

# Yorktown woman ‘loves serving her community’

At 81, valued volunteer has no plans to slow down; she’s too busy



By Alison Johnson Correspondent

**YORKTOWN** — For 40 years, Sharon Owen has been a “volunteer” at Historic Yorktown, including nearly a quarter century at the Gallery at York Hall on Main Street.

Volunteers, though, typically don’t work six days a week — about 50 hours total — or come in at 7 a.m. for what can turn into 10-hour shifts on busy days.

Owen, 81, logged 2,269 hours of service in 2024 as manager of the nonprofit showcase for regional artists and authors, which generates funds to support cultural events, museums and historical sites in Yorktown.

During the gallery’s regular season, from April to December, she rarely takes two days off in a row — the three-day-a-week winter season is her slow time.

“I guess I still have a lot of energy,” Owen said. “I love meeting people from all over the world, and I’m lucky that I’m in pretty good shape for my age.”

According to York County leaders, the community is what’s lucky. Last month, the Board of Supervisors honored Owen as the county’s 2024 Volunteer of the Year, with Kevin Ritchie, event planner for York County Economic and Tourism Development, describing her leadership as “inspiring” and her impact and legacy as “immeasurable and undeniable.”

The Gallery at York Hall, a partnership between York County and the Celebrate Yorktown Committee of the Yorktown Foundation, sells handcrafted works by more than 300 artisans, including paintings, jewelry, photographs, fabrics, books and stained-glass pieces.

Owen leads a team of about 25 volunteers. Every six weeks, she rotates exhibits with an eye for design and color that she honed when she owned a flower shop. In September, for example, the gallery showcased wooden bird carvings; October will feature history books and November a “Wonders of Fall” photography exhibit.

A portion of all sales proceeds benefit other local nonprofits, including the Fifes and Drums of York Town, Wreaths Across America, the York County Historical Museum and the Watermen’s Museum. Funds also go toward popular annual traditions such as free concerts by Virginia Symphony Orchestra, the Yorktown Lighted Boat Parade and Art at the River.

Over the past nine years, income from the gallery has allowed the Celebrate Yorktown Committee to give a total of more than \$82,000 to about a dozen nonprofits for Yorktown-focused events, said William Cole, chair of the Yorktown Foundation and founder of the CYC.

“Sharon is such a good and kind person, and just a workhorse,” Cole said. “She’s an inspiration and a friend to her volunteers — the type who sends a get-well card if someone has so much as the sniffles.

“She loves serving her community and attracts others who want to do the same.”

Born in Chicago, Owen’s father was a master gardener and frequently entered flower shows.

She started working at an ice cream parlor at 15, took hotel and motel management courses after high school and held positions at a hotel, bank and flower shop.

In 1974, Owen and a friend opened their own flower store in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, where a customer named Jack Owen came by in 1980 to order bouquets for his mother and a woman he liked in his native Northern Virginia.

Jack, an actuary, took Sharon out for her Sept. 19 birthday that year, and predicted they would be married within a year. He he was close — they tied the knot on Sept. 29, 1981, and remained a united front until Jack died at 91 in November.

In 1985, Jack and Sharon moved to Yorktown, where Sharon soon began volunteering at the Watermen’s Museum.

During her 15 years there, she created a gift shop with an initial \$15 and a card table set up in the parking lot; she later moved into a room indoors.

In late 2001, Celebrate Yorktown Committee members asked Owen to start an art gallery with \$3,000 and an empty room on Main Street, where York County would cover rent and utilities. The following April, the gallery’s first exhibit — a collection of 75 hand-sewn quilts — opened to the public.

Along with organizing displays, Owen communicates with artists, compiles monthly sales and financial reports, organizes an annual “Cookies with Santa” event, and hosts thank-you teas and special sales for volunteers. She lives a mile from the gallery with her cat, Chloe, and enjoys quilting, floral design and time with her son, daughter and four grandchildren.

As for the future, Owen said she hopes to stay healthy enough to work through 2031, the 250th anniversary of the 1781 Yorktown Siege that effectively ended the Revolutionary War. Her volunteer award was a big surprise, she said.

“I was so honored and happy, but I wanted all of us at the gallery to get it. There are many people who make it a success.”