

LAGUNA WOODS

GLOBE

HONOREE OF THE MONTH

HISTORICAL SOCIETY SELECTS
SHEILA BIALKA AS MAY
HONOREE OF THE MONTH PAGE 3



The Laguna Woods Historical Society's May honoree is actress and director Sheila Bialka. > MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Theater director named Honoree of the Month

BY CLAIRE WEBB
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

It's not a stretch to see Sheila Bialka in a directing role. She not only started a theater movement in Laguna Woods Village six years ago, but she also was a ballroom dance instructor for more than three decades.

"I'm just good at telling people what to do, and for some reason they do it," said Bialka, who has been selected May Honoree of the Month by the Historical Society of Laguna Woods.

Bialka, 75, is not only the founder of The Old Pros club, a group of retired actors, musicians, dancers and directors that puts on at least two theater performances a year in Laguna Woods Village featuring residents from the community, but she also directs and acts in many of the productions.

She got her start in theatrics when she began tap dancing at the age of 5 in Birmingham, England. At 11, she earned an apprentice spot at the Birmingham Repertory. Bialka said she learned her chops at acting in two to three plays a week and making tea for the cast.

"I was a good tea maker," she said laughing.

Despite growing up in the land of William Shakespeare, Bialka said the theatrical poet is not her favorite to perform.

"Whatever I'm doing is my favorite at the time," she said.

Although she still kept her sights on acting, Bialka began ballroom dancing



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in competitions with her brother, Tommy, at the age of 14 – a move that would later become a career.

In 1951, she began working as a switchboard operator for the Air Force in England before she moved to Hartford, Conn. and started getting jobs teaching residents ballroom dancing in basements. Bialka then found an opportunity teaching dance lessons for patients at the Institute of the Living, one of the first mental health centers in the country.

She would teach ballroom, Latin American, rock and roll and many other genres of dancing to roughly 400 pa-

tients at the hospital for the next 30 years.

She said dancing forced mentally ill patients to socialize, something many of them avoided, and helped them gain a sense of confidence.

"It's one of the best social graces you can have," Bialka said.

After teaching for roughly three years at the institute, Bialka talked the staff and physicians into allowing her to put on a production of Cinderella with the patients. She suspects she got favorable treatment from the chief psychiatrist at the time—a fellow Englishman.

Bialka said she encouraged the pa-

tients to follow through with the production because their fellow actors were depending on them.

"It was the only thing they were ever asked to do as a group," she said.

By the time she left the institute, Bialka estimates she put on 120 musicals, plays and performances with patients like "Oklahoma" and "Bye Bye Birdie."

She continued acting and directing upon retiring, when she started The Old Pros Club in 1994. Bialka belonged to a group of actors from the Theatre Guild, but she thought it unfair the club did not allow people outside the community, such as actors from other theater groups, to participate in the performances. Bialka thought the residents of Laguna Woods deserved a theater experience, even if it came from non-residents, and so The Old Pros was born.

Bialka just finished directing "The Gin Game" production at Clubhouse 3 in March, a Broadway play and tragic comedy about a couple who try and find comfort in their relationship by playing gin.

"The table was beat to Jesus by the time we got through," Bialka said.

She said the next project she would like to work on would be a take on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" as summer approaches, and give residents an outdoor theater experience.

Bialka will be honored at a ceremony at Clubhouse 6 on May 5.