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Senior Moments

Eva at Eighty-Eight

by Ellie Kahn

Imagine this situation: You've arrived at LAX after hours of sitting in an airplane from Italy. You've waited in line to get through customs, lugged your suitcases from the baggage claim and you finally emerge to locate your relatives. But they're nowhere to be found, and you don't speak English. What do you do?

If you're fortunate, you find Eva Field.

Field, at 88 years old, is a volunteer with the Travelers Aid Society of Los Angeles in the Tom Bradley International Terminal at LAX. She's been helping foreign travelers for 30 years, enabled in this job by the fact that she speaks English, Italian, French, Spanish and German.

Field's role is often directing newcomers to a hotel or giving them transportation advice. At other times, her task is more complicated.

"People often have serious problems," Field said. "Someone might arrive here and have no place to go, or they might have no money. They're very upset. I try to come up with solutions."

Apparently, Field's personality is ideal for job.

"Field has a wonderful way with people," said Christine Okinaga, director of volunteers for Travelers Aid at LAX. "She has to do a lot of soothing and reassuring in her job, which is vital in that terminal, where a lot of people are frustrated. Field's great sense of humor helps to diffuse the situation."

Field has faced some interesting challenges.

"There are some things you can't believe," she said. "A Belgium woman arrived one day and said she came to California to meet Charles Manson. Well, I was the only one who spoke French, so I talked with her, and I decided something wasn't right. I called the Belgium consulate and told them they needed to watch over this dame. Eventually they sent her back to Belgium."

Field also assists those who are waiting for arriving passengers.

“Someone might be here to meet a relative, but they don’t know what airline or flight they’re on, just that they’re to be here at noon,” she said. “I know people at all the airlines, so I make calls to find out the flight they’re on.”

Field knows what it’s like to be a foreigner. She was born in 1916, in Cologne, Germany.

“I didn’t like that country from the moment I was born,” Field said.

She spent time in Italy as a young woman and then in France, after Nazis closed her father’s business and the family was able to leave Germany. Field, her sister and parents were able to leave Europe in 1941, and they went to relatives in New York. But Field quickly headed west to Los Angeles.

“I worked as a maid, at first, for a really horrible woman,” Field recalled. “When I could get away from that, I applied for a job as a telephone operator. The day I married my husband, the phone company finally called and said, ‘Field, you have a job.’ I said, ‘Sorry, I’m getting married.’ I was a mother and a wife after that, so I didn’t do other work.”

After her husband died in the 1970s, Field volunteered with the National Council of Jewish Women.

“They became involved in helping the Boat People from Vietnam to find apartments,” she recalled. “At one point, I picked up some of these people at the airport, and I met someone from Travelers Aid, and they said, ‘Oh my God, you speak all these languages. We need you to help us at the airport.’”

Field’s been there ever since.

“One interesting thing that happens is that sometimes a person arrives in America looking for a relative with a certain name, but that relative has changed their name,” she said. “I try to figure out, if you had an unpronounceable name when you landed in the United States, what would you call yourself instead? When I come up with a name, I find people with that name and sometimes it turns out they are the relative.”

Since volunteering at LAX is apparently not quite enough for the 88-year-old, Field also works twice a week with first-graders at Westminster School in Venice.

“It’s been about nine years,” she said. “Many of the children are from Mexico, and I work with a perfectly marvelous teacher, Ramon Ramos.”

This feeling is mutual. According to Ramos, Field is a wonderful addition to his students’ experiences.

“She’s so warm and gentle with the kids,” he said, “and since she speaks Spanish, she can help them with their reading and writing and with learning English. She even teaches us some Italian phrases. The kids love her. One year, my class called her ‘Abuelita,’ which means ‘Little Grandma.’”

Field also helps the children with math. “I figure I can’t manage second-grade math, so it’s better that I’m in first grade,” she said.

At 88 years old, Field could be taking it easy. But every Monday, Thursday and Friday, she's helping others.

"I would have a hell of a hard time living if I couldn't do this," Field said. "My friends are dying around me, and it becomes more difficult being alive."

"I get joy from my daughter and grandson," she continued. "I do quite a bit of reading, but it's hard with my eyesight. The volunteer work I do gives my life meaning."

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