



# THE BRIDGE

*Bridging Generations with Ageless Friendship*

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WINTER 2024

Friends Across the Ages  
Nursing Home Volunteer Network

## 25 Years of Friends Across the Ages!

This January, Friends Across the Ages turns 25! As we celebrate our silver jubilee, we are taking the opportunity to look back across the ages of this endeavor, and to look forward as well.

The story began in the fall of 1998, when Steve first began volunteering at what was then called Alachua Nursing Center (now Parklands Care Center). Allison joined him shortly after, and two things quickly became apparent: there was a lot of loneliness at the nursing home, but also a lot of laughter and stories to be shared. We needed more volunteers! Recruitment efforts began with friends from church, but quickly expanded into the community. Friends Across the Ages was born.



A few years later, an article appeared in the Gainesville Sun about our efforts, and this prompted Ruth Hazen (see right with baby Peter) to reach out to us. She was with the Nursing Home Volunteer Auxiliary (NHVA) at the Gainesville Woman's Club. The NHVA was a well established charity founded in 1983, and had a similar mission. Ruth had the vision to combine our efforts. The two organizations merged in May 2002 under the name Friends Across the Ages.

As the organization expanded, what remained at the core was our friendships with residents at the nursing home, some of whom became like family: Annie Mae (see right)—for whom Steve and Allison's daughter is named; Sally, who with her red tambourine always made a joyful noise; Hugh, who taught Steve how to catch a rattlesnake with a shoelace; Jethro (see right), who always gave the quarters he won playing BINGO to preschooler Peter; Annias, who helped connect us with Old Florida and his days working in the tung oil business; Lizzie, who loved Louis L'Amour; "Granny" who was always going to North Carolina in the morning; and Nathaniel, who had lived a hard life but was always himself.



The list goes on and on—so many special people whom we have had the privilege to walk with, whose pictures we still cherish, and who continue to live on in our hearts. (Read our book for stories about these friends—see back for information on how to get it!)



Along with the residents, many volunteers stand out from the past 25 years, without whom we would not still be here. We have already mentioned Ruth Hazen. There is Dianne Walsh (see far left) who, along with her friend Gretchen Grigsby (also left), led our group at Palm Garden for a time, and went on to put together our newsletter for us for many years. George Hamilton,

our current president (see inside for his message) is our longest running board member, having been there for that very first board meeting in 2002 after we merged with the NHVA. Vi Asmuth (see right) is another person who has been with us for a long time. Now in her 90's, she occasionally helps us run a poetry program she designed for residents called Reaction Reading. We've been blessed by volunteers and board members who have encouraged us and walked the walk.





It is not overstating it to say *Friends* would no longer exist without the long time participation of Kim and Andrew Mitchell (left), who first joined the organization in 2008 and Heather Geidel Benton, who first joined us as a student in 2006. Past board presidents Cassie Cooper, Jean Lansford, and Jon Shinn come to mind as well. So many volunteers who have given of themselves... too many others to be named... you know who you are!

Then there's the staff who have made such a difference on the front lines. The top of that list is Allen Alexander (below), Activity Director at Parklands for the



past 13 years. He has become like family to us, and we are so inspired by his example of selfless service.

Family is a word we have used a lot in this reflection—and speaking of families, that has been another big part of the story of Friends Across the Ages: growing families, and how the next generation has been incorporated. When Peter was born (and around the same time, Jonah Shinn, oldest child of Jon and Keri Shinn), we wondered how we could continue with babies to care for? But at Peter's first board meeting, Ruth Hazen took him in her arms, and babies have been welcome ever since. Sometimes it is a challenge to figure out how to manage, and sometimes some of us have had to take a step back. But whenever we are able to bring children to the nursing home, the residents' faces light up like no other time—and it makes a lasting impact on the kids. (Peter wrote a couple of his college application essays about this.)



A more recent challenge for the organization was the COVID-19 Pandemic. On March 13, 2020, all of the facilities we visit closed to visitors and remained so for many months. We had to come up with creative ways to bridge the distance, including dropping off gifts and letters, and window serenades. Once we were finally allowed back in, we realized we could never take this for granted again.

Which brings us to the present moment, as well as the future. The organization is much smaller than it was before the pandemic. We do not know what the future holds. But we know magic still happens at the nursing home, such as with our monthly birthday celebrations (see article on right), or when we get to do things like go to parades with residents (see picture on left) or join them for events like "Jazz on the Green" (both pictures below).

We know volunteers are more needed than ever, as the residents recover from the trauma of the isolation imposed by the pandemic. We know that our friends at the nursing home have more to teach us than ever as well.



So we continue on, and hope to do so for years to come. We need the help of the next generation of friends and supporters willing to join us in our mission of "bridging generations with ageless friendship."





## President's Message

George Hamilton

We are blessed to share another holiday season together. It has been our pleasure to spend time and friendship with all of you--Nursing Home residents, staff, volunteers and supporters. I personally have worked as a Nursing Home Administrator since 1983 and especially in Gainesville since 1986. Early in my time here I was approached by the Nursing Home Volunteer Auxiliary about being a member of their group. Over time through Ruth Hazen and Steve and Allison Blay that evolved into the current Friends Across the Ages (another longer story).

Through those many years, the holiday season has always held a very special time and great opportunity for all involved to spend uplifting time in friendship through music, parties, visits and gift giving. For some, it is a challenging time of remembering past loved ones and being in new homes away from homes. Friends Across the Ages seeks to be a bridge, especially during the holiday season, between all of you. We are a community of folks who love each other where we are in life, sometimes generations apart, but always close in spirit.

May you all have a jolly season this year. And thank you all for your heartfelt friendship and involvement in Friends Across the Ages.



## Friends Across the WORLD

Some of you may remember volunteer Darragh Kelly, an exchange student from Ireland who volunteered with us while attending UF. The Blay family made a trip to Ireland this summer, and guess who they stayed with? In a tremendous display of international hospitality, the Kelly family opened their home to the Blay's, even picked them up from the airport, and served as their tour guide to the beautiful city of Dublin.

Darragh stays in touch with his nursing home friend Irene via WhatsApp.



## Birthday Magic



In March of this past year, we lost Florence Van Arnam (right), our longest running volunteer. Florence began volunteering at what is now Parklands in the 1970's—first as a helper with an adopt-a-grandparent program with her daughter's class, and eventually running a monthly birthday celebration. She was a member of the NHVA group that merged with us in 2002 (see main article). For these birthday celebrations, she would recruit entertainment and other volunteers to help, and she brought flowers from her own garden for all of the residents who had birthdays that month. She continued right up until March of 2020, when she dropped off one last batch of flowers after the pandemic began, and at the age of 92 finally decided to retire.

Since then, we have striven to carry her legacy forward. The birthday celebrations have evolved into a "Birthday Bunch" that roves the halls, finding all the residents who have birthdays that month. We sing "Happy Birthday" and then another song of their choice. Volunteers Robbie Curry, John Hobbs, and Christina Grannie have all been faithful participants.

These events offer us the opportunity to meet new residents, and somehow, magic always seems to happen. A recent example was when we sang "I'll Fly Away" to a group of ladies (below), and someone had the idea to pretend to fly during the chorus. Christina is a dancer, and made the most graceful flying motions, but the rest of us had a lot of fun with it, too. Then one resident named Bernice asked for the tambourine, and we sang it again. By the end, she was in tears, remarking, "My mama always played the tambourine at church. Seems like she's with me right now."



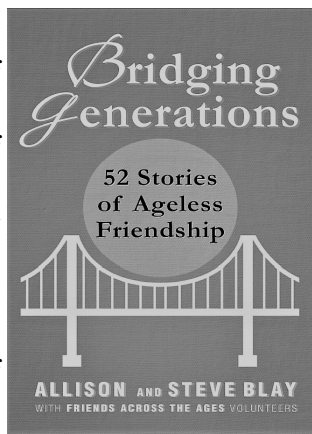
## Bridging Generations

Did you know that the Friends Across the Ages book, *Bridging Generations*, is a New York Times bestseller? Well, actually that is not true at all...but what IS true is that you will enjoy reading it and someday soon it will be a bestseller in your heart.

*Bridging Generations: 52 Stories of Ageless Friendship* contains transformative tales of companionship between nursing home residents and volunteers. You can get it on Amazon (and all other online booksellers) for \$12.99 for the print book, or \$9.99 for the e-book. For a link, visit:

**FriendsAcrossTheAges.org/book.**

It makes a great holiday gift! If you would like a bulk order of copies for your family or organization, just let us know and we can do that for about half price.



WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK AND RECOGNIZE  
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## Holiday Celebrations

We have lots of joyful events this month, and you are welcome to join us! Please RSVP to [info@acrosstheages.org](mailto:info@acrosstheages.org).

- Friday Dec 8th at 10am—**Caroling at Parklands Care Center:** We will walk the halls in Santa hats, giving out ornaments and stuffed animals, and singing carols
- Sunday Dec 10th at 2:30PM at The Plaza Health and Rehab: **Friends Across the Ages Holiday party!** Holiday treats, caroling, and holiday arts n' crafts
- Sunday Dec 17th at 3:30PM at Magnolia Ridge Rehabilitation Center — **Holiday Flute Concert and Sing— Along**
- Wednesday, Dec 20th at 6pm—**Holiday party at Parklands Care Center:** Featuring Peter's jazz band In Full Swing!



For more information about  
*Friends Across the Ages*, please visit  
our website:

**FriendsAcrossTheAges.org**

or contact us at:

**info@acrosstheages.org**

### Board of Directors

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