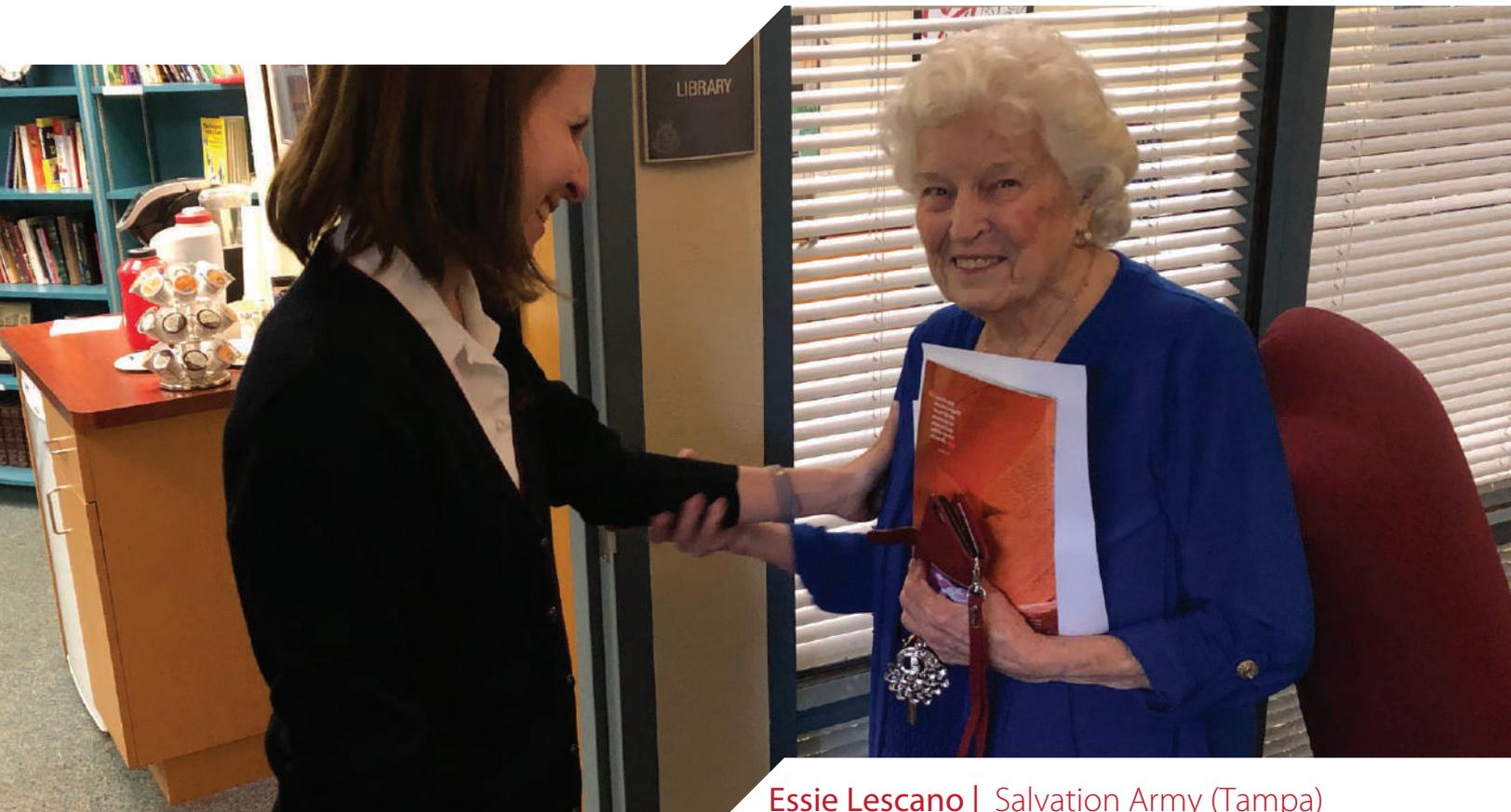




Respect 90® Foundation Volunteer Spotlight

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.



Essie Lescano | Salvation Army (Tampa)

Among Essie Lescano's memories of growing up in Tampa's Ybor City is a World Series game. She and her grandfather standing in a crowd on the sidewalk on Seventh Avenue staring up at the playograph, a big electric scoreboard, temporarily erected just outside the Tampa Tribune building. The board's tiny bulbs lit up as base runners rounded the diamond.

In this community of proud hard working Spanish-Cuban-Italian descendants. There was no television. No World Series tickets.

There was depression.

The year was 1933 and Essie was eight years old, but no stranger to the despair that came with the long days of the Great Depression. Ybor City's cigar industry was not immune. Widespread unemployment and hardship spread across the entire neighborhood cracking the foundation of even the closest of families.

"There was not much on the table," recalls Essie, now 93, "but we never went hungry. A lot of times it was potatoes or cornmeal mush." Her grandfather, employed by President Franklin D Roosevelt's Work Progress Administration, was the family's provider.

One day, an older classmate invited her to visit the local Salvation Army Shelter. There were activities there, the friend said.

Essie may have been too young to understand the role charities like the Salvation Army were playing during the Great Depression, but she soon found out. What she saw there that day changed her life forever.

"I found some very wonderful people who personified love, love that I didn't always have when I was a child," she says wistfully.

It was love in the worst of times.

So impactful was that first encounter, that five years later the 13-year-old Essie returned to the Salvation Army for good. "I felt the call to serve and we learned how to do that," she says. "The Salvation Army had a thrift store and we would go and fold clothes sort them and get things ready for sale. I went to the Hillsborough County Jail and served inmates. They would let the teenagers help when it was time to hand out presents to the needy at Plant Park and I rang the bell at the kettles at Christmas time."

Eight decades later she is still selflessly giving her time leading to a lifetime of uncommon generosity. And during that time, the 25 cents for lunch she received while ringing the bells as a teen was the only money she's ever taken.

"I was so blessed to meet people who were willing to serve and to give of themselves," she says gratefully. "They inspired me at such a young age. I am today what I am because of the people who were willing to give of themselves."

What she is today is nothing short of amazing.

Every Tuesday, the energetic nonagenarian can be found at the Salvation Army's Community Worship Center in West Tampa with her women's support group, a unit she led for more than 30 years.

Essie is also part of a team of men and women who make hospital and assisted living care visits. That group also provides resources and outreach to our local agricultural communities. Their work includes letter writing, phone calls, making crafts and gift baskets for first responders. Somehow, she also leads a weekly bible study and support group for single mothers.

"I'm no artist," she admits, "but I've taught women how to paint. I've taught things like cake decorating, bead making and line dancing. I have learned all kinds of crafts and when I learn a craft, I teach it.

"It's been fun. Those kind of things have made life really worthwhile. Just being able to get someone else to learn something new is really rewarding."

The ageless, bi-lingual wonder has a passion for women and the developmentally disabled. Eventually, she and her husband opened one of the first work programs and independent living homes for individuals with disabilities in the country.

Essie was one of the first people to recognize the struggles of the developmentally disabled and their care givers. She had the foresight to recognize the adversities these individuals would be facing in today's world and planned monthly parties and dances for them.

"Volunteers like Essie are the reason The Salvation Army has been able to perform its critical work in Tampa for the past 125 years, says Captain Andy Miller from the Tampa Salvation Army. "Her lifelong dedication and support will leave a lasting impression on the community for years to come."

Born Esmeralda Leoni in Ybor City in 1925, Essie married Harry Lescano, a West Tampa native, when she was 17. The couple was married 72 years before Harry passed in 2015.

They met when they were 12. While Essie joined the Salvation Army to serve, Harry had dreams of becoming a musician and hoped he could hone his skills while playing in the organization's iconic brass band, a common avenue for many budding entertainers.

After first doing a 23-month tour in the European theatre of World War II, he too, eventually focused on a life of giving and the two began a journey that took he and Essie and their four children on a Salvation Army mission from Tampa to Phoenix to California and many points in between. All the while, they served.

"I was a volunteer, but as long as there was any money and (Salvation Army) bills were paid, we were allowed to draw a small allowance," says Essie. "Some weeks, some months there wasn't much. A lot of our living was by the grace of God and the good people in the community. We've had a lot of community support. We have personally. And I am very grateful for that."

For nearly 40 years, the two were happy spreading God's love and giving hope to those in need.

One of their temporary homes was Vallejo, California, populated by a nearby Naval Station. "Do you know how many Navy men we had at our house for dinner?" she asked with a smile. "Wherever we were, my house always had lots of people."

One son, Lee, has been with California's Salvation Army for nearly 28 years and currently serves as the Divisional Secretary for San Diego County

"It's been a wonderful life," says Essie. "I have so much to be thankful for."

She says her secret to a long life has been simple. "I can be down in the dumps" she says, "but once I get around a group of people, my whole demeanor can change. I think that's where I get my energy. I'm grateful for living for as long as I have. Every day I say 'What can I do to bless somebody?' People have been my greatest reward. And when they respond it makes a difference."

"Everything I do, I do for God," she concludes, "but it's not so much what I have done, but what people have done for me."

– Rick Vaughn | Executive Director, Respect 90 Foundation



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For more information on the Tampa Salvation Army,
go to [SalvationArmyFlorida.org/Tampa/](https://www.SalvationArmyFlorida.org/Tampa/)