

JOYFUL KEYS LIVING: UPPER KEYS RESIDENT TERRY WILNER-TAINOW A FREE SPIRIT & PROPOSER OF SENIOR SERVICES

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Terry Willner-Tainow

Terry Willner-Tainow grew up in Maplewood, New Jersey. Her father was a pediatrician and her mother an artist. From the beginning she knew that her parents had her back; they allowed her to be herself without prejudice about who she should be.

Willner-Tainow grew up as a free spirit, marching to her consciousness. She met her husband, Jon Tainow, in New Jersey. He was a small business owner when he fell in love with the free-spirited Terry. They married because it was the only way his parents would watch their beloved dog while they traveled in Europe. The Tainows will be married 50 years in July. They have two sons, Mathew and Daniel, and grandchildren Millie and Milo.

Over the years, Terry has worked for social justice with organizations in New Jersey which advocated for the rights of people with disabilities, including senior citizens. She and her family would travel to Florida to visit the “old folks.” On some of these trips the Tainow family ventured to the Keys. At retirement the Tainows decided they would move to Plantation Key.

Arriving in the Keys, Willner-Tainow began looking for things to do. One day she discovered Keys for Peace and its Peace Bell project. The Tainows started visiting each of the many Peace Bell sites. During this adventure, she met like-minded people, including Denise Downing.

Four years later, Downing invited Willner-Tainow to help with a St. Patrick’s Party being hosted at the Plantation Key senior center. Willner-Tainow joined her friends, happy to be there. But, becoming angry over the lack of programs, she said to Downing, “You can put up

streamers and serve cookies, but that will never improve what's happening here." Then they got down to the real work of creating a place that offered fulfilling programs – and the JOY Center was born.

Volunteering with Just Older Youth Inc. was something Willner-Tainow never wanted to do,

"I was not really interested because I didn't want to work with old people any more," she said. "But I just got so angry over the lack of services and programs, I couldn't leave it like that."

Willner-Tainow is a survivor of breast cancer. At first the diagnosis was overwhelming but she kept volunteering at the JOY Center. She set her alarm for Wednesday morning knowing she would interact with her friends at JOY and be of service to others. When she suffered a broken ankle and COVID she experienced how important it was to her physical and mental health when classes were on Zoom. And during this time her JOY friends found her.

"I would sit on my back porch and friends, many from JOY, would come and talk with me. I am a lucky person," she stated.

"When we visited our families, the "old folks" in Florida, they were 10 years younger than I am now. Now I am one of them," Willner-Tainow continued.

She is not alone. According to the 2020 census, 29% of those living in the Upper Keys are 68 or older. The free spirited activist in Willner-Tainow will not let her rest until there is a community center in the Upper Keys that meets the needs of all its citizens.