

Sniffy's Mom gets Society's nod for September



JANINE SWIATKOWSKI/The News

Selected the Leisure Worlorder of the Month, Muriel Simon relaxes at home with her famous dog Sniffy. Simon is active in the Newcomers, London and Canine clubs.

By Cheryl Walker
The News

Sniffy the basset hound has made headlines over the last two years, running away from home for days on end while his frantic owners watched and waited for his rescue and return.

Now, Sniffy will have to yield the front page to someone new as the Leisure World Historical Society turns its spotlight on his mom, Muriel Simons, as Leisure Worlorder of the Month.

Unlike Sniffy, Simons has no intention of leaving Leisure World.

In fact, since she moved to Leisure World in 1991, she's made it her job to make new residents feel welcome in the community she calls "the senior's happiest place on earth" as the founder, president and guiding light of The Newcomers Club.

Simon explains that although the community had similar clubs before she came, none of them lasted.

And, she discovered when she tried to get involved in several other clubs when she first arrived, new residents weren't exactly welcomed in established organizations with open arms.

"I don't play bridge or golf-but I wanted to make friends, I love people," says Simon.

When she decided she wanted to start her own social club for new residents to the community and let the word out the response was overwhelming.

"I had always dreamed of someday finding a place like Leisure World and here it is. And I want other people to feel as good about living here as I do. In fact, I'd like to be known as the Ambassador of Leisure World."

Muriel Simon

She quickly gathered more than the required number of signatures on a petition to officially start such an organization and, within three months, membership had ballooned to more than 300 persons.

Although the club originally restricted membership to persons who lived in the community less than a year, that is no longer a factor. There are members like Simon, for example, who have been with the group since it's start.

"Men and women, singles and couples, everyone's welcome," says

Simon.

"Our meetings are always friendly-we make people feel very warm and special, like parts of an extended family," says Simon who points out that the monthly, informal gatherings are simple but fun: some entertainment, occasional games, good food and lots of fine conversation.

What makes the Newcomers so special? Members agree Simon is a major part of it.

Elaine Morgado, who's lived in Leisure World four months, says the club "makes you feel connected with the community.

"I didn't feel like this was home until I met Muriel; she has this way about her, she wants everyone to feel a part of something."

Veteran member Chris Woolner adds Simon is "a great gal, very dedicated-she just loves and cares about everybody."

Charter member Lucille Tow agrees. "She's a dynamo, a fighter with such energy, devotion and love for what she does. That's probably why she was such a success in the business world.

Background: Simon, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., earned her bachelor's degree in fine arts from New York University and, although she originally aspired to a career in theater, traded the stage for a spouse, children and a top public relations position with Corning Glass.

But, says Simon, there was always a part of herself that wanted to do something for others, whether it was life-guarding on the beach (an occupation that got her and other similarly employed young ladies a feature in a 1940's Life magazine), camp counseling or making sure inner city kids enjoyed a few weeks in the country away from the mean streets of Manhattan.

Although there was little opportunity for it while she worked and raised her family, afterwards Simon made up for lost time and became a fairy godmother to abused and neglected children wherever her husband was transferred.

For example, at the Orange-wood Center, she worked with County Social Services and gathered volunteers to take youngsters on outings, in San Jose (Northern California) she started Operation Satellite Santa to ensure each child got a Christmas gift.

"I came from a wonderful background and a good home and I wanted to give these children some of that-I felt it was a contribution I had to make," says Simon.

"Some people say I look at everyone's problems as mine, but I love helping where help is needed and I especially love working with these kids and doing something to make their lives a little better."

Simon has also taken docent training and volunteered her time at Western Medical, but health problems have prevented her continuing with such programs now.

Even so, she has more than