

Service with a capital 'S'

May honoree scores high with her colleagues

By Cheryl Walker
The News

Shirley O'Connor has dealt with elephants, clowns and circus freaks. Her forte is communications, a skill she mastered after nearly 40 years in the public relations business.

Before moving to Leisure World and getting involved in local governance, she handled accounts as diverse as the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to the Magic Castle, Universal Studios Tour and Amphitheatre and the West Coast premieres of Broadway hits.

The local activities, which are many, is why the Leisure World Historical Society selected O'Connor its Leisure Worlder of the Month for May.

Not content to sit on her pre-retirement laurels, O'Connor has more than a decade of post-retirement volunteering on more than a dozen Golden Rain and United Mutual committees and numerous Leisure World community groups. To her, Service is always spelled with a capital "S."

The Ohio-born former president of the Hollywood-based public relations firm, The Carrolls Agency, volunteer at the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) and past president of Saddleback College Performing Arts Angels support group, lives by the credo "you have to give back to the community you work and live in."

"It's a wonderful feeling to open up a door for someone, to help people help themselves," explains O'Connor.

Chuck Perry, SCORE associate secretary, says O'Connor's counseling was always invaluable to clients starting up, enlarging or improving small businesses.

"Whether she worked with individuals or with groups through her seminars, talks and workshops, she made meaningful contributions."

O'Connor says she feels the more you give, the more you get back. "You learn from every experience. A lot of life depends on how you look at things: out of



Don Leach/The News

Leisure Worlder for May Shirley O'Connor, poses next to her favorite poster from her days as a public relations professional for such popular plays as The Rocky Horror Show. The poster is signed by all the members of the cast.

every experience you can get something positive."

The 75-year-old redhead says giving of one's self and staying involved is particularly important for senior citizens. "Brains are like computers, you either use them or lose them."

O'Connor says although she only plans to stay active in the Leisure World Historical Society when her term on the Golden Rain board expires next week, retirement from Leisure World governance will not spell inaction.

On the agenda are spending more time with her two grandchildren, traveling and helping increase the awareness

LW'er of the month

Honoree: Shirley O'Connor
Where: Clubhouse 6
When: Wednesday, May 5, 10 a.m.
Sponsor: Leisure World Historical Society

HONOREE

From page 1

and treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) through the University of California, Irvine's Child Development Center.

The latter, a tall order since the center's support group is in its infancy, doesn't faze the charismatic lady with the ready smile who believes "you can do anything you set your mind to."

Says CDC Deputy Director Tim Wagal of his colleague, "Shirley has more ideas in one meeting than most people have in a year's worth of meetings. Her enthusiasm is contagious."

She credits her late husband Norman O'Connor, known in the nation's elite Big Top circles as the "World's Greatest Outdoor Show Announcer," with teaching her the value-and necessity-of enthusiasm to making a project successful.

"And my circus background was fantastic: a lot of hard work and the pressure of knowing you only had one chance to do your job right, that kind of training was invaluable," says O'Connor.

Circus people taught her tolerance too. Although brought up in a household where prejudice was unknown, becoming a member of the circus family deepened her abhorrence of bigotry in any form as she worked and socialized with people whose physical abnormalities qualified them as

exhibits in the side shows.

"That experience taught me not to look just at the outside of the package ... or you're going to miss something."

Gemma Heffernan, social services director, says O'Connor's special sensitivity was invaluable in her term as Golden Rain Health and Social Services Committee chairman.

"Shirley was a staunch advocate for those in the community who, because of frailty, could not be present to speak for themselves.

Heffernan said that O'Connor had a knack for handling "adroitly the often aggressive and at times hostile comments" from critics.

"Good manners will get you everywhere," is a tenet O'Connor preaches as well as practices.

Leisure World resident Doyle Selden who worked with O'Connor on the Golden Rain board and government & public relations and TV services committee, also praises O'Connor's singular talents.

"She is excellent at communication, both written and oral, can see through details and get to the important essence of an issue and is sincerely interested in the best interests of the residents of Leisure World."

O'Connor says it's always been important to her to have a relationship to values-in a career

and in life to be a success is when others have confidence in your judgment and professionalism. Not to mention always attacking a task like your reputation depended on it.

"All the top professionals are humble about their work. One of my most outstanding experiences was working with (actor) Henry Fonda when he was doing "The Oldest Living Graduate."

"He was a joy to work with, but very humble about his own talent: always worried he wouldn't get another job!"