

Aging Lifestyles: The big count

by Joe_Volz

It has been 10 years since I was assigned to help count a tiny bit of America for the Census Bureau. It was an intriguing and, I must confess, bizarre experience.

And now it is time for the Census again – that massive federal undertaking that takes place every 10 years. It is an effort to count everyone in the country.

I will be sitting on the sidelines this time, but it is a job you might want to try. It's a lot of fun and they pay you. And it's a great job for a retiree; you can make your own hours and there is no heavy lifting.

Although the official counting doesn't begin until next year, the Census Bureau is currently looking for some good men and women here in Frederick, Md., to do preliminary work. The temporary spots will pay from \$11 to \$19 an hour. Check the website at www.census.gov/2010census.

My experience certainly was hilarious, although I doubt that the bigwigs at the national Census headquarters ever envisioned just what the scope of my job would be.

I was assigned to a little office in downtown Washington, D.C., a couple of blocks from the White House. I worked at a cardboard desk. My job was to schedule job test appointments for applicants for the enumerator position. An enumerator actually goes out and interviews people.

But, somehow, the phone company got its signals crossed. Although I was only supposed to be dealing with local job applicants, the 411 people gave my number out to anyone in the country who had any question about the Census or anything else.

A woman from California called to complain that illegal aliens were camped out on the hillside near her gold-plated neighborhood, and she wanted to know what I planned to do about it.

"Count them, ma'am," I replied.

For several weeks, to paraphrase that great poet, Walt Whitman, I heard all American singing – or moaning.

"There is only one box to check off whites but six boxes for Asians," one man complained.

"What difference does it make?" I asked. "Check whatever is appropriate."

Like most callers, he had no idea that I was a temp, just an average member of the humble rabble. At first, I tried to refer callers to a designated information number, but it was always busy. And after reading all the pamphlets, I figured I could offer a lot of good information on my own. So, I decided to save the callers any more frustration and respond to some of their questions.

One man in Cleveland was clearly worried. "There are only two of us," he said. "What do I do about Person 3 and Person 4 on the form?"

"Leave them blank," I said. Now, that wasn't so hard.

Several callers asked something like this: "It says the Census form represents the situation on April 1. What if Grandpa gets run over by a truck on March 29?"

I assured them that they did not have to be quite so pessimistic, but if they were really worried, they could keep the old gentleman inside for a day.

Yet, for all the whining that came through on my phone, I heard more often from people who just wanted to do the right thing. Or from kids who expected me to help them with their homework. I did refer those eager beavers to the high-priced public relations people at headquarters.

When my two-week stint was over, I had answered 1,000 calls. I heard many people say their country could count on them. It was reassuring. Walt Whitman would have understood.

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