

Discover the magic of mental health recovery!

8th Annual LIVE from the Academy TELETHON

Thursday
August 13, 2026
7-8pm EST

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HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

by Brianna Stirrat



Brianna Stirrat's first shift at Hope Thrift

When I first took a tour of the Academy's Transitional Employment site at Hope Thrift, I really liked it, but I felt nervous. First, I was afraid that the job would be too challenging. I was also doubtful that I would be selected, and I

didn't want to be disappointed. But thanks to my dedication to the Academy, showing up and working hard, I was selected to be the processing clerk.

My Academy job coaches Juan and Vanessa worked side-by-side with me through the onboarding process, and they were the ones to train me on the job. It definitely felt comfortable being trained by people that I know and trust. Their training took the mystery out of the job and made the job duties feel very straightforward.

My job is to sort out damaged items, put price tags on select items, receive donations and organize the stock room. The women that I work with are very sweet and helpful and make me feel at ease. They're always laughing and having a good time which makes the day more fun. Time really flies!

Even though I just started this Transitional Employment position, it already has me thinking confidently about my future. I think I would like to work in a thrift store environment on a permanent basis. I'm grateful to the Academy for giving me this opportunity. I really think it will help shape my future.

WARM WELCOME TO ELLEN RUSSELL

by Ellen Russell

I graduated from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and come from a 25-year career with Burdines/Macy's. Visual Merchandising is truly the best job in retail. I had the opportunity to manage stores in Sarasota and Port Charlotte and travel the state assisting with new store openings, renovations, numerous creative projects and special events. Although I loved the challenges, I struggled with my mental health.

While at work, I experienced a mental health crisis and was admitted to Bayside, now Cornell Behavioral at Sarasota Memorial. During my recovery, I volunteered at a local horse ranch mucking stalls, feeding and grooming horses and began teaching riding lessons. I fell in love with a little Quarter horse and named her "My Amazing Grace." She became my greatest source of comfort and nearly 30 years later she is still happy, healthy, and full of herself!



Loriann Smith and Ellen Russell working at the front desk

That chapter of work came to a close and I also left a 25-year relationship. My therapist recommended the Outpatient Program at Cornell, and it is there that I learned about the Academy. In just a few short months, my life has been transformed with hope, opportunity, and genuine friendships. My new Transitional Employment position at the Public Defender's Office is allowing me to develop the skills to move confidently back into the workforce. I am deeply grateful to the Academy's incredibly supportive staff and the members who inspire me each and every day.

For the first time in a long while, I truly look forward to the future.

JUSTICE IS SERVED



Judge Gilbert Smith (center) celebrating his retirement with Academy members and staff

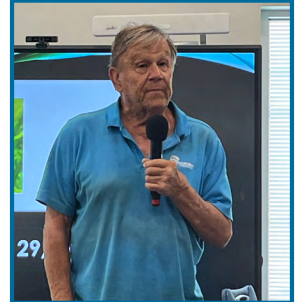
When asked if we would cater the retirement party for our dear friend, Manatee County Circuit Court Judge Gilbert Smith, we were honored to reciprocate the support that he has given us over the years. Judge Smith is an Academy Ambassador and has been a staunch advocate, speaking at our events and helping our reach in the community. His retirement celebration at the Manatee Judicial Center was quite a party! Roughly two hundred and fifty guests attended, and our members and staff fed them all! Our members, clad in their crisp chef coats and hats, did "justice" to this auspicious event, furthering their hospitality skills. We wish Judge Gilbert a happy healthy retirement, and we thank him for his legacy of service to Manatee County!



Judge Gilbert Smith addressing guests with our culinary spread in the foreground

MILES OF MEMORIES

This week marked the end of an era. Our beloved transportation specialist, Keith Christinson, has retired from his position with us. We held a lunch in his honor where he began by gently roasting the Academy riders whom he has transported over the last two years. The rapport between Keith and his passengers was evident in their jokes and, when it was their time to speak, members gave it right back to him. From comments about his questionable singing voice to his poor choice of sports teams to follow, it was clear that strong relationships were fostered on all those van rides.



Keith Christinson bidding his farewells

Keith has been transformational for Academy at Bradenton, enabling members to access our services far more often than they otherwise could.

We are grateful for his service, his humor, and his evident good will for the Academy and our members. When valued staff leaves us, we always remind them that they are still part of our community.

We hope that this is not goodbye but rather, see you soon.



Academy members and staff surround Keith Christinson (center back) celebrating his service

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BRADENTON CAMPUS

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