

Interview with Nita Cole ~ January 2023

Are you a Clearwater native or do you hail from other shores?

I do hail from other shores. I was born and raised by my grandparents in Louisville, Kentucky. My husband, Phil, and I knew when we retired we wanted to live in Florida. We started with a townhouse in Tampa, while we were still working, but when our daughter, Brandi moved to Dunedin, we wanted to be closer to her so we sold our home and bought a home in the Countrypark neighborhood. We actually are lucky to live with our son, Phillip, who is an accountant.

Can you tell me about your career path?

I'm a graduate of Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky with a Bachelor of Science in Learning and Behavior Disorders. I was particularly interested in this field because my younger sister, Vicki, is hearing impaired and as we were growing up I saw that she didn't have the same learning opportunities that I had.

I taught in Kentucky public schools for over 34 years. I started in Special Education for 10 years. I then spent 24 years teaching math and science to 4th graders and four years of teaching education courses at Western Kentucky University. I also earned a Masters Degrees, in Special Education with a Reading Endorsement. Education has always been my career path. It is a calling that I feel in my heart every single day.

You were just named Volunteer of the Year for the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC)– Clearwater Community Woman's Club. Can you share some of the ways you volunteer for the club and in our community?

Well, I am Chair of our major Fundraiser, the Champa Bay Elimination Dinner. In 2022, this event raised almost \$50,000 to provide long term safe housing for survivors of human trafficking in our community. I also organize fundraising bingo events at Hamburger Mary's; I recruit members to volunteer at the Threshers games concession stand and at Jazz Fest to earn money for our club's Daisy Grants for other area nonprofits; I co-chair the Environment Community Service

Project committee; I am on the board of the Friends of Moccasin Lake; I host a monthly beach clean-ups, some with Salty Soul Foundation; and I teach a monthly “Science Rocks” class for young children at Moccasin Lake Nature Center. I also volunteer with Meals on Wheels, help at the Salvation Army with their monthly drive-thru food pantries, Red Kettle Bell Ringing, Angel Tree/Silver Bell present distribution and participate with the Gulf Coast JFCS-CHATS program that calls homebound seniors once a week to check on them. I am also the Social Committee Chair for our HOA and in charge of planting our flower beds at the entrance to our neighborhood.

We’re you raised in a family that was involved in volunteering?

I was raised by my grandparents. My grandpa worked a lot, he was a janitor at Standiford Field Airport. My grandmother, Juanita, heavily influenced my sister and me. My grandmother was a very giving person. She was always busy and really kept everything going. I was also fortunate to have loving aunts who were a positive influence on my life. I think when you’re raised in a multi-generational home you develop empathy. I was raised in the South; we were raised to help each other, that’s just what you did.

It took a while for me to get my bearings here in Florida. When I first moved here and I’d walk my dogs in my neighborhood I’d say “hi” to everyone and they would look at me a little strange. Now I know everyone, and we stop and chat and people are friendly. I also became part of the GFWC Clearwater Community Woman’s Club here in Clearwater and I’m back to teaching and volunteering. My plate is full, but I’m happy.

Do you have a favorite committee or organization that you participate in, or are they like your children, there’s no way to choose a favorite?

I love teaching Science to 4-6 year olds at Moccasin Lake Nature Center. I get to plan the lessons, gather the supplies and, with the help of other GFWC volunteers like, Pat and Diana we present a lesson once a month. We can accommodate up to 12 children. There is no charge; a parent just has to register them before the class. Sometimes, if we have openings, we ask kids on the playground if they’d

like to come in and join for an hour lesson. We've taught about simple machines, rocks and minerals and more; we were excited to partner with the Clearwater Police Department Canine Unit and the children got to meet Sgt. Main and Officer Ski with their K-9's Cash and Krys and learn about the canine unit. At our last class we did rock painting. I love teaching at Moccasin Lake because it's in a nature setting, and of course, I love science!

Tell me about the “Champa-Bay” annual fundraiser for the GFWC – Clearwater Community Woman’s Club.

In 2020, Florida ranked third in the nation in calls to the National Human Trafficking hotline. As a major tourist destination with exceptional amenities, sports and other attractions, Tampa Bay is a hot spot for this activity. Because of this our club decided to help make an impact and came up with the Champa Bay Elimination Dinner in 2022. Since we feel it was a success, we decided to continue on this path with our next Champa Bay Elimination Dinner event will be on March 4 (5:30-8:30) at the Conmy Center in Dunedin. It will continue raising money for safe housing but will also include programs for survivors of Human Trafficking in Pinellas County. It is a casual, sports themed event with great food, live/silent auction, speakers, games, and much more. We are fortunate to be having as emcee's Olivia Hoegstrom from Spirit FM and the voice of the Tampa Bay Rays, Dave Wills. Tickets and sponsorships are still available at www.givebutter.com/2023champabay, or click on the QR code. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Nita at 2ndvp@ccwcflorida.org.

To buy tickets Scan the
QR CODE on your phone
or visit ccwcFlorida.org



What do you like to do in your free time?

I do not have a lot of free time, but what free time I have I like to spend with my son and daughter and my two grand dogs. They are both rescues. Daphne is a 14 year-old bichon-frees mix, and Buddy is a 12 year-old terrier-beagle mix. They really are family and I enjoy spending time with them.

Favorite sports team – local or otherwise?

I bleed red! I bleed red! I bleed red for the Ohio State Buckeyes, for the Louisville Cardinals, and for the Western Kentucky University Hilltoppers! I have red team shirts and red jewelry for all of them. My grandma and my husband are from Ohio. I also like the Buccaneers, more red – and we all enjoy going to the Rowdies games, and support all the Tampa Bay teams too.

Favorite restaurant?

I'm a Frenchy's girl! I love Frenchy's. I'll take family, who are visiting to the one on the beach, but we'll usually go to the one on the Dunedin Causeway because it's often less busy and there's free parking.

What's something people would be surprised to learn about you?

Well, I graduated high school at 16 and finished my first semester of college while still 16. I started grade school early and skipped my Junior year to make this happen.

Quote or motto to live by?

"Can't never could"...as an educator when students were learning something new, one of the first responses I might hear would be, "I can't do this!". My response, "Can't never could, you don't know what you can do until you try." It's important in life to always try and give it your best.

Anything else you'd like to share?

I like living in Clearwater, it's a good place to end up. I've been excited to learn that some of the students I've taught are living in our area. I still keep in touch with many of them through Facebook and email. One is even a speech therapist in Largo, one an ICU nurse at Meace Countryside Hospital and one has an animal rescue, "Isle of Misfits", outside of Bradenton. It's cool to know the relationships you develop with children really do matter and that there can be a lifelong connection. I love that about teaching and volunteering.