

Recognizing Volunteers During a Global Pandemic: The Show Must Go On

When COVID-19 canceled all large-scale events in 2020, we refused to accept that the Seniors in Service Annual December Volunteer Appreciation Luncheon was destined to be one of them. At first, we were hopeful that our traditional event would go on, honoring over 350 dedicated volunteers who have served 5, 10, 15, and even 20+ years with us. Our past exclusive events were like no other – held in a grand, glamorous ballroom with a star-studded backdrop, formal linens, upscale cuisine, and a program that included volunteer awards presented by community leaders, raffles, entertainment, and dancing – all captured by a professional photographer.

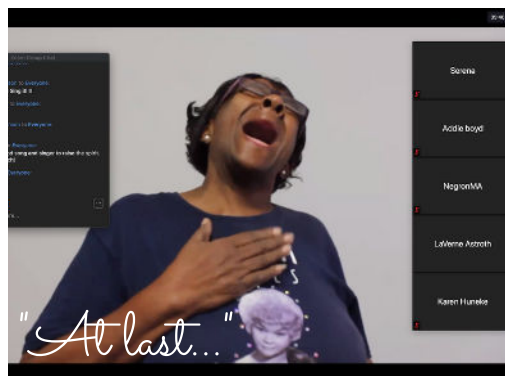
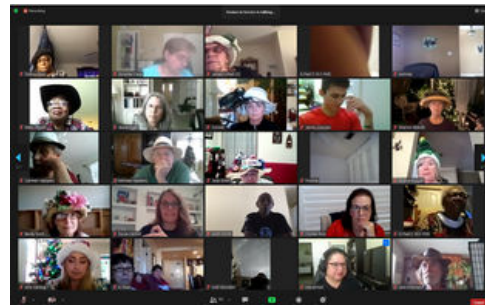
The pandemic made this impossible, but recognizing our volunteers was more essential than ever. In a year rife with isolation and tension, especially for seniors, the opportunity to connect was sacred. Though it would be easier to cancel, our volunteers deserved more. Instead of abandoning the luncheon until 2021, Seniors in Service pivoted and hosted this much-loved event over Zoom.

Shifting from a traditionally in-person event to a virtual one took flexibility and determination. Staff sent hard-copy and electronic invitations to all volunteers, funders, and partners. The invitations arrived with detailed Zoom instructions and with goodie bags filled with swag. After the initial invites went out, staff got to work contacting every volunteer to make sure they received their package and understood how to participate.

On the day of the event, 198 individuals signed on. Videos from our partners and board members honored volunteers celebrating tenure milestones and announced our 2020 Heroes of Service award winners to show our appreciation. Volunteers actively participated by congratulating each other in the chat, and one particularly talented volunteer upheld a long-standing tradition of dazzling us by singing Etta James's classic, "At Last." While the gowns and suits that usually graced the in-person event were unnecessary, fancy hats were encouraged with a "Best Hat" contest to coincide with our "Mad Hatters" theme, tipping our hats to our devoted volunteers. Raffles were held with prizes from local partners, and instead of dancing, there was bingo to bring us together.

Isolation has taken a toll on our community's seniors, but connection through volunteering is the cure. During the event, one milestone award winner wrote in the chat, "I'm always glad to be part of Seniors in Service's AmeriCorps. I have served for over 6 years now, and I will continue." During the event, CEO Robin Ingles asked volunteers to hold up a sign with one single word that answered the question: "How does volunteering make you feel?" Their responses included words like Vital. Blessed. Purposeful and Connected.

While we could not celebrate in-person, this virtual event helped remind volunteers that we are blessed to have them, they are still purposeful, and though we are physically apart, we are all still connected.



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A Message from our CEO

2021 is finally here! 2020 was such a tough year, I'm not sure New Year's Eve was ever as meaningful as it was this year.

Looking forward into 2021, we see some things moving forward but some remaining a lot like 2020.

For us at Seniors in Service, we'll be focusing on the same things we always have:

- Connection
- Purpose
- Service

Connection is the binding of people. There is no substitute for human beings to be connected to one another for our mental health. Our generous volunteers are connecting using phones, tablets, and visits. ANY WAY they can.

Purpose is the knowledge and re-assurance that you make a difference. The activities you do fill you with satisfaction and peace because they matter.

Service is bringing others along with us. It's the answer to the question, "How do I connect my purpose-driven activities to the world?"

Our volunteers are the epitome of all three of these meaningful endeavors. They channel their energy, love and passion by providing service to others.

As always, I'm humbled by their commitment and vigor. Each year, I give myself a theme as a guiding principle for the next 12 months. This year, I've chosen Self-Compassion and Self-Love. As I think of our generous, loving volunteers my wish for all of you in 2021 is Self-Compassion and Self-Love too. Please stay connected. Please chase your purpose. Please share your service with others. We cannot overestimate how important it is to take care of ourselves - so we can take care of others - right now.

Please reach out to us if you need connection, purpose or service. And take care of yourselves.

-Robin

-Robin Ingles, CEO

Service Moments

Foster Grandparents



Foster Grandparent volunteers help children achieve academic success and emotional balance through tutoring and mentoring. Students need extra support now more than ever, and 2020 Heroes of Service award winner Louise Peterson makes a real difference. "Grandma" Louise has served as a Foster Grandparent volunteer for over five years, treating each student, parent, and teacher as if they were her own family. Dequita Parker, Director of PromiseLand Early Childhood Education Center at Metropolitan Ministries, said it best: "Louise is a breath of fresh air when she enters the building and each classroom. The support that she brings to our team is monumental. Our kids and family have experienced so much trauma before coming to our center, and she

helps alleviate the long-term effects. She loves on each child, parent, and staff as if they were her own. She is missed when she is not here and loved even more when she is. Throughout the many changes in our country, I have prayed that she would return soon, and my prayers were answered. Grandma Louise has a spunk that I hope to have when I am her age. She has a giving spirit, and a loving heart that goes far beyond anyone could ask for. It is a great honor to work with her, learn from her, and be able to say I know her." Thank you, "Grandma" Louise, for being a hero to the young children who blossom under your wing.

Readers in Motion enhances our Foster Grandparent Program, engaging caring volunteers as Education Advocates to help children improve literacy through tutoring/mentoring PLUS increased parent engagement. Meet our Readers in Motion 2020 Heroes of Service award winner, "Grandma" Manning! The letter from the teacher she served for over two years at Oak Grove Elementary says it best: "Mrs. Manning arrived before the first student, helping with papers, managing breakfast, and rounding up stragglers in the hall. I could always count on her joyful assistance... Teaching a young child to read is both a science and and an art, a practice in patience and persistence. Mrs. Manning demonstrated all those qualities... Her love for children and sense of community naturally led to her great service." During COVID-19, "Grandma" Manning refused to give up. As one of the first to sign up for virtual tutoring, the technology was a struggle at first, yet "Grandma" Manning persevered. Thank you, "Grandma" Manning, for your unwavering dedication to our community's children! And thank you, Children's Board of Hillsborough County, for supporting Readers in Motion as we spearheaded virtual tutoring to meet children where they are while continuing to serve in-person at resource centers and classrooms.

Readers in Motion



Service Moments

Senior Companions



Senior Companion volunteers serve seniors who live alone, without a family caregiver to provide support. Meet our Senior Companion 2020 Heroes of Service award winner, Irma Amador Acosta. Irma was selected for this award based on the nomination from the Elderly Services Coordinator at J.L. Young Garden Apartments, where Irma has provided companion services to multiple residents for over 5 years. Before the pandemic, Irma provided ongoing in-home companionship and support to her clients with grocery shopping, reading mail, writing letters, and light chores. As a Senior Companion, she added richness to the lives of those who are isolated and kept a watchful eye to notice when residents needed extra care. To Irma, clients are like family. During COVID-19, Irma continues to connect with her clients regularly by phone. They discuss mental health and the effect the pandemic is having on their well-being. Irma reminds her clients that social distancing and mask-wearing are still essential, ensuring they continue to stay safe. Her ongoing service reassures them that she is still there for them. It is a great honor to recognize Ms. Irma Amador Acosta for her service.

Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) matches retired seniors aged 55 and better with the volunteer opportunities of their dreams. Don and Connie Smith received the RSVP 2020 Heroes of Service award due to their kind hearts, eagerness to help, and commitment to their community. Don and Connie provide telephone reassurance, volunteer at food pantries, mentor children, and more. An entire wall in Don & Connie's home shows their dedication to serving others – from the Jefferson Award for Public Service to Commendation from the Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners to the Diabetes Youth Service Outstanding Senior Volunteer. Whether they're spreading joy through gifting tomatoes to neighbors in isolation or raising money for children to receive healthy snacks and meals, Don and Connie show time and again how small gestures can create momentum. Thank you, Don and Connie, for uplifting an entire community.

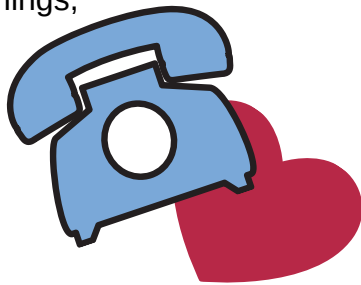
Retired & Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)



Service Moments

TelePals

TelePals help reduce social isolation for seniors through telephone reassurance. For some, it's the only conversation they have all day. 2020 Heroes of Service award winner Zoraida Class offer clients friendly conversations and regular check-ins that show them someone cares. Zoraida was one of our very first TelePals and has served as many as three different clients. She actively participates in volunteer surveys and trainings, well on her way to earning star points, which add up to "awards" by completing these tasks. One of Zoraida's TelePals writes, "We talk every day! I am so happy with my match!" Zoraida goes above and beyond to support her clients. She listens for red flags and acts as an advocate on their behalf. When one of her clients needed assistance with essential home repairs, Zoraida alerted Seniors in Service staff. Zoraida's attentiveness enabled Seniors in Service staff to find resources to meet her needs. Zoraida is passionate about serving others. Her drive to help and be a friend makes her a hero. Thank you, Zoraida! We are so grateful for your service.



Operation: Veteran Connect

Operation: Veteran Connect engages AmeriCorps members and volunteers who feel a special calling to help those who have served our nation. Norman Bungard, our Operation: Veteran Connect 2020 Hero of Service, helps veterans live life to the fullest. A World War II veteran himself, Norm commits 20 hours per week with Operation: Veteran Connect. After serving for a full year, he promptly signed up for a second year of service.



He has helped over 150 Veterans with improved knowledge of and access to VA healthcare services during the last three months of 2020 alone! In addition to serving veterans, Norm brings invaluable perspective and life experiences.

During the pandemic, he's continued to find safe ways to volunteer, including delivering hot meals to homebound veterans and elders. Thank you, Norm, for your dedication and service!



Health Buddies



Health Buddies reduce preventable hospital readmissions for older adults who struggle with chronic disease, offering connection to enhance overall wellness and social connection. Meet Christian Slater, our Health Buddies 2020 Heroes of Service Award winner! A psychology major at the University of South Florida, Christian learned about Health Buddies from his professor in the College of Health Sciences. Seniors in Service paired Christian with Mr. R, who struggles with diabetes, high blood pressure, is legally blind and lives alone. During the pandemic, we shifted to virtual services by phone to ensure participants remain healthy and safe. Multiple calls a week from Christian tell Mr. R someone cares. Christian brings an intergenerational energy to Health

Buddies, fueling lively discussions with Mr. R about anything from food, exercise, family, hobbies, and current events. Mr. R shares memories from his prior occupation, while Christian shares his career aspirations. On one occasion, when Mr. R shared feelings with Christian that raised a red flag, Christian immediately alerted program staff, who called the Crisis Center for guidance. It turns out that Mr. R's comments were words of aspiration and faith – not desperation. Yet Christian's prompt attention made Mr. R realize how carefully Christian listens and how very much he cares. Thank you, Christian, for your dedicated service!

Partner Highlight

Thank you to the MANY community leaders and partners who shared in the joy of our first-ever Virtual Volunteer Recognition Event!

Thank you to TECO, our Title Sponsor, and for the support from all who made this event possible.

We are especially grateful to those who sent videos with heartfelt messages of appreciation. What better way to show our volunteers how much our community values their service?

Some sent videos to honor the Seniors in Service volunteers celebrating 5, 10, 15 and even 20+ years of service with us. Others sent videos to recognize our Heroes of Service award winners while making it clear that ALL of our volunteers are heroes.



Special Thanks to Our Guest Speakers

- Alan Hill, Seniors in Service Board (TECO)
- David Pizzo, Flordia Blue
- Debbie Caneen, Sun Towers Retirement Community
- Dequita Parker, PromiseLand Early Childhood Education Center, Metropolitan Ministries
- Jack Levine, 4Generations Institute,
- Mark Hall: Seniors in Service Board (Unitrends)
- Maria Negron, Children's Board of Hillsborough County
- Marina Choundas: Seniors in Service Board (Foley & Lardner LLP)
- Mary McDonald, Suncoast Credit Union
- Michelangelo Mortellaro, Mortellaro Law
- Michelle Brownell, United Healthcare
- Susan Boyd, Seniors in Service Board



Thank you to our funders!



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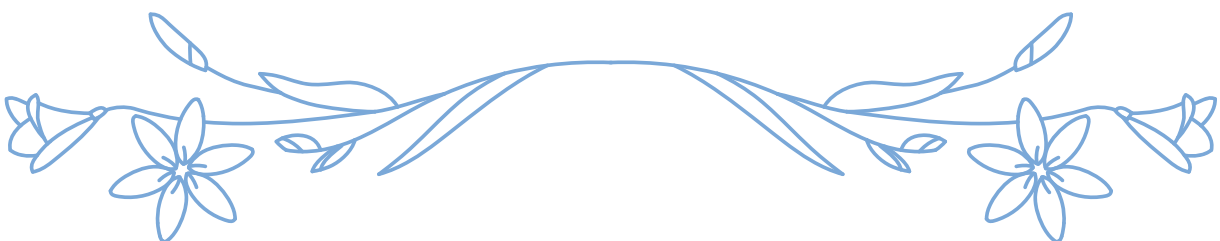


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www.SeniorsInService.org.**

or

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