

A photograph of Erin McLeod, a woman with blonde hair, wearing a red blazer over a black top and a pearl necklace. She is standing in a wooden gazebo with a lattice railing, smiling at the camera. The background shows a lush green lawn and trees. In the foreground, there are large pink and purple plants.

Erin McLeod

President & CEO of the Friendship Centers

Some 40 percent of the population in the Sarasota-Manatee area is over age 60. Of that, many have visited the Friendship Centers in Sarasota County (Sarasota, Venice, and North Port), DeSoto County/Arcadia, and Collier, Charlotte, and Lee Counties. They serve meals, offer health services, provide adult daycare and offer stimulating activities.

The center's new President and CEO is **Erin McLeod**, former Senior VP of the organization, who is only the second person to hold this position in 42 years (and the first woman).



As people age the number of services they require or desire increases ranging from medical, social, nutritional, psychological, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and financial. In the Sarasota-Manatee area where 40 percent of the population is over 60, many organizations sponsor free or low-cost activities to residents who gratefully take advantage of the services they provide. Many seniors are familiar with the relevant services and programs offered by the Friendship Centers in downtown Sarasota. Under the able leadership of recently-retired Bob Carter for 27 years, the center's new President and CEO is Erin McLeod, former Senior Vice President of the organization, who is only the second person to hold this position in 42 years.

"We need to recognize that aging is a journey for which some people have not planned," says Erin. "Society has shifted away from the honor and dignity of aging. Every one of our programs affects the health, dignity, and quality of life by addressing one of the dimensions of aging. We are not your grandmother's senior center. These are active places. Southwest Florida is the epicenter of the aging revolution. How the area responds will become a model for the rest of the country. Last year we served 275,000 meals in four counties to the elderly. We respond to older people's desire for economic security by counseling people on financial planning and how to access resources. Our facilities serve as a clubhouse where people come to avoid social isolation by attending classes such as computers, oil painting, yoga, creative writing, and Spanish; enjoying a healthy meal; listening to concerts and dancing to bands; participating in fitness classes and other activities on the extensive calendar. We also have medical and dental clinics in Sarasota, Lee, and Collier counties for low-income and uninsured residents. The adult day care services provided almost 90,000 hours of care for those with physical or cognitive issues to give caregivers some respite time."

The Friendship Centers was born due to a happenstance meeting between Brother William Greenen and friends of his mother in Sarasota in 1972. Working at a private boys' school in South Bend, Indiana, Brother Greenen, of the Catholic Brothers of Holy Cross, was planning a trip to Sarasota when his mother asked him to check on a couple with whom she'd lost contact. He found that the wife had Alzheimer's and her husband felt terribly isolated. On his way to the airport to return home, he stopped for gas for his rental car and spoke to a woman whose husband had Parkinson's. The desperation he heard prompted him to pack up his black lab dog, a card table, a few belongings, and drive back to Sarasota in 1973. He went to St. Martha Catholic Church to recruit volunteers. A mimeo machine (remember them?) printed flyers for an open house at the little house Brother purchased. They had cookies for the expected 40 to 50 people; 450 attended. Brother named his organization the Senior Friendship Centers—with the plural noun Centers since Brother sensed that one center would not be sufficient to meet the overwhelming needs. (The word Senior was deleted in 2009.)

With a mission to promote health, dignity and quality of life throughout the journey of aging, Friendship Centers are now in Sarasota, Venice, North Port, DeSoto County/Arcadia, and Collier, Charlotte, and Lee Counties. Forty percent of the organization's activities are at the Sarasota location and about 25 percent in Lee County. Medical and dental clinics in Naples see 5,000 people annually. In-home social services and meals are provided in Arcadia/DeSoto County. Meals are provided at Friendship Cafés in Sarasota, DeSoto, Charlotte, and Lee counties—sometimes accompanied by live music and games. Home-delivered meals are available in Sarasota, DeSoto, Charlotte, and Lee counties. All meals have a nominal charge if the person can afford to pay. Information on resources, case management and social services, and support groups round out the comprehensive offerings that are staffed by 140 employees and 1,000 volunteers.

Kathy Silverberg, chair of the Board of Governors of Friendship Centers, says, "The Board of Governors chose well when we selected Erin as our next President and CEO. She is eminently qualified for the job as a result of her extensive experience in all areas of the Friendship Centers' operation. But more importantly, Erin possesses the heart and the vision to lead this exceptional organization into a new era. While she is mindful of its amazing history under the leadership of our founder Brother William Greenen followed by Bob Carter, she is committed to serving a new generation of older adults with unique needs and interests while continuing the services that have been so important to current clients. Erin has the energy, the determination and the commitment to our mission that will serve her—and all of us—well into the future."

Not as well known is the Friendship Centers for Aging Studies, an accredited continuing education provider, that attracts licensed professionals from all over the country to learn about skills required when working with an aging population. Nurses, EMTs, CPAs, massage therapists, and counselors receive required Continuing Education Units for attendance at seminars. Another program, the Aging Mastery 10-session workshop where community experts address various topics, is designed to better prepare participants to plan and enjoy their later years.

Erin was raised in Dade City, Florida, by a college professor mother and salesman father and holds a Bachelor's Degree in Public Relations from the University of Florida. She and husband Craig have been married for 32 years. Their son Collin works at the University of Florida and daughter Meggan is an artist in Richmond, Virginia. Erin plays bocce ball on the beach, reads, gardens, hikes, and makes pottery in her downtime.

One of Erin's goals is to be on the leading edge of technology by incorporating technology into the clinics and educational programs. "It's a challenge to make aging interesting, but the rewards are the stories I hear. I compare them to a musical score—every story is a note and together they are a symphony." 🎵

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