhlmann's first job following graduation from the University of Minnesota was with the National Youth Administration, which assigned her to establish and direct a girls' school in Northern Minnesota as part of the government program providing job training for unemployed youth. Students prepared for restaurant jobs and other trades by performing those tasks at the self-supporting school. One of the personal touches added by their young director included the reciting of grace before mealtime, an innovation commended by Eleanor Roosevelt on a visit to the school.

"Mrs. Roosevelt said it was the first time she'd seen this done. I told her it was the only way I knew to give everyone a fair start on the meal," Mrs. Puhlmann recalls. Scarcely older than her students, she maintained close rapport with the 600 young women who passed through the school. "Later on, there were a lot of babies named Irene," she says.

In 1942 she was selected by E.I. du Pont de Nemours Co. as the first woman supervisor involved in a construction project underway at Hanford, Wash. As director of pre-employment, she and her staff conducted 1,000 interviews a day for what was to become one of the main plants in the production of America's first atomic bomb.

Mrs. Puhlmann remained at the isolated Hanford site for three years before joining the American Red Cross staff in a job that combined fund raising, public relations and disaster coordination. Her next move was to Los Angeles where she spent a decade working in public relations and fund raising for several large service organizations, including the Children's Home Society and the L.A. Council of Girl Scouts.

Upon moving to Leisure World in 1967, she became active in the Medical Auxiliary and earned a 1,000-hour pin as a Medical Center Pink Lady. Appointed to fill a vacancy on the board of Mutual Fifteen, she later was elected to the post and served as secretary-treasurer. Subsequent positions as a Golden Rain Foundation director and member of the SAAC executive board and Review Committee preceded her reentry into the working world in 1976, when she became one of PCM's Move-In Hostesses serving new residents of the community. She was supervisor of the hostess program when the plans for a new information service were hatched. "My boss told me we were going to have an Information Center—and I was it," she recalls.

Her performance as coordinator of the combined Move-In Hostess/Information Center has earned a "gem" rating from her boss, Community Relations Director T.J. Tandle, who says: "Every now and then someone pops into a job and proves to be exactly the right person for it. Irene shines in this position. She's friendly, intelligent, gracious—but not a cream puff!"

Cream puff or not, it was Irene and her telephone staff who stepped in during a heat wave last summer when the community's service workers were swamped with calls on nonfunctioning air conditioning units. The women went through a step-by-step review of instructions with each caller, then assigned Move-In Hostesses to provide personal assistance where needed. They managed to get the majority of units working again without a service visit.

But usually the women may be found at their telephones answering inquiries on bus schedules, club meetings, public services, voter registration, handyman referrals and a host of other topics. Seated in their tiny windowless office, they don't even flinch at one of the most frequent questions posed to them by callers: "Is it raining outside?"