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Greater Naples Leadership

'Done in a Day'



Greater Naples Leadership volunteers Vi Steffan, left, and Myra Williams, both of Naples, laugh Thursday while painting the outside walls at St. Matthew's House in Naples.

■ Volunteers from Greater Naples Leadership are setting an example in Collier



Greater Naples Leadership volunteer Ron Ferguson, of Naples, paints a wall Thursday at St. Matthew's House.

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See more photos and video of "GNL Done in a Day."

They call themselves GNL'ers. They are hundreds strong in Collier County, but their group — Greater Naples Leadership — is little-known to outsiders.

The group is not to be confused with Leadership Collier, a program affiliated with the Greater Naples Chamber that's for young professionals and designed to develop future community leaders.

Greater Naples Leadership, or GNL, educates local retirees, many of them from other areas, about the issues in Collier County and connects them with nonprofits and volunteer opportunities. Every year, a new class graduates from the program, which includes 13 weeks of

classes. Most of the organization's members are in their 50s, 60s and 70s.

"GNL is kind of one of Naples' best-kept secrets. You know, we don't advertise. We don't do fundraising, so a lot of people don't know we exist," said Sheila Harris-Schutz, a graduate and a past president of the group.

GNL promises its members firsthand learning experiences, rewarding relationships with accomplished, like-minded people and access to meaningful board and volunteer roles. With more than

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700 graduates and 500 active members, the organization is celebrating its 20th year in operation starting this month by doing 20 projects for local nonprofits in 10 days.

The "Done in a Day" projects started Monday and will continue through Thursday. On some days, the group will do more than one project to reach its lofty goal.

On Thursday, nearly a dozen GNL graduates met at St. Matthew's House, a homeless shelter off Airport-Pulling Road, ready to paint. The bright orange buckets that surrounded them with Home Depot's "Let's Do This" slogan on them, fit their go get 'em mood.

With smiles, laughs and a few mishaps, the small group of retirees brightened outdoor walls, pillars, gates and fencing with a fresh coat of white paint. Harris-Schutz, 67, who lives in North Naples, took charge when she noticed one wall didn't get enough paint on it, pointing it out to another volunteer.

"When it comes to painting I'm a perfectionist," she readily admitted.

Joan Sehdev, a graduate of GNL's 12th class, didn't disagree. She offered to help out, brushing another coat of paint on the bottom half of the wall. "OK, Mrs. Quality Control, is that OK?" she asked Harris-Schutz, who gave her a nod of approval and a thank you.

Standing back and surveying her own work a few minutes later, Sehdev looked pleased. "Not bad for old ladies," she quipped.

As she continued painting, Sehdev bent all the way down to the ground with her brush with ease, but said she knew she'd feel it later. "I'm 75. Tomorrow, I'll feel 80," she said.

After retiring as a family practice doctor up north and relocating to North Naples, Sehdev said she was looking for a way to give back to her new community. "I didn't want to practice medicine again, been there, done that," she said.

She learned about GNL from a neighbor. So did Ron Ferguson, who built up a sweat painting walls and pillars alongside her and others, including his wife.

When his wife offered him a cup of lemonade, Ferguson, a graduate of GNL's 19th class, gladly took it, but then winced when he took a gulp and realized the pitcher she poured it from must have had something else in it, bleach or maybe turpentine. His wife



Greater Naples Leadership volunteers Joan Sehdev, left, and Myra Williams, both of Naples, paint a gate Thursday at St. Matthew's House in Naples.

had no idea. He dumped his cup and rushed to get some water.

Before his mishap, Ferguson, 70, a former transplant surgeon from Ohio who now lives in North Naples, described the Greater Naples Leadership program as both spectacular and intense.

Each year, GNL accepts a class of 36 to 46 men and women, offering them sessions on history, culture, health care, education, the environment, economic development, human services, government and law enforcement, as well as introducing them to volunteer opportunities. Sessions include presentations, panel discussions, site visits and field trips planned by members of the class that graduated before them.

"It really, really does open up not only opportunities, but provides a lot of information that you might not otherwise get," Ferguson said.

Vi Stefan, who introduced Ferguson to GNL, agreed. She was in the 13th class, the same class as Harris-Schutz.

"I like the fact that it gave us a perspective of the entire county in so

many areas, environment, health care, the arts, so you really understood how the parts worked together," said Stefan, 71, taking a break from painting.

She worked for the CIA for 15 years and relocated here from Virginia to retire.

"I love Naples," she said. I would not go back to Virginia."

Despite a few mishaps, including spilled paint on the sidewalk, the improvement project at St. Matthew's House was a big success — and may not have gotten done without the help of GNL volunteers.

Vann Ellison, president and CEO of St. Matthew's House, said volunteers are key to his organization's success. By having volunteers do the painting, he said, his staff can focus on the more critical work.

"Things don't get done until someone stands up and says, 'I'm willing to make a difference,'" Ellison said. "That is how not-for-profits work."

Half of the board directors for the shelter have been graduates of Greater Naples Leadership program, so there's a much bigger connection between them.

"They are a great strong group," Ellison said. "There is a real sense of camaraderie among them. I really do believe they are some of our best and most committed board directors. They are people that care and really want to make a difference."

Other local charities GNL members will help over the next week are Youth Haven and Habitat for Humanity.

Greater Naples Leadership evolved from a Leadership Collier Masters program that the Naples chamber started in 1996 and ran for two years. When the chamber decided to no longer support the program, members of the third class, who had already been chosen, founded Greater Naples Leadership in 1999 and became its first board of directors. After all these years, some of those founding members are still involved in GNL.

Currently, tuition is \$1,700 for the leadership class, and financial assistance is available. GNL is now accepting applications for the 2016-17 class.

More information can be found at gnlweb site.org/masters-program.