

Reason for living programming

Margaret Ann Ross

To have a study leave in Florida in the winter time is like having a winning lottery ticket—almost too good to be true! A series of personal experiences resulted in a three-month leave, approved by Michigan State University, so I could study senior citizens' programs in Florida.

Idea for Study

The experiences started with my interest in the elderly and a chance visit to Port Charlotte, Florida, and its 2½ million dollar Cultural Center. The center houses an extensive and highly regarded adult education program. This prompted a visit to General Development Corporation's "Welcome Center" where hostesses and bulletins described the exciting growth and assets of the Port Charlotte area.

All the way home to Michigan I wondered how an open cattle range in 1954 could become a thriving and beautiful community of 42,000 in 1975. And especially, how did "they" ever get an impressive Cultural Center (complete with classrooms, library, theater, lounge, and gift shops) in such a new community? Don't these facilities usually take years to build? Could I pursue these questions via a study leave?



Entertainment by volunteers.

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Objectives

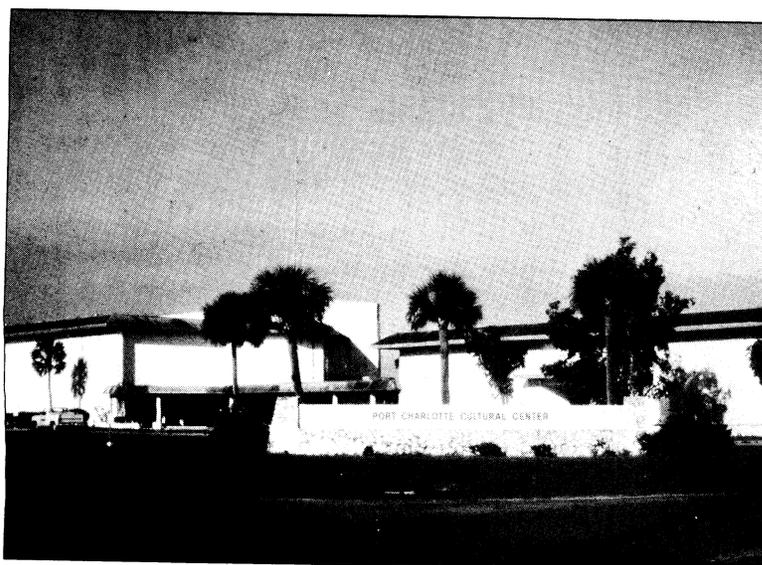
Writing a study leave proposal that would gain the necessary support required that the plan include a justifiable purpose (to study programs for the elderly), a reasonable expenditure of time (three months, including annual leave), a minimum of extra dollars (no extra dollars from the university), and a direct long-range application to the tri-county area where I serve as Extension home economist. My objectives were:

1. To find out what educational programs were available at the Port Charlotte, Florida, Cultural Center.
2. How they were funded and at what cost.
3. How the center was built and operated.
4. What this facility and program meant to the people of the Port Charlotte community.

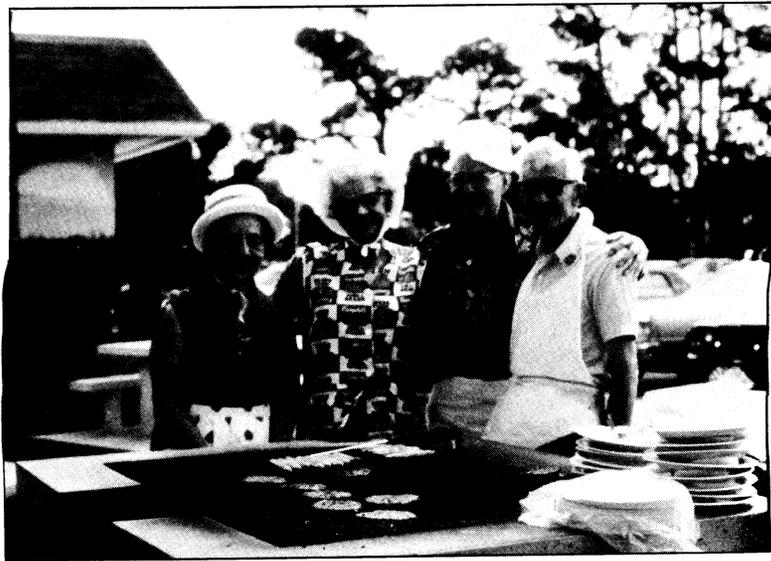
I was also interested in how this program compared to other programs for the elderly in Extension, in mobile home courts, and in selected urban centers in Florida.

On to Florida!

Introductory letters were exchanged with Charlotte County civic and Extension leaders in advance of my study. But, even so, it was a bit of a challenge to arrive in Florida with a bundle of objectives, a camera, and a list of people with whom I'd like to have appointments! Receiving the Port Charlotte paper for several months before leaving Michigan was helpful, as was the Charlotte County Visitors' Guide from the Charlotte County Chamber of Commerce.



Port Charlotte Cultural Center.



Volunteers selling lunches to raise money for more buildings and program

One of my first appointments was with County Extension Director Ms. Pat Smith. This and other sharing experiences with Pat stimulated ideas for the future Extension programming. Floyd Pfeiffer, a retired army colonel and director of the Cultural Center, opened the way for interviews with key Cultural Center personnel: the finance officer, director of volunteer activities, an instructor, and the community schools director.

Visiting some of the 100 classes and the center's craft shops, as well as interviews with local merchants, gave additional perspective to the value of the programs. A survey of 39 participants in a World Affairs class brought descriptions of the center as "a pleasant oasis," "a brain rust inhibitor," and "a lifesaver."

Conclusions

Conclusions from this study are that:

1. The Cultural Center is a "reason for living" for over 1,500 volunteers and thousands of visitors each year.
2. The dedicated leadership and vision of a few leaders have built a program highly responsive to community needs.
3. An initial investment by the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners of \$446,000, plus a building site donated by the General Development

- Corporation, and gifts and earnings of volunteers have led to county ownership of a complex of several buildings appraised at \$2,500,000 in 1975.
4. Port Charlotte's Cultural Center, Sarasota's Friendship Centers, Clearwater's Haven House, and Extension activities in Florida are excellent models for programs for the elderly.

Look to the Future

Community organization takes place by local development, social planning, social action, or a combination of these three.¹ By the year 2,000, 30 million or 10% of our population will be over 65.² A careful study of successful community programs for senior citizens will help social planners and change agents such as Extension personnel improve the quality of life for this growing generation.

Footnotes

1. Fred M. Cox and others, *Strategies of Community Organization* (Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1970), pp. 4-5.
2. Caroline E. Preston, "An Old Bag:: The Stereotype," in *Occasional Papers in Gerontology No. 11* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Institute of Gerontology, University of Michigan, 1975), p. 44.