



# Happy to Count My Blessings This Thanksgiving

By Laura Byrnes, APR, CPRC



Every day, I give thanks for the ability to do what I love for an organization that, I firmly believe, strives to improve our quality of life here in many meaningful ways. How many ways? I'm happy to count them, but first, did I ever tell you how I even got this job?

I was meeting with Margaret Spontak, who many of you know heads up Master the Possibilities at On Top of the World. Margaret is the kind of nurturing, wicked smart professional and quintessential Southern lady who, frankly, I'd follow to the ends of the earth if she beckoned me to do so.

At any rate, at the time, she was business development director for what was then Workforce Connection, now CareerSource Citrus Levy Marion. I was driving home from my nephew's graduation in Houston when Margaret called to ask if I'd edit the Education Health Partner's healthcare directory, published by Ocala Magazine. Of course I said you bet.

The day I was set to meet with Margaret in her office, she was uncharacteristically tardy. She popped her head in the door apologizing for the delay with the cryptic explanation: "We've got a bit of a problem."

That proved to be the understatement of the decade.

In marched her team, and they promptly began crafting plans for a rapid response event that took place two days later. It was Aug. 5, 2009 and the entire staff at Taylor Bean & Whitaker—1,600 local employees – had just been pink-slipped while at lunch.

I was so impressed by what Workforce Connection did in collaborating with myriad education, economic, government and community partners, that I vowed if there was ever an opportunity to work for them, I surely would.

Fast forward one year later, almost to the day when I signed on as communications manager. I have now worked here for more than seven years.

So, in the spirit of the impending Thanksgiving holiday, and in no particular order, I will share some of the things for which I am most grateful.

First and foremost: the people – both in terms of our terrifically dedicated staff and leadership and in terms of those employers and

career seekers who CareerSource CLM helps.

The team I'm lucky enough to be a part of makes it easy to come to work each day – yes, even on Mondays. They work hard, which is a major thing to me, and are competent, compassionate, friendly and warm. They believe in and are passionate about what it is we do and strive always to be recognized as the number one workforce resource in the state of Florida by providing meaningful and professional customer service that is reflected in the quality of our career candidates and employer services.

We have brass bells mounted at each of our career centers and tradition holds that the bell is rung every time there is a new job placement. One day I was over at our Fourteenth Street center in Ocala and Mary Gonzalez-Santiago, one of our ebullient job readiness coaches, rang the bell 21 times in a row.

Not only was she sounding the victory bell for someone who needed good, gainful employment, but the bell rang as a win for the employer as well.

I mentioned our leadership, and that includes our Board of Directors who volunteer their time and expertise. Right now, our Board Chair is Kathy Judkins, SECO's deputy director for civic, charitable and government affairs. She also serves on the board of the Ocala/Marion County Chamber & Economic Partnership and you may recognize her from her service as United Way of Marion County's board chair. She is also involved in the Ocala Youth Energy Academy. And once upon a time, she worked for, you guessed it, the organization that today is CareerSource CLM. Talk about someone who has the heart and head for workforce development.

I also love meeting people who tell me they got their jobs through CareerSource CLM, or the number of people who stop me when I'm out and about wearing my name badge or an article of clothing with our corporate logo. I remember attending a Junior Achievement breakfast and seated on my right was a lady who asked for help for her out-of-work adult grandson and on my left was the owner of a new fast food restaurant that needed to staff up in three weeks, complete with recruiting and training.

Of course, I didn't make any of that happen, but I could connect them with the right people

and they made it happen – including onboarding more than 40 associates for the restaurant.

Another thing I'm thankful for is the role we get to play as convener and collaborator on projects too numerous to mention, though I'll bring up a few.

We commissioned a Skills Gap survey, partnered with key stakeholders, held forums throughout the region, convened a task force and have been implementing recommendations for the past five years.

Some of those initiatives include the Computer Numeric Controlling (CNC) training made available to postsecondary institutions; adult internships and apprenticeships focused on manufacturing and logistics; career awareness and talent pipeline projects to educate students, their parents and teachers, as well as area businesses, about training and career opportunities available right here; and the über successful youth career expos.

And speaking of youth, and leveraging collaboration, I'll wrap up with a third reason I'm thankful for CareerSource CLM: the Phoenix Rising YouthBuild. I kid you not, of all the things I'm blessed to be able to do, having just a small part in the Phoenix Rising program tops the list. Nothing is more fulfilling or life affirming than watching troubled young adults develop the discipline and skills needed to work as a team and build Habitat for Humanity homes for deserving families. This alternative education, nonresidential community based program not only helps revitalize economically challenged neighborhoods by building homes, it also builds strong, productive citizens who go on to find employment or enroll in postsecondary programs. More on that later.

On behalf of myself, our board of directors and entire staff, we hope you have as many reasons to be thankful this Thanksgiving as we are thankful for you.

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