

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, OLLI Life is introducing you to these award winners.

Carolyn Clark Keeps the Prizes and Cards Coming



If you've ever won a prize at a Volunteer Appreciation event or received a get well, congratulations, or sympathy card from OLLI, you can thank Carolyn Clark.

Carolyn does double duty for OLLI. She serves as door prize leader for OLLI's volunteer recognition events and as our very first goodwill ambassador.

Carolyn's work allows OLLI to show appreciation to our many volunteers for the work they do and provide a personal message to members who are ailing, grieving or celebrating.

Her work is so valuable that in April, OLLI presented her with the 2025 Award of Excellence, given for an outstanding contribution to a one-time event or project.

New and Intimidating

Carolyn joined the Volunteer Engagement Committee about 10 years ago, shortly after joining OLLI. It became her job to solicit prizes for the annual volunteer recognition events. And though Carolyn has volunteered for many organizations in many different roles, soliciting prizes was a new – and rather intimidating -- role for her at first.

“At first, you feel awful because you have to ask people for things,” she says. “I decided at first to go where I shop. The first time was scary. I went to Walmart. I

went up to a cashier and asked who I could talk to. She told me to wait in a corner. So I waited, and I waited, and I waited. Finally, the person I needed to see came up to me and said, ‘How about two \$25 gift cards?’”

To her great relief, Carolyn found that most places she visited were happy to donate to OLLI. Now, armed with documents showing OLLI’s not-for-profit status and her OLLI badge, Carolyn has amassed a long list of donations either through personal visits or letters sent on OLLI letterhead.

Through her efforts, volunteers have received such prizes as tickets to Tampa Bay Rays games and Straz performances and gift cards to Target, Lowes, Home Depot, Walmart, and numerous restaurants to name just a few gifts.

“The first time I went to Home Depot, they gave me two buckets and said I could fill them with up to \$25 in goods. I went up and down the aisles and filled them with cleaning supplies. Now, every year I go back and do the same thing,” she says.

“The first year that I started getting prizes, I didn’t have a lot,” she says. “We started small because I didn’t know what to do. But every year, the number of prizes grows. Now we give away over \$1,000 in gift cards.”

What’s In A Card?

Countless members going through significant life events have heard from OLLI over the past few years through the cards that Carolyn sends out. Carolyn always includes a personal note to show that OLLI shares their joy or sorrow.

“People may say, ‘What’s so important about a card?’ But a card can mean a lot to someone,” she says.

Carolyn may send up to four cards a month. Her information comes from OLLI staff, board members and OLLI members like you. If you or someone you know is having a significant personal event, you can contact Carolyn [here](#). You can also find a link to her email every month at the bottom of *OLLILife*.

A Life In Florida

Carolyn and her husband moved to a senior community in Parish from Baltimore in 1998. Both retired and their three children grown, they were enjoying Florida's weather and slower pace. While there, Carolyn started a monthly community newsletter – just two pages at first but later growing to four.

“At first, it just had schedules of activities, things like that. But one Valentine's Day I ran a column on ‘how did you meet your wife?’ It was so funny!” she says.

Carolyn's husband died eight years after moving to Parish, and in 2010, her son divorced and was awarded custody of his two children. A single father living in Tampa, her son needed his mom's help.

So she moved to a garage converted to an apartment adjacent to her son's house and helped to raise the little girl and boy, then ages 3 and 5 years old. Those little kids are now 19 and 21 and doing great, thanks to their very proud grandmother.

That is just one example of how Carolyn has worked to make people's lives better. There are many more.

Making Lives Better

Carolyn is the consummate volunteer. Over the years, she has donated her time to numerous organizations.

While living in Parish, she taught English for an organization based in Bradenton. “People would come from other countries, and they needed to be able to read or speak English better,” she says.

“I had a student from Mexico. I saw she had a lot of potential. We would meet in a back room of a library and go through books, and we'd go to the stores. She was my daughter's age, and I'd have her over for dinner. She wanted to go to college, but she didn't know English. She eventually became a phlebotomist working in a lab.”

Through this organization, Carolyn met people fleeing repression from around the world, helping them to learn English and our country's customs. She showed

them how to shop, how to order food in restaurants. “You start out teaching English and you get involved in people’s lives,” she says.

When Carolyn’s grandchildren attended Roosevelt Elementary School, she worked as a volunteer in the school library, putting books on shelves and checking them out.

For many years, she volunteered at the Straz Center until having to cut back for health reasons. She has donated many hours to the Jan Platt Library bookstore as a member of Friends of the Library. Until last year, she volunteered every other Tuesday and some Saturdays at Ronald McDonald House. She’s a member of a prayer group at United Methodist Church.

Her volunteer work brings her great satisfaction, she says. “I’m not a TV watcher,” she says. “As a volunteer, you get out and meet people; you meet all the good people, really nice people. And you make friends. I’ve made friends for life,” she says.

Volunteering for OLLI has also brought her great satisfaction, Carolyn says.

“I just love OLLI,” she says. “I have met people who I never would have met from all walks of life. There are so many talented people who contribute their time to make OLLI such a wonderful organization. I truly believe that I receive more than I give.”

--Sandy Buckley