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COLLIER CITIZEN

#SWFLstrong: Leaving her mark: Senior mentors, inspires as volunteer at local center

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***Editor's note:** This is the second in the "#SWFLstrong" series, profiling individuals making a positive difference in the community. These articles will be featured on a regular basis in the Collier Citizen, Marco Eagle and The Banner.*

Dorrie Karnis doesn't stay in one place for long. At least when she's volunteering at a Naples senior center. She leaves scuff marks in her wake as she briskly moves throughout the center, welcoming seniors stepping through its doors for a free warm meal on Wednesdays.

Karnis, 86, isn't the only volunteer at the center — a program of the Jewish Family and Community Services of Southwest Florida (JFCS) — but she surely stands out with her loving hugs, genuine smile and the colorful flowers she wears every day on her silver hair that match the color of her outfits.

On a Wednesday in August, she wore blue, and of course, her flowers followed suit.

As seniors settled into their seats for lunch, Karnis walked around, talking to old friends and making new ones. She even gave her friend from First Baptist Church Naples, Julie Harty, 75, a quick shoulder rub.

"I do that for her once a week," Karnis laughed.

Harty enjoyed the massage, closing her eyes at one point, and said, "She's a very loving and caring person...She just makes you feel so welcomed."

After making her rounds, Karnis jumped into the kitchen, slipped her hands into plastic gloves, and started preparing salads with fellow volunteer, and friend, Alan Horowitz, 69,

past two years.

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"She's taught me everything I know," Horowitz added.

The two exchanged playful banter inside the kitchen when Horowitz called Karnis "the colonel."

Karnis explained that she started off as the kitchen's major and worked up to the title of colonel.

"It took me a year to get this one," she said pointing at a silver eagle pin (the insignia of a colonel) attached to her shirt.

But she doesn't run a tight ship.

Quite the opposite.

She works with her comrades to better serve seniors in the community.

Once the salads were prepared, and the buffet-style food trays were uncovered, Karnis stood in line with other seniors, but it wasn't to eat after a long morning's work. Rather, she plopped several plates of food on her hands as if she was a veteran waitress, and took them over to hungry seniors who couldn't get it themselves.

Why does she spend day in and day out volunteering at the center?

"The people," she said. "They're my family. From day one, I've just made friends with everybody," the Golden Gate resident said.

Karnis volunteers seven hours a day, four days a week, give or take.

Besides helping out during the luncheon on Wednesdays, she helps organize art and gardening classes, and the dementia respite program.

She loves staying busy. "At my age, it's the life," she said.

Lifetime of giving

Karnis was born in Holly, Michigan, and worked as an accountant for most of her life. She moved down to Naples in 1970, and worked as a bookkeeper.

Even during her earlier years, she always found solace in helping those in need.

Karnis formed a close relationship with a couple in her neighborhood when she moved
and died, she stepped in to help.

"I used to call her 'momma.' I'd promised her husband I'd watch over her, so after I'd tuck my children in I'd go stay the night at her home. It's something I felt was right," she said.

Karnis has been married three times, and has three children – Susan, Richard and Betsy. After her last husband died, Karnis grew lonely, especially since her children were long grown.

"That's when I decided to volunteer at the senior center," she said. The center opened in 2014. "It was a small little group when I first started. Then it grew and grew."

Karnis never tires of giving back, and doesn't ask for anything in return.

"The hot meal may be the only one (these seniors) get. The friendships they make here may be the only time they get to talk to someone in person," Karnis said. She makes it her mission to hug each and every senior she greets to make them feel welcomed, and at home.

Jaclynn Faffer, JFCS's president and CEO, said many of their nearly 200 volunteers look to Karnis as their mentor.

"Dorrie brings a real compassion, passion, and enthusiasm to everything she does. While she started out doing a few things, she's now here every day, and is the backbone for what we do. She not only establishes the interface among the seniors who are members, but she certainly works closely with our staff and establishes the interface with the staff and the seniors," Faffer said. "She does it with such a positive, happy attitude, and a sense of calmness that is contagious."

When the senior community leaves for the day, and the doors to the center close, Karnis heads home. She opens the door, plops her feet up and smiles, knowing she'll leave plenty of scuff marks at the center in the coming week.

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To nominate an individual for the "#SWFLstrong" series, contact reporter Ashley Collins at 239-213-6029 or ashley.collins@naplesnews.com.

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