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## Pride & Joy A Voice for the Vulnerable

By Jackie Minniti

Our growing population of elderly Americans is, unfortunately, one of our most vulnerable. They often fall prey to unscrupulous individuals who try to take advantage of their age and frailty. This is particularly troubling when a senior citizen is no longer able to live alone and becomes a resident of a long-term care facility. Fortunately, there are people like Sheila Ramsdell who are willing to step in and become their advocates through the Florida Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program (ombudsman program).



Sheila Ramsdell holds the plaque she recently received after being selected by her peers as the Mid and South Pinellas Council Ombudsman of the Year. The retired police officer, originally from Ohio, has continued her public service here as a volunteer for the ombudsman program where she works to improve the quality of life for the elderly living in nursing homes, assisted-care facilities and adult family care homes.

The ombudsman program was founded in 1975 as an outgrowth of the federal Older Americans Act which grants rights to individuals in long-term care facilities. The program's mission is to improve the quality of life for residents in nursing homes, assisted-care facilities and adult family care homes by protecting their health, safety, welfare and rights. Since 60 percent of Florida's long-term care residents receive no visits from family or friends, the ombudsman provides a vital service which is free and confidential.

Sheila, a retired police officer, relocated to St. Petersburg to escape the Ohio winters and wanted a way to continue her tradition of service to her community. When a friend introduced her to the ombudsman program, Sheila knew she'd found a perfect fit.

"As a police officer, I saw people abuse and scam the elderly, and I've been in facilities that were awful, where people took advantage of the residents," Sheila recalls. "After I retired, I was looking for something worthwhile to do, and I think mediating for the elderly, so they can enjoy their last few years, is something worthwhile."

As a volunteer ombudsman, Sheila spends one day each week working with long-term care residents, facility administrators and family members to address issues and resolve problems.

Sometimes she visits the facility to talk to the residents and assess any problems they might be experiencing. While residents are often reluctant to complain directly to the administrator, many are willing to confide in the ombudsman. The ombudsman will then investigate the validity of the complaint and work with the facility's administrator to resolve the problem. "Since the program assigns you to a facility, you get to know the residents and staff and become friendly," Sheila explains. "I've met a lot of nice elderly people. Many have families that live far away, others have no children, and they look forward to having someone to talk to. You really feel like you're making a difference."

Sheila must be making a big difference because in May she was selected by her peers as the Mid and South Pinellas Council Ombudsman of the

Year. According to Annette Perry, District Ombudsman Manager, "Sheila goes above and beyond and always puts the residents first. Residents comment on how they feel cared for and heard when Sheila is working with them. She always helps wherever she is needed."

Sheila, for her part, wants to encourage others to become volunteer ombudsmen. "We're always looking for new volunteers because we have so many facilities," she says. "Our job would be easier if more people would volunteer." She points out that volunteers can set their own schedules and are even reimbursed for mileage. But most of all, they can have the satisfaction of knowing they've made a positive difference in the lives of many seniors. "If elderly people are being taken advantage of, we need to help them," she says. "We'll all be old someday, and we'll need honest people to give us help when we need it."

For more information about the program, go to [www.ombudsman.myflorida.com](http://www.ombudsman.myflorida.com).



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