

National Volunteer Week - let's celebrate all year long.

By: Corine Burgess

"America's story has been marked by the service of volunteers. Generations of selfless individuals from all walks of life have served each other and our Nation, each person dedicated to making tomorrow better than today. They exemplify the quintessential American idea that we can change things, make things better, and solve problems when we work together.... Today, as many Americans face hardship, we need volunteers more than ever. Service opportunities tap the energy and ingenuity of our greatest resource -- the American people -- to improve our neighborhoods and our world." Barack Obama, President of the United States of America.

On April 7th, our President spoke these words about America's volunteers in a Presidential Proclamation. Over 60 million people volunteered last year and the week of April 10th – 16th was put aside to recognize them and to encourage everyone to serve their communities in some way. National Volunteer Week got its start in 1974 by Executive Order as an annual observance by President Richard Nixon. It has grown by leaps and bounds since that fateful day. Statistics show that more than 23 million people volunteered in 2008 than in 1989. The younger generation's volunteer rate has risen about 60 percent from 1989 to 2008. Baby Boomers are 40 percent more likely to volunteer than the same age groups were in 1989. Working with kids and educational organizations has shown a rise in volunteerism by approximately 75%.

Right here in our beautiful County we have many men and women who give their time and efforts generously without any thought of compensation. In fact, Earth Team volunteers gave out free low flow showerheads at the Agriculture Center on April 21st, 2011 between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to all who brought in their old ones. Our "April Showers" event was to celebrate Earth Day by conserving water and to showcase our volunteers in this worthy project. Weeks before, they got together and packaged the showerheads to include literature for each device. Our Earth Team volunteers include Carol Orth, Eric Maron, Carl and Anna Fette, Ed Cunningham, Gerald and Pat Hibbs, Danny Wilson and Gale Martin. They have provided countless hours of assistance to our organization and no amount of thanks is adequate for their hard work.

These unselfish folks have always been important, but now more than ever we rely on them heavily. With constant budget cuts and less staffing in the workplace, the importance of these people has become more obvious than ever. Earth Team is the voluntary arm of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the federal partners in our office. Our team is invaluable to us. Their purpose is to expand the services that we offer by donating their time, talent and energy to meet the agency's needs. Our community and everyone in it depend on healthy natural resources. Volunteers are a wonderful way to accomplish tasks and goals that would otherwise be difficult because of time and staff restraints.

Each time the Highlands Soil & Water Conservation District (HSWCD) and the Natural Resources Department have planned a project or special event, our volunteers have helped out. They have come up with great ideas to improve many of our events and are always available with their vast knowledge and know-how. They have done everything from man booths at our special events to build home composters for our workshops. They are wonderful and patient with children and many of this county's youth have benefited from their assistance.

In addition to the Earth Team folks, LAKEWATCH is an organization that collects data for the University of Florida IFAS, on our local lakes. This information is vital to the future health of the lakes in this county. The Master Gardeners that work out of the Highlands County Extension office put in countless hours helping citizens with their soil needs, identification of plants and any number of issues that arise on a daily basis. They also man HSWCD Mobile Irrigation Lab. If not for these volunteers, this service would not be offered to our citizens and hundreds of thousands of gallons of water would be wasted. The Supervisors who serve on the HSWCD are elected officials, but they receive no compensation for their efforts. They volunteer their time in an effort to conserve the natural resources of this county.

Since the early days of this great country, volunteerism has been a tradition that has contributed greatly to communities and organizations. Today, times are tough and it is easy to get discouraged. The economy is a mess and money is tight with most folks. But take a moment to look around you and see all the people that strive to make the world a better place. Take a moment to thank these folks when you see them out in the community. My guess is that you can find a volunteer just about any day you venture out. After all, where would our country be without these over 60 million people who don't ask for anything in return?

Let's make sure to celebrate National Volunteer Week every day. Once again, we express our gratitude to our wonderful volunteers! We couldn't do it without you.