Angela Yacano's reasons for volunteering at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History are pretty simple. "I have a great time in here," she said, as if admitting to a guilty pleasure. Yacano, who works the museum front desk one or two afternoons a month, has been a museum volunteer for several years. "I just like to talk to the people," she said. "I like the chance to meet people who come from all over the world. Their reasons for visiting Mount Airy are really different." Whatever their reasons for passing through, Yacano said she always sends them up to the museum tower to check out the view. "I call the tower Mount Airy's answer to the Empire State Building," she said. "That always gets a chuckle."

Museum staffers Nancy Davis, guest services manager, and Matthew Edwards, executive director, have discovered that most volunteers get a lot out of the social opportunities volunteering provides. To thank the people who donate their time and energy, a "Volunteer Appreciation Social" was held on April 14. Davis said the museum annually hosts a program during National Volunteer Week, which in 2016 ran from April 10 to April 16. This year they changed the format of the appreciation from a program with guest speakers to simply a social hour where volunteers could mingle and munch on catered heavy hors d'oeuvres. The following long term volunteers were honored with service pins.

For five years – Mark Brown, Anita Hoisington, Rodney Pell.

For 10 years – Barbara Fields, Doris Surratt.

Twenty-year volunteer Ruth Richards was unable to attend the social but will be pinned when she shows up for work at the museum on Tuesday. "Ruth has been a steadfast supporter and volunteer almost since the museum opened to the public," Edwards said. "Her warm smile and welcoming personality have greeted visitors to the museum for 20 years now. It's rare to find that kind of dedication these days and we're honored to have her as a part of our museum family." Davis added that five volunteers who have been with the museum for 19 years are on deck for the pin for next year.

Additional volunteers sought

While the staffers are thankful for their core group of about 65 volunteers, recruiting and maintaining a full volunteer staff of ideally about 100 is a “constant struggle,” Davis said. Folks want to do too much, too soon, and burn out. Others are just too busy for a consistent commitment. “There are a lot of organizations we compete with for volunteers,” Edwards said. “A ton of great organizations.” The director noted that human services organizations sometimes have a more obvious connection to serving the community that draws volunteers, but that the museum also serves a critical function. “Our mission is to preserve our collective experience of living in this place and time. It’s part of being part of something bigger than ourselves, something more influential,” he said. “What we do is just as important to the overall health of the community.” Davis recalled one docent who compares the museum to an individual who might keep a box of important memories and treasures. “She says ‘consider the museum our box and these are the treasures we want to keep.’”

Edwards said the broad strokes for a regional history museum are similar to other regions, that every community had their industries, their “big fire,” their powerful families. “Our job is to tell our story and what makes us different,” he said, and volunteers are crucial to doing that job well. “It frees up paid staff to be working behind the scenes on the big picture things,” he said. Edwards said their greatest volunteer needs are for front desk volunteers, who run the cash register and more importantly “are our first interaction with the visiting public,” Edwards said. “That’s the hardest to fill because of the sheer number of shifts.”

The museum is also in need of docents, who must be available on demand to give tours and attend training. But the director noted that “there are a lot of jobs people don’t think about,” he said. “We’ll find a way to work with anyone with an interest in the museum.” He also noted that volunteers don’t necessarily have to spend a lot of time at the actual museum in situations where getting out of the home is a barrier. Edwards used his wife, Glenda Edwards, as an example. As leader of the Junior Historians, she spends about eight to 10 hours at home prepping for what ends up as only about an hour and a half at the museum. “If they’ve got an interest we want to give them an outlet,” he said. Anyone interested in volunteering at the museum should contact Nancy Davis at (336) 786-4478 ext. 229.