

Alton Tucker of Crown Point has worked with mentally handicapped people for the past 25 years.

By Betty Sacek

Staff Writer

Alton Tucker was leery when approached to work with the mentally handicapped more than 25 years ago, but it's been an experience he wouldn't trade for anything.

"When you see a retarded or handicapped person, you tend to shy away from them because you don't know how to handle yourself," said the 64-year-old Crown Point man. "You're afraid you wouldn't know what to do if they had a seizure or something, so I was scared."

Tucker's fears dissipated after a year of contact with such individuals through the Apostolate for the Handicapped, founded by the Rev. Dennis Blaney, who solicited Tucker's help about 27 years ago.

About 10 years ago, Blaney founded the Share Foundation, an organization for mentally handicapped adults, based in Michigan City, in which Tucker has been "very active" for the past five years.

Tucker, the father of three grown children, has served as a jack-of-all-trades for Share — cooking at its summer camp, helping straighten out computer glitches in the office and overseeing maintenance at Sharing Meadow, near LaPorte.

Sharing Meadow is a 184-acre farm which houses three group homes for mentally retarded adults whose elderly parents want to make sure they have a place where they will be cared for after they are gone.

Tucker is in charge of the grounds at the complex, where a crafts building currently is under construction.

Two days a week he does chores like cutting the lawn, planting trees, erecting a fishing pier and making sure the equipment is running and repaired. He even stocked the pond

with fish.

While Tucker enjoys communing with nature while performing a service, he gets even more satisfaction from another annual contribution to the cause — cooking with his wife, Theresa, at Share's summer camp, July 2-21 this year.



DAVE BARTMAN/ Post-Tribune

An arts and crafts building is under construction at Sharing Meadows. Alton Tucker is in charge of the grounds at the 184-acre farm.

From 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily for three weeks, Tucker is one of three cooks who whip up three meals a day for up to 55 campers.

The fare isn't just hot dogs and hamburgers.

"Every Thursday we serve a complete turkey dinner, as for Thanksgiving, including pumpkin pie," he said.

In their quest to produce a varied menu of good meals, Tucker and company also turn out the likes of stir-fry chicken, pork noodle casserole, tuna casserole and chicken chimichangas.

Before the plates are cleaned from one meal, Tucker said, the campers are asking what's on tap for the next.

"You can be the worst cook and you won't get any complaints," he said.

Share has no complaints about Tucker's work either; quite the contrary.

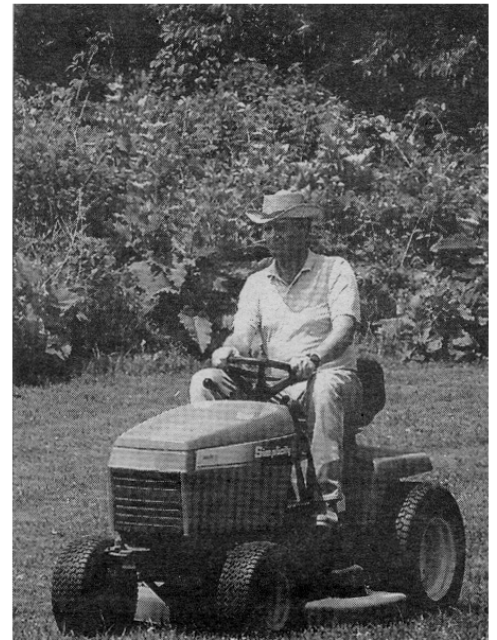
"What makes him so valuable is that he's willing to do whatever needs to be done," said Kathleen Wolf, executive director of the organization.

Fellow Share volunteer Anne Franz of Merrillville echoes the sentiment.

"Al is superb and does a lot of work for us," she said. "His job as head of maintenance at Sharing Meadow alone entails an enormous amount of work and is very time-consuming. I can't find enough adjectives to sing his praises."

Just as well because Tucker wouldn't want it. The satisfaction he derives from his efforts in behalf of the mentally handicapped is enough.

"It's been very rewarding because of the love, friendship and appreciation those people convey," he said. "They always want to give you a hug. I've gotten more out the experience than they have. It's been a wonderful outlet for me since I retired from LTV Steel five years ago."



A sharing experience

Fund-raiser set for Aug. 6 at Sharing Meadow

The Share Foundation is sponsoring The Great Northwest Indiana Leprechaun Hunt, a family fun day from noon-6 p.m. Aug. 6.

Featured at the fund-raiser at Sharing Meadow will be entertainment, celebrities, boating, hiking, food and drinks.

The big attraction is the Leprechaun Hunt. Find a hidden leprechaun on the grounds and win a big cash prize.

Tickets are available, only in advance, for \$50 per adult and \$15 per child 13 through 18. Youngsters 12 and under will be admitted free. For reservations, call 872-2866.

To get to Sharing Meadow, take the Indiana Toll Road to the LaPorte exit. Go north on Indiana 39 to U.S. 20 or Interstate 94 to LaPorte-South Bend exit. East on U.S. 20 to the second road after crossing over the toll road, 300 East north on 300 East to Mandich Boulevard, first road on right after crossing toll road again.