

Portrait project is a picture of service for seniors

By Bill Stevens, Times Staff Writer
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Debbie Humphrey spent 22 years as a banker, working her way into management. She might still be at Wachovia if not for the sad stories.

Not about the banking business, but from people who made their way into her office.

"Older people would come in with piles of mail they didn't understand," Humphrey recalled. "Many of them were taken advantage of financially. Others just wanted somebody to talk to."

Then there was the elderly woman Humphrey calls "the straw that broke the camel's back." She lived in a condo and came to the bank every week for \$200 to pay her tree trimmers.

"I kept telling her, 'You live in a condo! The condo association pays for that, not you.' It just broke my heart."

Humphrey longed for a change of careers, to start a business dedicated to helping seniors remain independent and secure in their homes. And when the bank offered early retirements three years ago, she eagerly said yes. At age 51, she started Home Helpers with an office in Holiday. Her 28 employees provide homemaker and companion services and transportation for a growing list of clients in West Pasco and North Pinellas.

When she began networking to grow her business, Humphrey joined the Community Service Council of West Pasco, an 88-member group of professionals who donate time for projects such as serving Thanksgiving dinner to poor people.

"I joined several groups when I got started," Humphrey said, "but I have stuck with the Community Service Council because of what they do and what they stand for. They help everybody, from kids to seniors, veterans, animals ... you name it. And it's a fun group."

This year, as it has since 1979, the council went looking for a project to benefit the community. Humphrey chaired the committee responsible for coming up with ideas. One had been kicking around in her head because of what she saw in her business of serving seniors.

"Over and over, we have found that many older people don't have recent pictures of themselves," she said. "The most recent is from their 40s and 50s."

The council had its idea. It would arrange for folks in five adult living facilities to gather for professional portraits by themselves or with family members — for free.

The council secured Photos by J David of Tarpon Springs and Life Care Center in New Port Richey agreed to set up a room for the sittings and another for a tea party, because everybody will be all gussied up. The participating homes are Atria Bayonet Point, Sunshine Christian Home, Jennifer Gardens, Trinity Regional Rehab and Life Care Center.

The sessions will be Sept. 8 because council members wanted to make the event in conjunction with National Grandparents Day, which is Sept. 12.

Humphrey and her husband, Robert, general manager of Pinnacle Door & Hardware in Clearwater, have six grandchildren of their own, and they all live nearby.

"I can tell you," she said, "there is nothing better than being a grandparent."