



Respect 90® Foundation Volunteer Spotlight

Says Joe Maddon: "The volunteers are the unsung heroes. Without them, none of our efforts occur." Every month, the Respect 90 Foundation will salute a distinguished volunteer from the communities of Tampa Bay, Chicago, Mesa, Arizona or Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Respect 90 will present a \$1,000 grant to that volunteer's charity. Should you have someone who is deserving, please let us know.



Robert Anderson | Volunteers of America of Florida (Bradenton, FL)

When he was 30 years old, Robert Anderson began hearing voices. The frightening paranoid schizophrenia diagnosis that followed was brought on, he says, by sustained alcohol abuse that began during his high school days in Mount Prospect, IL, a northwest suburb of Chicago.

"I thought at first it was a 30-day problem," he admits. "But it doesn't go away. It's not like having a scab on your knee from falling. It's a life-long illness. That woke me up a little bit to the reality of it. No cure."

With a degree in industrial education and technology and a minor in business from Western Illinois University, Robert was working at Lumsden Concrete in Bradenton in 1992 when he was diagnosed.

The job stopped. The long journey began.

Hospitalized numerous times due to his illness, Robert eventually entered Manatee Glens, since renamed Centerstone, a not-for-profit health care organization that provides mental health and substance use disorder treatment, education and support to communities in Florida. He remained enrolled there for more than four years.

"They encouraged me not to look at my disability as something that's overwhelming because it is just a little piece of me at times when I hear my voices," says Robert. "They said 'Don't use this as an excuse.'"

For much of this time, he was able to live at home with his parents who retired and moved from the Midwest to Bradenton while Robert was in college. Upon their passing, his younger brother, Craig, and older sister, Cathy, took him in at various times. "They were good to me," he recalls.

While at Manatee Glens, Robert's case manager introduced him to Volunteers of America of Florida.

It was a perfect match. VOAF is a faith-based, human service organization helping the most vulnerable people and their families to achieve long-term, sustainable and meaningful change.

Since 1896, VOAF has supported and empowered America's most vulnerable groups, including veterans, at-risk youth, the frail elderly, men and women returning from prison, homeless individuals and families, people with disabilities, and those recovering from addictions.

"Robert began his relationship with us as a participant in need of support while he was struggling with his mental illness," says Janet Stringfellow, President/CEO of VOA Florida. "As he will tell you, he learned about his illness and finally felt like he found a place where he was truly meant to be and belonged. And with that experience behind him, he decided to give back to those experiencing similar journeys like him."

After Robert arrived at VOAF in 2011, Ruth Robbins, the thrift store manager at the time, invited him to try volunteering at the store. He's been there ever since, three or four days a week, five hours a day, his first job in 20 years.

Says Stringfellow: "He is an amazing member of our volunteer team. He is kind, positive, helpful, thoughtful and ALWAYS goes the extra mile for the organization and the most vulnerable that we serve. Robert is a role model for all of our other volunteers."

"I love it here. I try do to whatever they ask," he says. "Iron or clean clothes, sort through donations, move furniture, handle delivery and pickups (of donations), clean bathrooms, wash the floor and vacuuming, work at the counter... a kind of jack of all trades.

"I try to be respectful of everyone. Be kind. I like to help people. I respect others. I haven't always been able to do that. It's rewarding," he adds.

Robert, who played football, baseball and basketball at Forest View High School in Illinois, enjoys rooting for the Rays, Lightning and Buccaneers, in addition to the Cubs. You can also catch him fishing off one of Bradenton's piers.

The mental illness, however, is never far. Robert still receives medicine including injections every two weeks, but is quick to add that he hasn't touched alcohol in 18 years. And, although a successful graduate of the VOAF program, he still engages with their case management services to monitor his performance and stability.

- Rick Vaughn | Executive Director, Respect 90 Foundation



For more information on Volunteers of America of Florida, please visit www.voaflorida.org

