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Supporting literacy Group welcomes service-minded professionals

**BY ANN SPERRING
SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER**

OCALA - In 1977, 29 local business and professional women gathered to form the first Altrusa Club in the city. Spearheaded by Sarah Arnette, a few of the women had networked with the Gainesville Altrusa Club. According to charter member Frances Ferguson, they believed Ocala could support a club and had contacted the other initial members.

"At that time, our club, which is part of Altrusa International, was a classified service organization. Membership was for women, only a certain percentage of any one occupation could be represented and membership was by invitation only. My boss was familiar with Altrusa and said it was an honor to be invited to join. I am so glad I did," Ferguson said.

FOCUS ON LITERACY

Locally and internationally, one of Altrusa's primary service projects is the promotion of literacy. According to the organization's Web site, www.altrusa.com, there are 392 clubs worldwide that also fund scholarships through the Altrusa Foundation. The Ocala chapter has 45 members.

Club President Julie Watson-Helms said several major events to support literacy are sponsored by the Ocala Club.

"Our Board of Directors just approved a \$500 grant to provide books depicting the story of the "Three Billy Goats Gruff." The Orlando Opera Company and Central Florida Community College are sponsoring a presentation of the play at local schools and CFCC. Each child in attendance will receive the book," she said.

In 1990, Altrusa began its Read In program, which pairs volunteers with all Marion



Zoom

Julie Watson-Helms, Altrusa member, opens the meeting beside the Altrusa Flag, which symbolizes that Altrusa is an international organization. The meeting at the Elks Club included lunch.

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County elementary schools. The annual event reaches more than 19,000 students through 900 volunteers who read to them for 30 minutes. This year's program will be held Sept. 20.

Other major projects involving literacy include a five-year commitment to the Ocala Public Library to provide children's books. Working in conjunction with Ocala optometrist Dr. David Appelquist, the club funds the Eyes To See For Literacy program. Indigent children are provided eyeglasses for a nominal fee. The club also stocks five reading rooms for various children's and teen shelters along with the Marion County Health Department.

MORE OUTREACH

Club members' service to the community is not, however, limited to literacy, according to Nancy Jones, a member for more than 20 years.

"We participate in the Food4Kids program, which allows needy children to take food home for the weekends. This year we plan to provide and fill 150 backpacks," she said.

Christmas holidays find Altrusa members busy stuffing stocking and "dressing dogs" for the Salvation Army. "They provide the toy dogs and we dress them up in cute outfits. They are given to children whose parents can't afford Santa Claus," Jones said.

Teenagers are offered the opportunity to acquire leadership and civic responsibility skills through membership in high school Astra Clubs that are sponsored by Altrusa. The club awards college scholarships to members on an annual basis.

While membership is by invitation only, Watson-Helms said interested applicants are welcome to attend a meeting.

"We welcome people who are civic minded, enjoy being of service to others and who want the fellowship of very community service oriented people."

ALL ABOUT ALTRUSA

Altrusa International Inc. of Ocala holds luncheon meetings the second and fourth Thursday of each month at the Elks Club, 702 N.E. 25th Ave., Ocala.

Membership is by invitation, but anyone employed as a professional, who is working in a managerial position or who is a business owner is encouraged to apply. Retired persons with business and professional backgrounds are welcomed.

The cost of membership is \$62.75 per quarter and includes lunches. Members must commit to raising or funding \$200 per year for service projects.

For more information, attend a luncheon, visit Web site www.altrusaofocala.com or call Julie Watson-Helms at 342-2895.