

“TRY IT... You'll Like It”

BY JULIE GIBSON

Those immortal words of Mikey, the Life® cereal boy, instantly came to mind as President Bush urged people to try the new Medicare Discount Drug Plan on a recent trip to Liberty, Missouri.

It was almost 39 years ago that then President Lyndon Johnson came to the area to sign the first Medicare law and to later have the first card issued to Missouri's former President, Harry Truman. And now, in 2004, President Bush was here, promoting his Medicare plan to an audience where some looked forward to the changes and potential cost savings, others feared the idea of a new Medicare benefits system, and some were downright opposed to the change.

The week before the President's visit, Rob McVay and I were invited downtown to the Federal Building to meet with CMS representatives Joe Tighlman, Regional Administrator and Robert Epps, Regional Rural Coordinator along with Kent Aland, CEO and Linda Shoemaker, Vice President, Patient Care, Memorial Health Center in Nebraska. Joe and crew are planning a pilot rural health care conference in Sidney, Nebraska to inform providers of new Medicare benefits available and to explain the many changes to the CMS system. The National Rural Health Association has agreed to assist in anyway possible as CMS prepares to follow the President's directive to "get the word out." As we prepared to leave, Joe mentioned his office could possibly obtain a ticket to see the President if Rob or I were interested in attending the following week.

After a brief schedule check with Rob, I proceeded to comply with the information request necessary to clear security to obtain a ticket. On Monday morning, just hours before the President was to arrive, I found out that I did indeed have a ticket and should meet a CMS representative at the front door of the community center to pick it up. That was before I knew that I would be stopped two blocks away with a request to see my ticket prior to proceeding to the parking lot.

So what happens when you are among the last to arrive at a scheduled Presidential visit? You wait, that's what! And wait I did on a hot and sultry day in Liberty, Missouri with the temperature in the low 90's and the humidity almost a match. I waited and marveled as the crowd grew to welcome the President to town. As I sat in a long line of traffic waiting to be cleared to proceed towards parking, I smiled as the young and old alike headed towards the community center. They packed lawn chairs and umbrellas, waved flags and hoisted signs as they scouted for a place to sit and perhaps a sliver of shade. The weather was oppressive but President Bush was scheduled to speak to seniors on the new Medicare Discount Drug plan and the air was filled with excitement in this small suburb of Kansas City.

As I turned the corner to proceed to yet another checkpoint, I rolled down my windows so I could hear the chants of the protestors. They too were out in full force and were just as excited to have the opportunity to express their point of view. I waited in a "special" line inside the parking lot with other questionably "cleared" guests, and then waited more outside my car as I struggled to make contact with my CMS escort. Back in the city, the CMS office staff provided wonderful

assistance as frequent calls were made back and forth to arrange a new meeting location. Finally, with ticket in hand, I headed towards the front doors of the community center. There I waited more with the last 10-to-20 individuals to arrive. We watched the police on four wheelers, motorcycles and bicycles cruise in and out of the nearby woods and through the parking lots. By now the sweat was really beginning to pour out of all who remained in line, but the mood was jovial and only got better as the workers from the Liberty Community Center appeared like angels with cups of ice water... ahhhh, what relief!

I finally made it through the last security check and entered the auditorium only to discover it was full. I made my way down the side steps to find a place to stand out of the way and enjoy the cool, refreshing air the indoors provided. It was then that the White House staff appeared and requested us to proceed to the bleacher section on stage. Enough tickets hadn't been handed out to local seniors to fill the stage and more folks were needed to sit there...it had to be full for the view of the cameras.

Never did I think I would end up some ten feet behind the President — after all this was for seniors and

I am, of course, "still 39"! I could read President Bush's notes over his shoulder and shook hands with him at the conclusion of his speech. In all it was a truly exciting experience for this Midwest girl not accustomed to the hype of political pageantry.

As we begin discussions with CMS and the rural Nebraska hospital folks about their upcoming conference, I'm reminded of President Bush's charge, "Just keep putting the word out. This is a program that helps people." I know many of us are struggling to understand the new benefits and changes and just how it will affect us and our loved ones. However, I hope you will use the resources that are available to you if the new program has left you unsure of what steps to take. Call the Medicare office at 1-800-Medicare, it's available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, log on to www.Medicare.gov, or contact your regional CMS rural coordinator who is also available to help. So as the President and Mikey both said, "try it!"...who knows, you just might like it!

