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## **Lakeland Man a Voice for The Elderly**

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LAKELAND | Bob Bettis is one of the good guys. A problem solver. A voice for the voiceless. An advocate for quality long-term care for the elderly.

He's an ombudsman, a volunteer intermediary member of the State of Florida Ombudsman Program, Department of Elder Affairs for the South Central Council.

"We can take care of just about anything for the elderly except make them younger," Bettis said. "We sit down with them and discuss whatever problems or issues they might have. We are the extra set of eyes and ears. We listen when no one else does."

The South Central Council ensures residents are treated well and issues are resolved in Polk, Hardee and Highlands counties' nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and adult family care homes. Bettis is one of only 14 ombudsmen for the area and was recently named Ombudsman of the Year.

The volunteers make visits when a call is received from a resident who has an issue or during a regular inspection of one of the 15 -20 facilities they are assigned.

"There may be a problem in the 200 wing, with a roommate, the food may be cold, the mattress too hard ». whatever. There are hundreds of possible problems we can help with," Bettis said.

According to Bettis, 60 percent of residents do not have anyone who visits regularly and only half of the residents are aware of the role of an ombudsman.

"The facilities don't know we are coming, but within five minutes everyone knows we are there," he said. "Most of the time, we can resolve the problem with the facility but, if not, we have the numbers of those who can."

Bettis, originally from Michigan, has been a Florida resident since 1978. He found out about the ombudsman program about two and a half years ago when he read an article about it in The Ledger.

"I've had big jobs and a variety of them but this is the most rewarding job I've ever had," said Bettis, who would not tell his age. "After helping someone, when you walk out, you feel like you can fly."

Complaints are kept confidential as well as scheduled ombudsman visits.

"I get so excited talking about the program. It's so rewarding to be able to help people," he said.

Bettis said that when he was growing up, his father taught him the importance of helping others and that lesson stuck with him.

"My father said you can't take, take, take. You have to give back," he said. "And, I've tried to give back all my life."

His recent selection as Ombudsman of the Year shows that others feel he is completing the mission of the organization.

Bettis' accomplishments over the past year include mentoring 11 ombudsmen-in-training; 474 volunteer hours, traveling more than 1,500 miles, nearly 30 training hours, community presentations, and much more.

"Mr. Bettis is one of those rare individuals who everyone looks to for advice and mentoring. He possesses a wealth of wisdom and life experience," wrote Terre Anne Lindstamer, South Central District Manager, Florida Ombudsman Program, in the award recommendation. "He doesn't stop until his cases have a happy ending." And, over the last year, that meant investigating 34 cases and conducting 36 annual assessments and resident quarterly visits.

When he isn't volunteering as an ombudsman, Bettis enjoys spending time with his wife of 31 years. He also helps out at their church and neighborhood, recently assisting a neighbor's grandson with getting a golf cart unstuck and purchasing a birthday cake for a neighbor's daughter. He also shares information about the ombudsman program, encouraging others to volunteer.

"It doesn't matter what your background is in, what your education level is — if you want to help, you can," he said.

[ To recommend someone for Heart of Polk, email [anita.todd@outlook.com](mailto:anita.todd@outlook.com). ]

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