

June 16 & 17, 2021

Saluting OUR SENIORS

Presented by:



Treasure Coast Hospice
A TREASURE HEALTH SERVICE

**Lake
Okeechobee
News**

**Caloosa
Belle**

**From volunteers to civic leaders,
we are honoring seniors
who are the backbones of
our communities!**

**Lake
Okeechobee
News**

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FloridaLife.com**

Celebrating *Our Seniors*

Lake Okeechobee News, Caloosa Belle & TC Hospice are pleased to present a joint effort to recognize the great senior citizens who make our communities a better place to live, work & play!

Senior Citizens gave us birth, built our nation, fought our wars and gave us opportunities to be who we are today. They have established and contributed to the businesses, organizations, and way of life in our communities.

The following criteria was used to evaluate the nominations received:

Community Volunteer Achievements – Significant lifetime contributions to their community marked by care and concern for others.

Personal Achievements – In pursuit of one's daily life the individual is the epitome of devotion to family, friends, faith, and individual effort.

Professional Achievements – Having achieved a level of success in business, education, or government that our community benefits from.

We are pleased to announce the honorees of this inaugural celebratory salute.



Treasure Coast Hospice
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**Lake
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Treasure Coast Hospice

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HOSPICE CARE

Providing exceptional care to patients in their homes, hospitals, assisted living residences, and in our Inpatient Units.



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Hospice care has always been at the heart of all that we do. Since 1982, Treasure Coast Hospice has been providing compassionate end-of-life care to patients and families in our community.



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Okeechobee, FL

Shirlean Graham

“I just believe that wherever you are, do what you can.”



Shirlean Graham began Chobee Steelers as a way to provide Okeechobee kids with an outlet where they could participate in pro-social activities. The goal has been preventing school drop outs, juvenile delinquency, drug involvement, gangs, domestic and sexual abuse and teen dating violence in and around the community. Chobee Steelers has a mission of providing support and empowerment to the Okeechobee youth. The youth are taught how to play the steel drums, and there is an emphasis on promoting healthy relationships, team-building, self-esteem and positive thinking.

She worked for Martha’s House for 26 years, fully retired for two years, and has since returned to part-time work with the organization. She and her husband, along with their daughter and granddaughter, live in Okeechobee.

“I’m originally from St Petersburg,” said Shirlean. “And when I needed the community there, they were there for me. So this is like giving back. Even though I’m not in St. Petersburg anymore, this is like paying it forward and giving back.”

In addition to Chobee Steelers, Graham has been involved with Okeechobee Community Improvement Association. She is also the founder of Ladies of Elegance, which sponsors young ladies for scholarships, and holds a debutante ball every year.

“I just believe that wherever you are, do what you can,” concluded Shirlean. “I don’t consider it going above and beyond, I just do what I can.”

Willie “Billy” Johnson, Sr.

“As a senior still assisting in the church community and school, what a blessing Pastor Johnson is to Okeechobee.”

— Brenda Scott

Pastor Willie “Billy” Johnson, Sr. has been a longtime Okeechobee resident, devoted to the Lord, his family, friends and he loves his beloved Okeechobee County.

Pastor Johnson is a youthful senior citizen, a retired minister and pastor associated with New Stephens AME (African-American Episcopal) Church. He retired from South Elementary School and serves the community in Douglas Brown. He feeds the community every third Saturday. He leads the breakfast – making, serving, stirring the grits for their free breakfast – to feed the Okeechobee community.

He is always there to minister and educate, offer words of wisdom, housing, commercial painter. He is a living example of God’s Love to help others on this journey called life.

He was married to Mercedes Washington for 20-plus years. She taught at Central Elementary School until she passed. He has two adult children, Patience Johnson-Washington and Willie Johnson, Jr. He has five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Honestly, I cannot think of anyone more in this city who has represented the city of Okeechobee so well more than Pastor Johnson. As a senior still assisting in the church community and school, working, coming out of retirement, what a blessing Pastor Johnson is to the Okeechobee.



CONGRATS TO SHIRLEAN GRAHAM FOR 25 YEARS OF DEDICATION

MARTHAS’S HOUSE CONGRATULATES SHIRLEAN FOR HER DECADES OF DEDICATION TO VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, AND HER UNWAVERING LOVE OF THE FAMILIES IN OUR COMMUNITY. SHIRLEAN CONTINUES TO BRING SEASONED WISDOM, WIT, UNITY, AND TRUE RELATIONSHIP TO HER CO-WORKERS AND THOSE SHE SERVES. AS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS TEACHER, PREVENTION EDUCATOR, MOM TO EVERY TEEN, AND FOUNDER OF THE CHOBEE STEELERS STEEL DRUM BAND PROJECT, WE CANNOT THINK OF ANYONE MORE WORTHY OF RECOGNITION.



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Bruce and Mary Anne Swinford

“I just enjoy helping people. Ain’t nobody on earth can tell me to quit.”

— Bruce Swinford



Mary Anne and Bruce Swinford began Big Lake Mission in 1995, taking over the mantle from Park Street Mission after its founder, Mary Thomas, decided to leave Okeechobee for the missionary field. Mary Anne told Bruce that she had heard God say to her that it was time for her to start a mission. She didn’t know how Bruce would take it – “but he’s a very giving person, anyway” – and they agreed to begin the mission in October 1995. They began with a toy drive, and that first Christmas, they helped 150 children.

They began feeding the homeless people two days a week, starting with sack lunches, and then Mary Anne discovered it was easier to cook a hot meal. She began cooking seven days a week. They have now scaled back to four days a week. (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday) and have different churches and groups who help them cook.

When they started, there were between 30 and 40 homeless people in the park, and they eventually worked at helping to get these people off the streets. “I learned so much,” Mary Anne said. “I thought all the homeless was just drunken bums, but they all have a story. We’ve had retired cops, truck drivers, doctors, all different professions that have just fallen down and can’t get back up.”

They currently have maybe a dozen homeless people they help. They also feed the needy, single mothers, widows and widowers, anyone who needs a meal can come down to the mission. They turn no one away. Publix has been one of the main suppliers to the mission, and in addition to making sure anyone who comes to the mission has a hot meal, the Swinfords will also give them a bag of stuff to take with them. They also help the people get shoes and clothes, and they’ve also helped people in medical situations get the care they need.

For the first five years, Bruce drove a semi truck in order to finance the mission until they felt they could prove to the town they could be trusted and were responsible. When donations began coming in, he was able to sell the truck and stay home to work full-time in the mission. The mission is a non-profit with no paid employees, including Bruce and Mary Anne. The mission survives completely on donations from the community, and any time they have any excess supplies, they share with other charities.

They also do a food pantry by referral.

When asked what motivates them, Mary Anne responded “We both love what we do. We love people, love to help people.”

Jaclynn Esparza

“I had never lived in a small town. I’m glad that I did come [to LaBelle].”



Jaclynn R Esparza has been a volunteer child advocate for LaBelle’s Guardian ad Litem program for about four years. She started her advocacy because her friend and her friend’s mother-in-law suggested that she would be a good candidate. She is also a volunteer for the Victim’s Advocate with the Hendry County Sheriff’s Department.

“I love kids, and I’ve helped single moms and other people who have been in situations get a Guardian ad Litem assigned to their custody cases,” Esparza said. I’ve been involved with children and single moms for quite a long time. I lived in California 27 years and mentored many single moms and, actually, I’m still friends with six of eight children from one family.”

She was a single mom for 15 years, has one daughter and four grandchildren. and that fueled her passion for child advocacy. She is retired due to a disability; she previously worked in the medical field as an office clerk and receptionist in the ER.

She also runs the Facebook group What’s Happening in LaBelle Today, which currently has 10,898 members. The group began with the purpose of informing people of LaBelle and surrounding areas of events, accidents, recommendations and things like that. She also runs the Moms New and Old Savings Deals and Ideas group on Facebook. “In that, I post different things about price drops, good buys from retail stores and such. It’s a lot of fun. You meet a lot of different people and become friends with them even though they’re thousands of miles away.”

Jaclynn originally came from New York, born and raised on Long Island. When she married, she moved to California and lived there until her ex-husband and she both got jobs in Colorado and relocated. After that, she relocated to Bradenton, Florida. Then she met David Harrod, who wanted to move to LaBelle.

“I had never heard of it, had never lived in a small town, so when I came to visit LaBelle, I wasn’t real sure. Now I’m glad that I did come here,” she said.

She’s most passionate about being a voice for children. “I taught in children’s church in California and Colorado, and chaperoned and volunteered with the youth groups.”

Judi Winchester

*“She could deliver the hard stuff
but with a sense of love and care.”*
— Gail Gerstrup



In Loving Memory

Judi Winchester is being honored posthumously. As an RN with a certification in hospice, she had worked tirelessly for almost 25 years in Okeechobee to make sure that all individuals in the community had access to quality hospice care. From training and managing the staff to become hospice certified, to reaching out to families and providing them the information, care and support needed at such a difficult time in peoples' lives.

Judi had been instrumental in creating the type of care for patients and families, as well as the community, that Hospice of Okeechobee has been nationally recognized for. She believed in putting the patient first and making sure the Hospice House in Okeechobee was always a warm, caring place where people knew that would be where to go to be cared for when the time comes.

Gail Gerstrup joined Hospice within the last ten years, and had worked side by side with Judi. “She was a very rare personality because she was so very straightforward and a straight shooter,” said Gail. “She could deliver the hard stuff but with a sense of love and care. She was colorful and definitely one of a kind.”

She trained lots of people to be able to do the hard job and say the hard words with a lot of love and care.

“Ask anyone in Okeechobee if they know Miss Judi at Hospice of Okeechobee and most will say yes, that she has touched their lives and they will never forget her honesty and caring truth,” Gail said. “Caring for her family has always been her strong point. She is Mawmaw, and that was her management style.”

She had that nurturing attitude of a mother and developed some of the greatest Hospice nurses. “I would say to her, ‘Judi, there is no ‘mother’ in management, and Judi would say ‘well, it’s because I’m their mother that I can put my boot in their butt.’”

Gail and Judi partnered together after that -- “she nurtured and I managed, and that was the successful team relationship we developed.”

Judi passed away on May 30, 2021. She is survived by her daughter, Christy Bryant Levi (Jeffrey Levi); her son, Cody Bryant; her sister, Patricia Chap (Bernie Chap and family); grandchildren and their spouses; great-grandchildren; daughters-in-law; nieces; nephews; and many wonderful friends. She is now reunited with her much loved son, David Joe Bryant.

She will be tremendously missed by the staff and patients of Hospice of Okeechobee.



Our Family of Care. *Begins with yours.*

Hospice of Okeechobee devotes every day to making the most of life and keeping patients as comfortable as possible in the place they call home. Our friendly, highly trained team members provide the best quality care with a commitment to help during one of life's most challenging moments.

As a not-for-profit, community-based organization for nearly 40 years, Hospice of Okeechobee has been providing a special kind of care to those faced with life-limiting illnesses. While addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of patients and their families, we focus on pain management and symptom control to enhance the quality of life.

Please contact us today to learn more about the special programs and services Hospice of Okeechobee offers in our community.

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Raye Deusinger

*“If somebody needs some help,
I’m one of those who tries to help.
I just enjoy being out among
people.”*



Raye Deusinger worked as a journalist for the Miami Herald before marrying her husband, Frank. After she retired and moved to Okeechobee, she worked at W&W Lumber for seven years. She also wrote columns about blood donations for Okeechobee the Magazine and Okeechobee Times.

She organized the Okeechobee Blood Roundup, runs the Okeechobee Women’s Business Referral Network, is an Ambassador for the Chamber of Commerce, teaches an adult women’s Sunday school class at First Methodist, and volunteers with Main Street and My Aunt’s Closet.

Raye is most proud of her work with the Okeechobee Blood Roundup, though all her work is important to her. The Okeechobee Blood Roundup is run by volunteers in Okeechobee, and has been going for 16 years. It’s held the weekend before Thanksgiving every year, and 5,777 units have been gathered in just those two days a year. Raye and her crew work for four months to plan that drive every year.

Frank Deusinger, her husband of nearly 40 years, passed away in 2004, and she has two daughters, Diana Demiano and Ann Rodgerson.

Raye also began an art business when she moved to Okeechobee. It was called DeuRaye Art, and she had a studio in the flea market. She sold art supplies, framed artworks, and offered painting classes taught by local artists.

She’s most passionate about the blood drive because “it’s something that is going to touch every single person’s life in some way,” explained Raye. “It’s so desperately important. My own husband used 36 units of blood before he died. That gave us hope.”

“It could be anyone you know that needs blood,” continued Raye. “You’re saving lives every time you give blood. It’s so essential to all of us. It’s why I give. And it’s why I would never give up the roundup.”

“If somebody needs help, I’m one of those who tries to help,” said Raye, “I like to help.”

Frank DeCarlo

“I’ve always been plugged into Okeechobee.”

Frank DeCarlo owns and operates American Drilling Services, Inc. He has 20 employees, including his daughter, two sons, a stepson and two grandsons. He is married to Yvonne DeCarlo, and together, they have five children and thirteen grandchildren. The DeCarlos enjoy attending and serving at Christ Fellowship Church.

DeCarlo volunteers as often as possible in the community. He serves on several boards such as The Pregnancy Center of Okeechobee, Real Life Children’s Ranch, Okeechobee Main Street and the Fair Board. He gives back to the community through sponsoring local youth sports programs and donating to organizations that he feels are important to our community. Over the years, he has helped organize and volunteers for several local community events such as the Adam Bryant Minimal Regatta, Santa in the Park, parades, 4th of July celebrations and cooking for local community events. He usually takes on the jobs that other people wouldn’t want such as setting up, cleaning up and even taking the trash out.

“I’ve always been plugged into Okeechobee,” said Frank. “I left my hometown to come here because I loved Okeechobee. We’re drilling a well down by the Veteran’s Park now. When you come to Okeechobee, you see visitors in two places. One is down by the pier, the other is the Veteran’s Park. The irrigation was looking rough in the park, so I wanted to do something.”

DeCarlo received the Paul Harris Fellow Award for relationships among people of the world from the Rotary Club. He has received the Clyde Durrance Award, which is a local community award for service above self. However, he does not do what he does for recognition. He does it because he loves Okeechobee, he loves his family and he continues to invest in the next generation.

“I’m always trying to help,” explained Frank.



Congratulations to all 6 over 60 Nominees

Locations

- Handy #58 - 1040 S SR29, Labelle
- Handy #82 - 200 Old CR78, Labelle
- Handy #85 - 1400 CR78, Labelle
- Handy #86 - 21321 Palm Beach Blvd, Alva
- Handy #93 - 2790 Hwy 441 S, Okeechobee



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Robert H. Buker, Jr.

“I am proud to lead a company that has made charitable giving and community involvement a core part of its everyday mission.”



Since May 2005, Robert H. Buker, Jr. has held the position of President and CEO of U.S. Sugar, and he currently serves on the Board of Directors for U.S. Sugar Corp., United Sugars and the Florida Sugar Cane League. He has held numerous senior management positions at U.S. Sugar for 30 years. Before joining U.S. Sugar, Buker was with the commercial law department of the Miami law firm of Mershon, Sawyer, Johnston, and Dunwoody & Cole. There, 90 percent of his practice was representing agricultural clients in business matters.

From 1973 to 1979, he served as an officer in the U.S. Army, rising to the rank of Captain. Buker was a pilot in command of a platoon of an attack helicopter company. After his discharge, Buker attended law school at the University of Florida at Gainesville and graduated in 1981 with high honors. He is a native of Bangor, Maine and spent his childhood living abroad while his father served as a medical missionary and later as a physician for the U.S. Army. He lived in Panama, Pakistan and Canada during this period. He received a B.A. in psychology in 1973 from Wheaton College in Illinois.

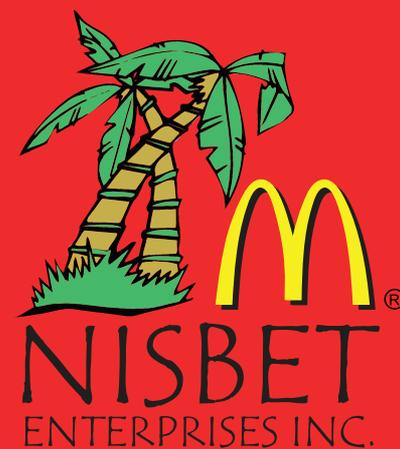
Currently, Buker and Barbara, his wife of 51 years, live in rural Glades County. They have three children, Robert H. Buker III, Richard S. Buker III, and Heather Branaman, and ten grandchildren.

Buker and his wife are involved in Providence Church and the National Rifle Association, and proudly support programs that help horses and the horseback riding community.

Buker am passionate about learning about and sharing United States military history, serving our local communities through charitable causes, and living the values of my Christian faith.

“I am proud to lead a company that, in addition to growing local and sustainable food for American families and providing good-paying American jobs, has made charitable giving and community involvement a core part of its everyday mission,” Buker said.

Since it was founded in 1931, U.S. Sugar has always prioritized serving the local youth, supporting community organizations, and being actively involved in the rural communities where the company’s employees live and work. U.S. Sugar’s founder Charles Stewart Mott had a saying, “If you take care if the community, you take care of the company” and his words still hold true today.



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Mary Bartoshuk

“We have to keep paying it forward and be kind to one another.”

Mary Bartoshuk works part time at Hendry Regional Hospital and the Hendry County Sherrif’s Office. She also belongs to the Kiwanis Club of LaBelle, volunteers with United Way, American Legion, and Caloosa Humane Society.

“I just believe we have to treat each other how we want to be treated,” said Mary on what motivates her. “I think it’s important to give back. The community has been good to me. I raised my kids here. I love my town and I just want to constantly give back to it for all they’ve done for me and my kids.”

When her two daughters, who both live in LaBelle, were young, Mary explained that she didn’t have a lot of money and didn’t think she’d be able to avoid a Christmas tree that year. It was the Kiwanis Club that stepped up offered to give her a Christmas tree. The Kiwanis also helped Mary’s grandson with scholarship funds for college.

“We have to keep paying it forward and be kind to one another,” added Mary.

When not working or volunteering, Mary likes to go biking, hiking, kayaking and boating and she shares her travels via social media to inspire others. She also teaches Tai Chi to seniors.

For children’s events, Mary will dress in costume as a Clown, an Easter Bunny, ‘50s Soda girl, and so many more.



Nikki Yeager

“I moved to LaBelle because it’s country. I prefer to be out in the dirt.”



Nikki Yeager can be seen from sunup to sundown picking weeds at the LaBelle welcome sign, attending every civic meeting daily, joining boards, and more in every aspect of the LaBelle community. She has inspired other seniors to get out and be part of the community.

Yeager is involved with the Women's Club and has been a past President of the Kiwanis Club of LaBelle twice.

She's also on the board of Kiwanis.

She's been very involved with the LaBelle Museum as well as the LaBelle Swamp Cabbage Festival, and was the Grand Marshal for the 2012 parade.

She is a part-time realtor for Southern Heritage and has been a nurse, a screen printer, a trophy designer. She also coached gymnastics for 30 years.

She was raised on a dairy farm in Texas, and she and her first husband had lived in Naples. After their divorce, she had intended to return to Texas, but went to nursing school and met Paul Roser. Together, they moved to LaBelle because it's country. "It's a good place to be, and I've been involved with the city," she said. She has been able to petition the City Council to consider a tree known as "Sherri's Tree" in Barron Park for a memorial plaque and bench to honor Sherri Craichy, who was Mayor of the City of LaBelle from 1993-2005.

Nikki is very involved in the American Legion Auxiliary and has been a past President and Secretary. In the past, she has put together the entire program, which involved every branch of the American Legion. "We need to honor our country and honor our flag," she said. She assists with fish fries on Friday night and any other activities.

She's also involved in the Kiwanis youth programs, such as the high school's Key Club and the middle school Builders Club, and the Aktion Club, which is a club for adults with disabilities. Every Sunday at the Catholic Church, she and others involved in the Kiwanis Club distribute baked goods donated from Publix to anyone who needs them. On Mondays, she sorts and distributes donations from the United Way House.

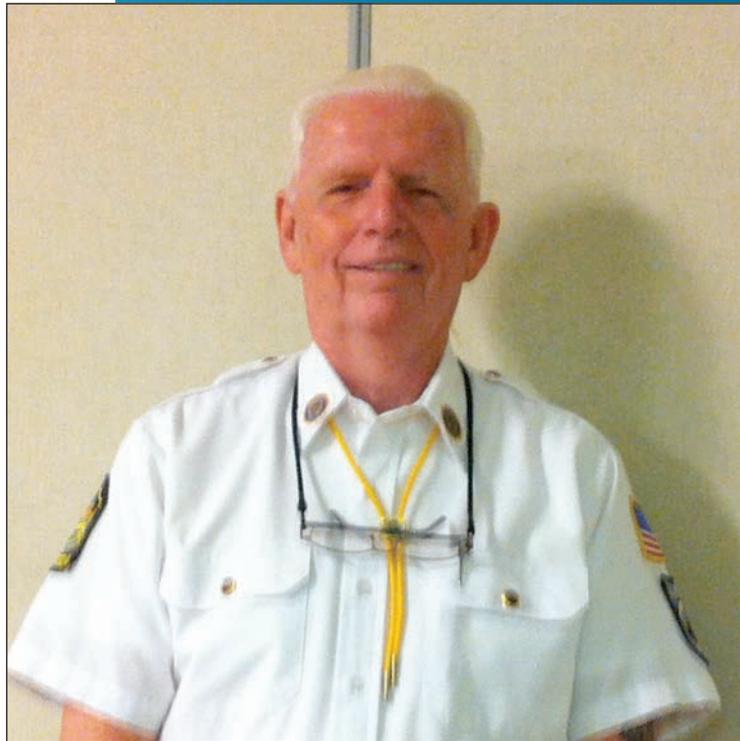
Every April for Earth Day, the LaBelle Garden Club sponsors a program for elementary school students to come out and learn about gardening and getting back to the earth.

Nikki has also been a captain of the American Cancer Society's LaBelle Relay for Life Team as well as a Relay for Life Survivor Chairman. She is also an active volunteer with the Firehouse Theater.

"Nothing is too much of a challenge for Nikki to face head on," said Mary Beth Pringle of South West Florida PODS Angels.

Robert "Bob" Groth

"When I retired, my wife said 'you're not going to be hanging around 24/7,'"



Robert "Bob" Groth is a veteran and previously worked as the operations manager for an insurance company. He retired from a disability in 1988 and has been a valued member of the Hospice of Okeechobee team for the past eight years. Bob has three children, eight grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.

Bob volunteers with the Hospice of Okeechobee, Raulerson Hospital and American Legion, where he is considered dependable, kindhearted and compassionate. He goes beyond the call to provide assistance when needed, and he never asks for compensation in return. His giving heart shines through in all that he does throughout the community.

"When I retired, my wife said 'you're not going to be hanging around 24/7,'" recalled Bob with a laugh. "She said I should try volunteering at the hospital. So, I did that in Broward County. I enjoy helping people, so I did that and have been ever since."

"I lost my wife ten years ago," continued Bob. "She was in hospice care for the last six months of her life. And that's how I started volunteering at Hospice. I've volunteering there ever since."

"I don't do things to be put in the spotlight," said Bob. "I don't look for any return. I do it to help other people. And it actually helps me too."

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- Lead investigator for Softec HD intraocular lens studies and the first to introduce No-Drop Cataract Surgery to our area.
- Completed his ophthalmology residency at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami, consistently ranked as the number one ophthalmology program in the country for over 15 years by US News and World Report.

