

## Evolution of Community Giving

After being stunned by the generosity of her neighbors following a holiday party where collections for the needy were brought, Julington Creek Plantation resident Kathy Bravo thought, “If my little neighborhood of Eastgate could be so generous, what could the whole community do?” JCP C.A.R.E.S. – Julington Creek Plantation Community Active Residents Engaged in Service was born in 2007 with the mission of, “Uniting the Community through helping others in need”.

Bravo became passionate about ensuring the giving done within our county benefitted the charities in St. Johns County. Being a “bedroom community” of Jacksonville, many residents gave in Duval County and were not aware of the needs in their own back yard. Although St. Johns County is a wealthy county per capita, over 50% of the residents in the southern portion of the county are below poverty level. An Annual Food Drive was established, the popular “Giving Tree” initiative and A Dog Day Afternoon, all benefitting local charities. Several smaller fundraisers and awareness events are planned each year as well.

JCP C.A.R.E.S. changed their name to St. Johns CARES in 2015 to reflect both the fact that all county residents are welcome to be involved in the group, and the charities supported are within St. Johns County. At this point, after almost \$500,000.00 of charitable giving had been generated through JCP C.A.R.E.S./St. Johns CARES, Bravo began to consider a move out of the county and retiring from St. Johns CARES. Meg Balke, long time member and current President, was chosen to continue leading St. Johns CARES and its growth in the county.

Amidst the success of St. Johns CARES, Bravo was approached by Anne Crane who would go on to found Helping Hands of Nocatee. Crane was mentored by Bravo, and modeled her community group after the popular St. Johns CARES. Helping Hands of Nocatee has been focused on getting children in the northeast part of the county involved in the community for the last three years with activities such as dinners for the homeless, valentines for veterans, dinners for local first responders and beach cleanups.

Remaining in contact and sharing each other’s activities with their groups, it occurred to Crane and Balke that perhaps a larger impact could be made by joining their respective groups. Providing volunteer activities for adults, teens and children would bring in more of the community and generate even more giving and awareness for the deserving St. Johns County nonprofits. Over the next few months, St. Johns CARES and Helping Hands of Nocatee will work alongside each other to join their members, as well as give birth to St. Johns CARES Kids to allow young children and families chances to get involved with those in need in their county.

As St. Johns CARES approaches their 10 year anniversary, approaching \$600,000.00 in giving generated, and providing over 9,000 community service hours, they look forward to growing alongside Helping Hands of Nocatee to welcome new members and continue to reach more of St. Johns County. County residents can look for an expanded calendar of events, with fresh new opportunities for service hours and teaching the children of the community what “Uniting the Community through helping others in need” looks like!

St. Johns CARES is a 501©3 based in St. Johns County and open to residents anywhere in the county who want to become involved in the community. Learn more about St. Johns CARES at [www.stjohnscares.org](http://www.stjohnscares.org) or find them on Facebook