

SENIOR SPOTLIGHT: Joel Conaway



Joel Conaway, who has lived at Commons Senior for several years, is always willing to help other residents with translations and electronics.

Joel Conaway has a skillset that lets him help his fellow residents at Commons Senior and also members of the community at large.

The 58-year-old retiree serves as a district leader in Essex County for the Democratic Party, an elected position he's held for eight years. In that role, he serves as a resource for residents within the district he represents, keeping them informed and helping them when they need it. He said he didn't seek out the position, but someone he knew that was a district leader groomed him to take over when he became ill.

Conaway speaks Spanish and Portuguese in addition to English so he helps those who need translations. He's also very good with electronics and often finds himself troubleshooting smartphone and computer problems. Since he has a car, he also helps residents go to the store.

"He does a lot inside the building," said Commons Senior Care Coordinator Jill Derios. "Whatever you ask him, he is able. He's available any time you ask him to do anything."

Derios said Conaway helps her when she has a resident with a language barrier and he helps Management by distributing literature to residents on the different floors.

"He also uses his vehicle to assist," she said.

Conaway has lived at Commons Senior, 140 South Orange Ave., Newark, for about five years, moving to the facility from the North Ward of Newark. He attends all the events at the building and is involved when members of the Newark City Council visit.

His favorite part of living at Commons Senior is the people.

"It's like a family," he said. "I think it's one of the most interesting places I've ever lived."

He grew up in a small, rural town in southeast Georgia as the youngest of 13 children. He traveled to New Jersey during summers and moved to the Garden State permanently when he was in his mid-20s.

Conaway worked at M&M Development as a construction manager, overseeing projects. It was on the job that he learned Spanish and Portuguese, mainly from his coworkers and their family members.

"Reading and writing is easy," he said. "It's not so easy to speak."

To improve his verbal language skills, Conaway spent time with his friend's mother who would drill him and insist he speak only Spanish, not even using "Spanglish" while learning.

He continues to read books in Spanish and Portuguese, including the Bible.

Conaway retired at a relatively young age because of his health. He suffered a stroke and two heart attacks and was obese. He realized he needed to make a change.

"I made a conscious decision to change my life," he said.

He altered his eating habits and began swimming for exercise, which he still does at least once a week.

"Swimming felt fun. I looked forward to it," he said. "The weight started coming off."

Conaway isn't just sitting back in retirement. "I worked 30 something years. Now I can't seem to be still," he said.

Conaway enjoys sightseeing, even when it's close to home. He visits the Museum of Natural History, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and the streets of New York City. He recently attended the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

He also enjoys traveling and has been to many countries abroad. In the last year he made his first trips to Mexico and Canada, which he enjoyed.