

A cupboard less bare

Elderly man's volunteer shopper provides more than just the groceries

By **SACHI FUJIMORI**
STAFF WRITER

Robert Long briskly pushes his grocery cart through the aisles at the A&P supermarket in Wayne, stopping in front of the cranberry juice in plastic bottles. Eyeing the shelves for a moment, he chooses a bottle with a tapered, easy-grip neck. "He likes this one; he can grab it," says Long.

Every two weeks, Long does grocery shopping for James Scott, a 91-year-old who is homebound because of a stroke. This has been his routine for 10 years.

The pair were matched through a volunteer shopping program run by Home Care Options, a Paterson agency that sends nurses and home health care aides to the elderly and ill living at home. The volunteer program filled a void that was created after Medicaid and Medicare budgets were gradually reduced in the 1990s, cutting the hours a home aide can spend with a client. "It's a tremendous support for shut-ins. We have many elderly living alone in this county," said Virginia Statile, the program's coordinator.

A general contractor, Long signed up to be a shopper in 1999 after seeing an advertisement for the program in a newspaper. "I had gotten to a certain point in my life when it was time to give back," said Long, who lives in Wayne with his wife and two children.

For many years, he shopped for two: Scott and his beloved wife of 68 years, Nan, who suffered from back problems and emphysema. On Sunday nights, Nan would call Long to read off their grocery list, which was always well-organized by aisle. Since Nan passed away in 2006, Scott lives alone and has come to rely more than ever on Long's bi-weekly shopping trips.

To Scott, the grocery deliveries are about more than just stocking his pantry. He's paralyzed on his left side and gets around by wheelchair, so looks forward to the visits to break his loneliness.

"Very few people come in, except for Bob,"
See **SHOPPER** Page **F-9**



STAFF PHOTOS BY TYSON TRISH

For 10 years, volunteer Robert Long of Wayne has shopped for groceries for James Scott, 91 and homebound. His visits help break Scott's loneliness.

Answering the call

Being a good citizen no longer simply means voting and paying your taxes on time. In his inaugural address, President Obama issued an urgent call to enter "a new era of responsibility," where every American embraces the duty and privilege of giving back to their communities, the nation and the world. In this occasional series, we'll introduce you to your neighbors of all ages who are answering the call. If you know someone whose volunteering or generosity is helping to make the world better, e-mail features@northjersey.com. Please include your name and telephone number.



COVER STORY

Shopper: Groceries and more

From Page F-1

said Scott. "He's a friendly person that talks to me. Sometimes I wonder if I can still talk."

Compared with his wife's lists, Scott's grocery lists are shorter and require Long to bounce across the store. On a recent shopping trip, the only solid food that lands in the cart is for the animals Scott cares for — a sack of bird seed, two bags of cat food for the neighbors' cats, and 30 cans of chicken-flavored Fancy Feast for Iris, Scott's cat. Long once tried to switch to a generic brand, to save Scott some money, "but the cat is fussy," Long said.

The food on his list is far less filling: Carnation Instant Breakfast, apple sauce and low-pulp orange juice.

No longer able to cook for himself, Scott receives Meals on Wheels deliveries six days a week,

and a nurse comes in the mornings to help him out of bed. He rarely gets to see his three grown children, who live out of state. A son in Pennsylvania visits on Sundays.

Arriving just before 8 p.m. at Scott's Cape Cod style home, Long enters the front door with grocery bags in his arms.

The lights are lit around the house and the television is tuned to "Wheel of Fortune."

"How was your week, James?" asks Long, putting juice inside the refrigerator, which is empty except for yogurt and bottles of beer.

"It's the same — no better, no worse," says Scott. He wheels over to a bureau to pull out a magnifying glass, which he uses to inspect the grocery receipt. Satisfied with the total, he writes a check to Long. A large mural of a wild horse that Nan painted takes up an entire wall. A silver oxygen

tank, to treat her emphysema, still rests in a corner of the living room.

"Did you go outside today?" Long asks.

"No," replies Scott. The rain kept him inside all day. But on clear days he gets outside via the wheelchair ramps fitted in the backyard. He's diligent about taking out his recycling and feeding the birds, squirrels and neighborhood cats.

After the groceries are put away the pair move to the living room to chat. Sometimes Long can't stay for this part because he's too tired or is expected at home. But through the years, he has sat on the couch and listened to many of Scott's stories from his past, where his memories are clearest.

"I listen to him talk about his wife, his family, when he was an engineer. He's very intelligent," Long said. Scott spent his career with Bell Labs as a research engineer with its satellite division. He likes to talk about his impressive gun collection, since inherited by his son, and the 12-point buck he once shot in the woods. He also often mentions the three Jaguars he owned. Convertibles that he always "drove with the top off" he said.

The TV is on mute in the background, as "Dancing With the Stars" comes on.

Scott stares at the screen and says, "I used to like to dance."

Long eventually stands up and heads for the door to go home.

"I'll see you next month," says Scott.

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