

Joanne Polster, Ritch Leone named Seniors of the Year

By Dean Geddes

dgeddes@inkym.com Old age isn't for sissies, Joanne Polster says. It takes discipline and occasionally pain. At 91, Polster hasn't slowed down. In fact, she feels as if recently she has caught her second wind. These days her schedule is packed. All her time is devoted to volunteering for island nonprofits, including the Hospital Thrift Shop, the Unitarian Meeting House, the Atheneum and the Maria Mitchell Association. She walks to nearly all of them from her home on Fair Street.

The sense of community that Polster feels is something she shares with fellow 2021 Nantucket Senior Citizen of the Year Ritch Leone. The pair were chosen for the award by the Nantucket Council on Aging last week out of 43 nominees.

"This is totally unexpected," Polster said. "I feel I represent the hundreds of Nantucket women and men who take time out from their busy lives to volunteer."

Normally the winners are celebrated at a dinner in June at Faregrounds Restaurant but due to COVID-19 concerns, this year's live event has been postponed indefinitely.

Leone moved to Nantucket in the early 1970s, taking a job at the high school as the shop teacher. He taught art at the school for more than 30 years and then took a job working for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

"I do a lot of guidance, that's the same with FEMA. I love helping people. It was a nice transition from teaching into FEMA, it correlated very well," he said. Back when he started, even more so than today, the turnover was heavy at the high school, he said. His first year he was one of 18 new teachers. People would move to Nantucket from off-island, not realizing how desolate things would get in the winter. But Leone said he enjoyed the quiet of Nantucket winters.

"I was going to do one year and I stayed for 34. If you can make it through your first winter here, you'll be OK," he said. "It was peaceful and nice. There was a real sense of community back then."

His secret was getting involved. That first winter he participated in four plays with a local theater group.

summer camp with others going through the same treatments they are going through. At Leone's retirement party from the Nantucket school system in 2008, he was able to raise \$32,000 for the camp.

Even though he retired from teaching over 12 years ago, Leone still volunteers his time in the afternoons, helping out in the wood-shop class.

"I really enjoy doing it. I'm a teacher, and I try and get the kids to do something different and bring an artistic side to it," he said.

Polster and her husband Max have been coming to Nantucket since the 1950s. They first arrived on their honeymoon in 1954 and then bought their first island home in 1958. Since then, it has been their home away from home.

For most of her life, volunteering wasn't an option. Polster was too busy raising children and working in the publishing world. But after retiring in the early 2000s, and with her kids all grown up, she turned her attention to volunteer work.

"I started off at the Thrift Shop, I worked in places I used," she said. "Then I went to the Atheneum and just asked if they needed any help," she said. "That's the one thing I have: time. There are so many places to help at."

Polster has cataloged the library at the Shipwreck & Life-Saving Museum, organized the book room at the Thrift Shop, cataloged a special collection at the Maria Mitchell Association, helped out at the Saltmarsh's monthly dinners and knit items for the Unitarian Church's shawl ministry and its Christmas Craft Fair. Currently she is helping out with the creation of a remembrance garden at the Unitarian Meeting House.

"I do have a lot of energy," she said. "My theory is that my husband, who was a very energetic person, died suddenly, I think he gave me all this energy. After he died there was no stopping me. I feel like he's always with me."

After four years of teaching wood-shop, Leone moved to the art department and taught there for the next three decades.

In 2008 he retired from teaching after a 34-year career and joined FEMA as a member of its community-relations team. He had to be on call, ready to anywhere in the country whenever disaster struck, going door-to-door helping affected people in disaster areas connect with FEMA and get the resources they need.

From tornadoes in Oklahoma to the devastation caused by Hurricane Sandy, Leone always had his “go bag” packed with essentials ready to fly out on a moment's notice.

For the past 20 years, Leone has also volunteered at Camp Ta Kum Ta in South Hero, Vt. It's a free camp for children with cancer that gives kids an opportunity to experience



Joanne Polster



Ritch Leone