

Giving back: Volunteer Expo pairs helpers with organizations that need them

Lance Shearer, Correspondent 5:07 p.m. EST November 9, 2016



(Photo: Lance Shearer/Correspondent)

It's kind of like speed dating for nonprofits.

Collier County has dozens of charitable groups that do good work in the community, and need volunteer help to get their missions accomplished. Hundreds or thousands of local residents, many of them retired, are looking for a place where they can devote some time and make a difference.

So on Wednesday, Nov. 2, the Leadership Collier Foundation Alumni Association Matching Needs Committee attempted to bring together the two groups, would-be volunteers and the organizations who covet them, together in one place. The second annual Volunteer Expo at the Hilton Naples allowed interested good Samaritans to quickly interact with a variety of groups they might be interested in helping out, and offered the possibility they could discover a fit with an organization they never knew existed.

There were more interested groups than there were spaces available for them to set up their tables and displays, even with the event spilling out of the hotel's ballroom into the corridor outside. Some nonprofits, such as Audobon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, who heard too late about the event, were not able to participate.

But if some organizations weren't there to participate, that was also true of a lot of the prospective volunteers the organizations who were on hand wanted to talk with. Nonprofit representatives working the expo said that attendance was well down from the turnout at last year's inaugural event. Some of the exhibitors were reduced to making the rounds of their neighbors' booths, in many cases people they knew, and talking about their respective challenges and opportunities.

But members of the public who did show up were guaranteed to have the attention of the volunteer coordinators and program managers from the nonprofits, who emphasized the special opportunities working with their organization would offer. When it comes to unique volunteer opportunities, it's hard to beat the Naples Zoo.

Volunteer program manager Jessica Deering talked to visitors about how people can help at the zoo.



Jessica Deering and Scott Woodcock of the Naples Zoo explain the unique opportunities the zoo provides for volunteers. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Correspondent)

"There's lots to do. Volunteers help with informal education, work behind the scenes in guest services, help in the gift shop, and even help make up food for the animals," she said. At their recent Halloween promotion, she said, they utilized 250 volunteer helpers. "And hey, we've got a boat cruise," on a lake dotted with islands housing a variety of monkeys.

The Naples Historical Society, said executive assistant Geraldine Pessolano, has its own crown jewel. "Historic Palm Cottage (they have trademarked the phrase) is a fun place to work. We get visitors from all over the world." Volunteers can help out as docents, particularly if they are bilingual, or clerical and archiving work.

To really get out into the wild, potential helpers could consider working with the Big Cypress National Preserve, administered by the National Park Service, said Jay Kissell, environmental education and outreach ranger.

"Volunteers work in the visitors' center, in environmental ed., as a dispatcher, or they can go out in the field as researchers with our biologists," he said. "We're doing a study right now on the Florida bonneted bat, an endangered species," as well as tracking another endangered species, the Florida panther. Big Cypress has their annual Swamp Heritage Festival coming up on Dec. 3, he said, and volunteers are needed for that.

Avow Hospice's volunteer manager Berta Garcia said work at Avow could include both patient care for their seriously or terminally ill patients, companionship visits and respite care for caregivers, and programs such as their Paws Pet Program that lets the patient experience doggie therapy and the Serenity Singers, an a cappella vocal group.



Nikki McTernan of the ACS, left, speaks with Emiy Budd from FGCU. The Volunteer Expo at the Naples Hilton on Nov. 2 brought together people looking to donate their time with over 60 organizations who could use their help. (Photo: Lance Shearer/Correspondent)

Additional groups represented included Jewish Family Community Services; the Naples Holocaust Museum; Naples Equestrian Challenge, that puts special needs children on gentle riding horses; the American Cancer Society and their Relay for Life; the Blue Zones Program promoting longer, healthier lives; the Marco Island Center for the Arts; St. Matthews House, devoted to feeding and sheltering the homeless, Literacy Volunteers of Collier County; the Golisano Children's Museum; the Shy Wolf Sanctuary, housing wild or unwanted animals; the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County; the Stroke Recovery Foundation and many more.

Whatever interests a visitor had, there was likely an organization that could mesh with those interests and put their talents to work. If a visitor didn't have time for a discussion, or wanted to get "just the facts," each nonprofit filled out a one-page form laying out the types of jobs available, the hours sought, whether there was an opportunity for high school youth needing to amass volunteer hours, and contact information for the group.

For those who missed the Volunteer Expo, but are interested in volunteer opportunities, United Way of Collier County maintains an online matching service at www.unitedwayofcolliercounty.org/volunteer (<http://www.unitedwayofcolliercounty.org/volunteer>).