



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, FL, Chicago, IL, Mesa, AZ, Southern California or Joe’s hometown of Hazleton, Pennsylvania.

Respect 90 will also present a \$1,000 grant to that volunteer’s charity.



Janet Lewis | Waymakers OC

She has a degree from the University of Michigan and an MBA from Cal-State Long Beach. She’s a survivor of bone cancer that took her entire left leg at the age of 23. She taught special education elementary school students. She’s a 35-year veteran of the aerospace industry.

These days you can find her strumming her ukulele and making animal balloons. And yet, it is this latest chapter of her life could that could be the most rewarding for Janet Lewis.

“Janet is an extraordinary woman and a selfless volunteer,” says Elsa Greenfield, Program Director at Waymakers OC, an organization committed to supporting at-risk individuals throughout Orange County and a place where Janet can often be found. “She genuinely cares about the wellbeing of our youth and uses music and the arts to broaden their horizons.”

Among her many contributions to Waymakers, Janet provides weekly ukulele lessons for kids of all ages at both Waymakers’ Huntington Beach Youth Shelter and at the shelter’s outreach program located in the Huntington Beach neighborhood of Oak View, one of the lowest socio-economic neighborhoods in Orange County.

Waymakers' skill-building programs including Janet's music classes, are all positive alternatives that help prevent youth from running away, joining gangs, using drugs and alcohol and engaging in other at-risk behaviors, all issues facing youth in the neighborhood.

Ok, so why the ukulele, an instrument unknown to many of these youth?

Why not?

The Uke has been called an instant community builder. When he recorded Ukulele Songs in 2011, rocker Eddie Vedder said he hoped the album would encourage listeners to create some music of their own, preferably with friends. A prominent Canadian psychologist opined, "Perhaps the instrument should be re-named a You-Kulele since it helps behaviorally challenged children shift their orientation from 'me' to 'you.'"

And then there's Janet's own reasons, starting with the arthritis in her hands that forced her to switch from the guitar to the uke, an instrument with only four strings making it easier to play for her and her students.

"I love seeing the kid's faces when they realize they can play an instrument," she says. "You can really watch their face light up, when they realize they can play something. Some have never had success in their life. We give them an opportunity for success. Some carry it around with them at the shelter. It's a good coping mechanism. When they get agitated it can calm them down."

In between her uke activities at Waymakers, Janet holds art classes for these at-risk kids, often providing all the art supplies needed. While she has a lengthy syllabus, her favorite activity is balloon animals.

"Many of the kids don't think they can do it, but we have never had a kid who couldn't," she says proudly. "We start them out with making balloon dogs and pretty soon they're making their own things, things I can't make."

In addition to her direct volunteer work with kids, Janet plays a leadership role in the shelter's advisory council. She also helps fundraise and secure donations for the program; and personally donates all ukuleles for the Oak View program, so the children can have the special gift of a musical instrument to call their own.

Says Janet: "They get to get to keep them when they graduate the class. It gives them an opportunity to continue playing." But, she adds, the youngsters must write a letter describing what the uke means to them. "We get some great letters," she says.

A native of Royal Oak, MI, about 10 miles north of Detroit, Janet enrolled at Michigan initially seeking a degree in psychology. During her studies, she took on volunteer work with special needs children which inspired her to change her major; graduating with a Bachelor's of Arts in Special Education. Her first job was teaching special needs elementary school students.

Soon after, she was diagnosed with bone cancer, but continued to teach in the small Michigan town of Fowlerville while undergoing chemotherapy. The cold weather eventually presented her with challenges, so she headed for the warmth and beaches of California.

Once in SoCal, Janet discovered new opportunities in the Aerospace industry working with manufacturing giant McDonnell Douglas. While completing her MBA at Cal State Long Beach, she worked her way up from a typist position to become a Senior Subcontract Program Manager on several projects, including the Space Station Program and the Delta IV Rocket Program at Boeing.

After retirement, it was her ukulele that guided her in the right direction. At a local weekly uke jam session, she learned about the mission at Waymakers from a fellow musician.

"I always wanted to get back to working with young people and pursuing my interests in art and music," Janet says. "Volunteering for Waymakers has allowed me to do both. A young person's education is not complete without the arts."

For the past 4-1/2 years, Janet has also devoted time as an advocate/mentor for a foster child in the Orange County Court System. Somehow, she also finds time, when she's not reading, painting or gardening, to serve as an adult English tutor through the local library.

But it is at the OC Rescue Mission where she can be often most found.

"I've been involved in music for as long as I can remember, starting with singing with my mom and sister while I stood on a stool to help wash dishes," she recalls. "I am thankful for the opportunities I have had. It's time for me to give back."

– Rick Vaughn | Executive Director, Respect 90 Foundation



For more information go to waymakersoc.org