



WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS

Last Thursday marked the second anniversary of Academy at Bradenton, and we pulled out all the stops! We opened our doors to friends old and new, community partners, families, Academy Ambassadors, volunteers and elected officials. We were truly amazed at the turnout – an estimated 250 guests visited us. Maybe they came for the excellent food that our members and staff prepared or for the dulcet tones of The Jazzberries, a jazzy duo that never disappoints. Perhaps some came to hear our inspiring speakers. But whatever motivated our guests to join us, everyone left with a smile on their face and a renewed belief in the power of gratitude, kindness, acceptance and service.

The last two years have seen plenty of milestones, but this one felt particularly special. There was a time before we opened when we were not sure how the Manatee community would respond to our mission. So Thursday felt like a celebration, not just of Academy at Bradenton, but of our integration into the local community who welcomed us with open arms.



Alan Davidson, President and CEO of Central Florida Behavioral Health Network,



Judge Gilbert E. Smith, Jr., 12th Judicial Circuit



Amanda Ballard, Manatee County Commissioner



Rosemary Stack, Academy Board Chair



Academy at Bradenton member Thad Haddad presenting at the two-year anniversary.

TWO YEARS OF GROWTH AND BELONGING

by Thad Haddad

On April 9, we celebrated the Academy at Bradenton's second anniversary, and I was honored to address our community once again. Two years ago, I emceed our Grand Opening; now, I reflected on my journey with over 200 guests. Seeing familiar faces—community leaders, families, business partners, and supporters—reminded me of our shared mission to transform isolation and marginalization into community reintegration, goal attainment, and purpose. I introduced our dedicated keynote speakers: Manatee County Commissioner Amanda Ballard of District 2; Judge Gilbert A. Smith Jr., of the 12th Judicial Circuit; Alan Davidson, President and CEO of Central Florida Behavioral Network; and my Academy colleagues, William McKeever and Vanessa Alcantara-Mangrum.

The Academy has become a true community for me, offering understanding, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. I shared a few of the member-created outreach cards I've received since joining—each one a reminder of how we celebrate achievements and support one another. These personal messages, whether congratulating me or offering comfort, have meant so much.

Through skill development in graphic design and multimedia, culinary arts, and wellness, I've gained confidence and practical skills. Formal goal-planning using the 8 Dimensions of Wellness, along with support from staff and other members, has helped me return to work and achieve independent living. We celebrate successes and learn together, always lifting each other up.

What sets the Academy apart is the genuine care and empowerment we share. I look forward to growing with this community for many years and continuing to make a difference for those living with mental health challenges, staying true to our mission: "Create a working community where adults can improve mental health through friendship, healthy lifestyles, skill development, and careers."



Members and staff ready to welcome guests to our two-year anniversary celebration.

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BRADENTON CAMPUS

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