

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.

Speaking Of Hablemos....



Donaghy grew up in Miami amid the throngs of people from Spanish-speaking cultures who settled there. While she never became a fluent speaker, Ethel learned to understand and enjoy the language.

After joining OLLI, she signed up for a Spanish conversation class taught by Leonor O'Reilly to maintain and even increase her Spanish-language skills. The class was so successful, that in 2022, Ethel and several other classmates decided to take their experience further and create a Spanish-language Shared Interest Group.

That's how Hablemos came to be.

Over the past three years, the group has grown from a handful of people to nearly 70 members under the leadership of seven volunteers who organize meetings

and keep in touch with members. The team's efforts have been so successful that in April, Hablemos received an OLLI Exemplary Teamwork Award, presented for a significant contribution to OLLI by a team.

"It takes a vision, teamwork and dedication to run a successful SIG, and this group exemplifies teamwork among their members to develop a warm, lively and creative community for anyone wishing to learn, practice, and immerse in the Spanish language and culture," said Diane White who presented the award at the Volunteer Appreciation Breakfast.

Let's Talk

Hablemos is the Spanish word for "let's talk." And that's what the SIG is all about. Every two weeks, about a dozen members meet over Zoom to discuss a topic in Spanish. Some members are fluent in the language and others are hoping to improve their skills. Everyone is welcome.

Once a quarter, Hablemos members meet at a restaurant to enjoy Spanish food and culture. The restaurants represent a variety of cultures -- Puerto Rican, Peruvian, Caribbean, Cuban. The group has also traveled to the Tampa Bay History Center to see an exhibit on Spanish immigrants in Tampa.

But it's the Spanish conversation that's the big draw for its members, Ethel says. Each meeting focuses – at least at the beginning of the meeting -- on a specific topic: *¿Qué géneros musicales te gustan? ¿Qué clase de música no te gusta?* (What musical genres do you like? What kind of music do you not like?). They talk about favorite foods, their pets, hobbies, holiday traditions, and more. They have listened to music and read poetry. And always in Spanish only.

That's what keeps Ethel coming back, she says. "A lot of Spanish speakers don't have anyone to speak the language with at home. It helps keep the language alive for us. Also, I enjoy the people and learning about the different cultures, such as how they celebrate the new year and Christmas," she says.



The leadership team is comprised of two administrators and five moderators.

The Administrators

Ethel and Debbie Gitomer are Hablemos' two administrators. Their job is to send out reminders and Zoom links for the twice-monthly meetings, maintain the membership list, arrange lunches, and keep in touch with members.

The Moderators

The group's five Spanish-speaking moderators – Deborah Laskowski, Mike Hayes, Grizelle Aldea, Ara Rogers and Beatrice Boles -- take turns leading the Zoom discussions. It's also their job to come up with the topics and questions for discussion and send them out to SIG members beforehand.

Ara Rogers was director of OLLI when members of Leonor O'Relly's class asked for her help in forming the SIG in 2022. With Ara's guidance through the application and approval process, Hablemos became one of OLLI's most flourishing SIGs.

Now retired, Ara is an active Hablemos member, facilitating group discussions several times a year and attending most of the meetings. She appreciates the immersive approach Hablemos takes in its meetings.

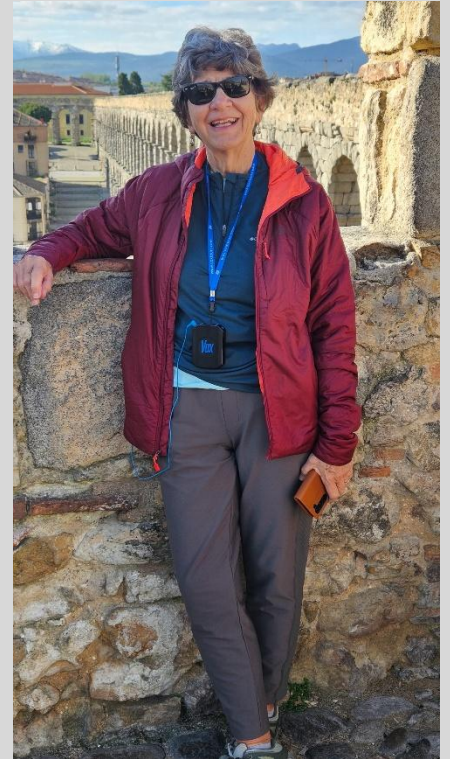


“Spanish is my first language, but my facility with it suffers from lack of use. I struggle to find words and stumble when trying to answer questions thoughtfully,” she says. “Leonor spoke Spanish exclusively throughout class from day one, repeating and translating as needed. Hablemos' approach, like Leonor's, is immersive. Just as in life situations, we each struggle a bit to get our thoughts across. It's a friendly and encouraging environment.”

Deborah Laskowski is one of Hablemos original members. Her goal in joining the SIG was to maintain the Spanish-language skills she developed in school and during her career.

“In college, my majors were sociology and Spanish. During my career as a clinical social worker, I worked mostly with Spanish-speaking clients. Additionally, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic where I really improved my language skills,” she says.

“I thoroughly enjoy my experiences in Hablemos, both as a participant and moderator,” she says. “The group members are from diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds and possess varying levels of Spanish fluency. All these factors are instrumental in assuring interesting and lively discussions.”



Mike Hayes is also an original member of Hablemos. Growing up in the Midwest, he didn't know anyone who spoke Spanish. But when he had to pick a language to study in the sixth grade, he chose Spanish. A good choice as it turned out.

Mike was a senior in high school when he met Pat, an exchange student from Peru. Although she spoke English, his six years of Spanish lessons didn't hurt. In fact, it was quite helpful, he says. “Of course, it later turned out to be a fortuitous choice, as I was able to ask my future mother-in-law in Peru for her daughter's hand in marriage,” he says.



Entranced with the Spanish language, Mike continued to work on his Spanish skills after high school. “I took several more college level courses in Spanish as electives, and gradually my Spanish improved,” he says. “In the working world, I was the guy called upon to translate whenever needed. I also held job positions

dealing with overseas offices in Latin America. For business or vacation, I have travelled to most Spanish-speaking countries in the world, exceptions being Cuba and Paraguay. But I have many Cuban friends and had a good friend from Paraguay in college,”

Now retired, he enjoys being able to practice Spanish with a friendly group of people through Hablemos. They’re “a great group of people with a shared interest in speaking Spanish. We get along, we laugh at each other's attempts at jokes in Spanish. We have gotten to know some of everyone's past history, where they have traveled etc. Plus we go out for lunches at Latin American or Spanish restaurants several times a year. It's always a hot topic where to eat next.”

Grizelle Aldea: is the leadership team’s newest member. Born and raised in



Puerto Rico, she learned about Hablemos after visiting the SIG table at OLLI’s 2023 Fall Open House. “I was curious about what the SIG was all about, and I wanted to find out if it was something I could do to use my native Spanish. I asked Deborah and Ethel if it would be unexciting for me as Spanish is my first language. They both said in unison that people like me were needed for the SIG as it was a Spanish discussion Zoom platform,” she says.

“So, I decided to join the next Zoom and got very interested. I felt very welcome! From that point, I volunteered to host discussions at least four to five times a year. I try not to miss any of the Zoom meetings, even when I’m not the host. We always have very interesting and lively conversations. Also, we have come to know each other and enjoy each other’s points of view.

“Being a host is very interesting as you need to come up with a theme question for the group with Ethel’s help, We all help each other during the discussions, and the most fun part is the once-a-quarter lunches where we visit different Latin cuisine restaurants in the Tampa Bay area,” Grizelle says.