

The 2025 Volunteer Recognition Awards:

The Volunteer Recognition Awards honor volunteers who have made significant contributions to the mission and values of OLLI-USF. In April, the awards were presented to three individuals and two teams. Over the next few months, OLLILife is introducing you to these award winners.

She's Granny, The Diva and OLLI's Dulcimer Maven: The Many Sides of Karen Brown-Blonigen



Karen Brown Blonigen loves the mountain dulcimer. She loves the instrument's beautiful hourglass shape, the plaintive notes and stirring songs she plucks from its strings, the artistry of creating music from such a simple but powerful instrument.

She owns 12 dulcimers, all with different shapes, sizes, colors, and sounds, and she's given each its own unique name: Moon Dance,

Triple B (Big Bad Bass), Big Red, The Bard, and so on.

Over the past 20 or so years, Karen has brought her love of the dulcimer to the OLLI classroom where she has taught at least 100 members to play. That in addition to the numerous computer classes she has taught to members back even before OLLI was created, when it was still called Learning In Retirement.

Her contributions to OLLI have been so valuable that in April she was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award, which is awarded for significant contributions to the growth and development of OLLI over the years.

“Karen is a Roll of Honor instructor who has led classes in computer training, working with those brand-new to using computers, to teaching members to play

the mountain dulcimer. Above all, she has been an indefatigable ambassador for OLLI-USF for many years, cheerfully sharing her own story of growth and development post-retirement, attributing all this to her participation as member and volunteer to her association with OLI-USF,” said Ara Rogers when presenting the award to Karen.

Learning To Play

The mountain dulcimer is a stringed instrument whose history goes back to the Scottish and Irish immigrants who settled in the Appalachian Mountains in the early 1800s. It usually sits on the musician’s lap as its three or four strings are plucked or strummed.

It’s exceedingly easy to play and very versatile, Karen says. “You can learn how to play in 15 minutes. You do not have to read music to learn to play it. Instead, we play by numbers.

“It’s a fantastic instrument with all the different things it can play,” she says. “It’s not like a guitar or violin. It has its own unique sound, and depending on how you play it, it can sound like a fiddle or a harpsicord.

“Originally, a lot of folk music was played on it. I play a range from classical 15th century music to ragtime and contemporary music such as the Beatles,” she says.

Karen discovered the dulcimer while on a weeklong stay in a North Carolina state park when she saw a presentation by a local dulcimer player. She was captivated and asked the musician to make an instrument for her. Dubbed Mountain Man, it was the first of many dulcimers she’d collect.

Over the years, Karen has honed her skills through private sessions, Zoom presentations and festivals. Even after 20 years, she still takes lessons from a leading dulcimer musician and practices every day.

Becoming Granny

Karen's history with OLLI began as a computer instructor to seniors at USF. A few years after OLLI-USF was created in 2001, Karen learned to play the dulcimer and, at the request of Educational Program Manager Joseph McAuliffe, she performed at a one-hour Friday Lecture.

"Then Joseph asked me to teach a course. I said no one would be interested," Karen said. But to Karen's surprise, the class filled up so quickly that a waiting list had to be created.

Here's how long-time dulcimer student Susan Northcutt describes Karen's classes: "How did Karen teach me? She was, above all, a teacher, demonstrating the beauty of sounds that the dulcimer makes. Every session, she played at least one song that raised awareness and interest. She also encouraged me – to practice, suggesting ways to improve my fingering, for example. ...She supported me as I struggled to figure out tablature. Patience, knowledge, enthusiasm – each a part of Karen's approach to teaching me, and so many others, how to play the lap dulcimer."

Ten years ago, Karen took an OLLI class at Cracker Country, a living history museum located on the Florida Fairgrounds. She was so inspired by the authentic historic setting that she became a docent, performing as Granny and her Dulcimers. Dressed in 19th century-style clothing, she entertains and educates with her musical instrument at Cracker Country during state fair days and for special events.

She also brings her dulcimer and another favorite instrument – the Native American flute -- to retirement communities, assisted living centers, and women's groups. And she has played her instruments for the animals at ZooTampa, where she has served as a docent.



She never charges money for her performances. If someone wants to pay, she asks them to donate to breast cancer research.

“This is a gift that has been given to me in later life. I see it as my responsibility to pass it on,” she says.

The Diva

Karen has performed in Readers Theater, an OLLI-based performance group that met for several years. Friends have dubbed her “the diva,” because of her affecting and sometimes hilarious acting.

That experience spurred her to take roles in plays produced by Powerstories, a community theater troupe that focuses on issues around women and girls.

Her diva-ness developed over a teaching career that included training teachers in classroom management. It’s what makes her such a successful teacher, she says.

“When I’m teaching, I’m on the stage. Teaching is 50 to 60 percent performing. Of course, you have to know your subject matter, but you have to engage your students. You can’t just throw facts at them,” she says.

Karen credits all of her many accomplishments to her 25-year membership in OLLI. “I’m an OLLI creation,” she says. “OLLI has been amazing in pushing me forward. It’s pushed me in all sorts of different avenues.”

These days, Karen is taking a break from dulcimer teaching for OLLI, although she still has a few private students. But she hasn’t stopped being an OLLI instructor. Watch for her class next spring on Florida’s rural history through music.

--Sandy Buckley