

The Ave Maria Social Committee: Making friends through volunteering

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Ave Maria Sun Correspondent

The next time you're enjoying a neighborhood function in town, whether it's the Winter Festival or the annual Easter event, think of the volunteer residents who help make these activities a reality: your neighbors, getting together and doing the rewarding work needed to improve quality of life in Ave Maria.

Appointed by the Ave Maria Master Association (AMMA) board of directors, the Social Committee is a group of nine volunteers that helps to create, execute and manage these fun activities and celebrations.

"We serve as the voice of the community," says Debbie Fornwall, committee chair and volunteer coordinator. "Committee members have to enjoy talking to their neighbors and friends," she adds, "because we get all of our information as to what the community wants or how they liked an event by speaking to the residents."

The Social Committee oversees four subcommittees, all of which are open to anyone who wants to get involved. Currently, 28 volunteers serve in the Health and Education, Adult and Family Fun, Youth and Teen, and Marketing and Research subcommittees. These are the people who gather ideas from the community, brainstorm together to devise a strategic plan, and collaborate with AMMA staff and area developers to bring entertainment and enrichment to the people who call Ave Maria home. The Adult and Family Fun group is the most active, holding meetings every other Friday.

You might have seen or even talked to one of these volunteers during an event as they walked around with clipboards surveying attendees.

"We ask questions like, 'Would you suggest this event to a friend or family member? Can you score the event on a scale of 1 to 10. What did you like most about this event? What type of improvements would you like to see?'"

"And then we analyze the responses to see how each event rates against other events or against the same event the year before," Ms. Fornwall says. "That's how we determine what to do in the future to make sure people are happy."

Prompted by residents' suggestions, the Social Committee played an integral role in building a disc golf course in North Park. As establishments are opening up post-pandemic, volunteers are busy planning off-site group excursions. Among the ideas being tossed around are brewery and winery tours and a visit to the Kowiachobee Animal Preserve in Naples.

"We like our residents to stay active, and we want them to have fun, so if there's anything we can do to help them have that fun, then we're going to do it," Ms. Fornwall says.

For larger events, volunteers are sometimes needed to set things up a few days in advance, but most of the hands-on work is done the day-of. They show up early to help with setup; stick around to direct parking, man the entrances and run the games; and stay afterward to tear it all down. If there are enough volunteers, Ms. Fornwall spreads the work around so that everyone has plenty of free time to enjoy the event, as well.

"Things run more smoothly if you've got a



COURTESY PHOTO

SEATED: Donald Gunthner; Debbie Fornwall, Social Committee chair and volunteer coordinator; and Rhonda Hatten. STANDING: Dolly Gunthner; Tom DiFlorio, vice chair; Lacey Lambotte, youth/teen lead; Cindy Schang, health/education lead; and Leah Armstrong.

lot of hands," she says. "One person can't do it alone."

"We're always looking for volunteers who are open to sharing their ideas and skills. For example, if you're an artist and love working with children, we'd be thrilled to bring you in to offer a craft project for the little ones." During the Fall Festival, she adds, a group of volunteers planned a chili cook-off and executed it from beginning to end.

Newly-appointed Social Committee member and avid volunteer Dolly Gunthner stresses

the need for new volunteers.

"Ave Maria is growing so much, and we need the volunteer effort to grow, too," says Ms. Gunthner, who along with her husband, Don, can be counted on to do whatever is necessary. "If I can physically do it, I do it. Retired life is nice, but after working full-time for 40 years, we don't like to sit home too much."

"We look forward to going out with people and helping. It gives me a sense of purpose and makes me feel like a better person."

All Ave Maria residents are invited to participate in one of the subcommittees.

"It's fun. It's rewarding, and it's a great way to meet people and make a change in your community," Ms. Fornwall says. "Whether it's for an hour, a day or a commitment of a year — it's up to you how much you want to do."

She adds her favorite part of being involved in the committee is the camaraderie — "that closeness and trust that you earn from the others

you are working alongside of. You start out not knowing somebody and before you know it, after you work a few events together, you've got this close feeling with them."

As for her role as Social Committee chair and volunteer coordinator, Ms. Fornwall finds her reward when survey respondents write: "Amazing event, loved this, loved that."

To learn more about the Social Committee and how to get involved, send an email to AveSocialCommittee@gmail.com. 🌟

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