



Republican Federated Women of The Villages (RFWTV) "Caring for America" Committee Chair, Maureen Foertsch, entertains SoZo Kids with cardio drumming.

STORIES BY JOHN  
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# Giving Back

**Villagers Make a Difference Through Programs Supporting Local Children, Plus 12th Annual College Colors Day Raises Funds for Local Food Pantries**



Maureen Foertsch, *Republican Federated Women of The Villages* "Caring For America" Committee Chair, entertains SoZo Kids. To learn more about the club's community outreach efforts, visit [www.RFWTV.org](http://www.RFWTV.org)

# Friends of SoZo Kids

Far from the lush golf courses and manicured lawns of The Villages is a small concrete-block community center that was once a fishing lodge tucked away in The Ocala National Forest.

There, Villagers who are volunteers with the Friends of SoZo Kids, Inc. have been spending weekdays during the summer months feeding, educating and entertaining children from families who live in the forest.

On this day, they mingle with the kids who are sitting at tables inside the Forest Lakes Park Community Center, feeding them breakfast and helping them make masks they will wear later in the morning while watching a performance by The Villages Clown Alley 179. The Villager clowns rouse the children by singing songs, telling jokes, putting on humorous skits and face painting them.

The summer program is one of many supported by Friends, which was formed in March of 2022.

The funds raised by the organization have paid for everything from fixing up community centers for after-school programs to purchasing back-to-school items to providing meals at summer programs.

"We're probably making 70 meals a day for the kids when the program happens," Friends president Ed Latimer of the Village of Fernandina.

Friends is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that supports the "Help Agency of the Forest, Inc.," otherwise known as SoZo Kids. SoZo Kids is a nonprofit founded in 1993 by pastor Dave Houck and his wife, Tammy. "We exclusively support pastor Dave on the front lines," said Linda Casey, immediate past president of the Friends.

Friends also financially supports Camp SoZo, a 72-acre forest camp. Children attending the summer camp enjoy swimming, canoeing, fishing and other water activities on Deer Lake. They also enjoy team sports and activities, competitive games, late-night movies, pizza and ice cream parties and campfires.

Villagers said they get much satisfaction out of volunteering for Friends, especially when they get to interact with the children.

"It was just a natural fit for me," said Friends board member Sharon Stiles. "I enjoy giving my love and attention to these kids."



**Above:** Maureen Foertsch of the Village Del Mar entertains children with cardio drumming.



On this weekday, Sharon, who had been a volunteer for a year and a half, helped serve a breakfast of chocolate muffins, bananas and fruit juice for the kids at Forest Lakes Park Community Center. "The kids need attention. I want to give attention," she said. Sharon said she has enjoyed mentoring some of the older girls. "I've got about four or five girls I've really bonded with and I'm looking forward to the new school year and us going really deeper into life issues," she said.

Tammy said the funds donated by Villagers have paid for many of SoZo Kids programs, including repairing the air conditioning and other renovations to Forest Lakes Park Community Center. "They have helped us so much," Tammy said.

Friends offers an after-school program and summer day program at two forest community centers. Volunteers provide lessons, including Ed, who puts on a robotics class. Friends of SoZo Kids also provides food that is served up at the programs, which is served with the help of Villagers. Friends has even paid to buy land next to the Forest Lake Community Center's playground to address safety concerns.

In 2021, Friends launched a program for SoZo Kids who seek post-secondary education and careers. "We do a career education award," Linda said. She added that they don't pay for tuition but help the student obtain critical items to earn a living, such as for tools for a recent graduate who trained to be a mechanic. "We enable them to be successful in whatever path that they choose," Linda said.

Friends of SoZo Kids has also conducted collection drives throughout the calendar year.

The organization's Back-to-School Bash provides more than 1,000 kids with new backpacks filled with school supplies and hygiene products. "We want to get them ready for school in August," Ed said. "We want to get them a new pair of sneakers, underwear, socks, haircuts, nail polishings and of course school supplies."

Ed said the back-to-school items can bolster the kid's confidence.

Linda said the organization serves kids ranging in age from kindergarten through eighth grade. "We actually set up a shoe store. We fit the kids for shoes," she said.

Friends' Christmas Angels Project fills the Santa Wish lists for 200 forest kids and also pays for turkeys and hams for families. Friends also offers grants to fund operating and emergency needs for SoZo Kids.

In 2022, Friends doled out \$63,000 in grants to SoZo Kids. In 2021, it gave out \$91,000. In 2020, it donated \$21,000.

All funds and in-kind gifts to Friends are used exclusively to support SoZo kids, with no funds used for salaries.

The organization's fundraising efforts really kicked in after it became a certified IRS nonprofit 501(c)(3) in 2022.

Fundraising was very informal before that, Linda said. "They were passing the hat at meetings," he said.

**“ It was just a natural fit for me enjoy giving my love and attention to these kids. ”**

— Sharon Stiles



**Right:** John McCarey of the Village of Dunedin joins in on the drumming.



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## MAGAZINE

# Giving BACK

VILLAGERS MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE THROUGH  
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12th ANNUAL  
COLLEGE COLORS DAY  
RAISES FUNDS FOR  
LOCAL FOOD PANTRIES