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Darrell Turner wins Clarke Humanitarian Award

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MANATEE — It's hard to imagine that any one person in Manatee County gets as many philanthropic requests as does Darrell Turner, the gregarious owner of Turner Tree & Landscape in Bradenton.

Judy Peterson, Turner's long-time assistant, estimates 50 to 70 calls for help come in each month, and Turner checks out every single one, she said.

For his devotion to many of these causes, including Meals On Wheels Plus, which really has his heart, Turner on Tuesday was named recipient of the Fifth Annual C. John A. Clarke Humanitarian of the Year Award, selected by the Lakewood Ranch Community Fund.

The past recipients of the award, whose namesake was an early visionary in the development of Lakewood Ranch and a man known for his lifelong dedication to humanitarian ideals, start off with Clarke himself, followed by Don O'Leary, Pat Neal and, last year, Lorraine and Dick Vitale.

It was fitting that when Turner was told by Peterson on Tuesday that he won the award he was driving to Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, where he was a sponsor for a United Way of Manatee County fundraiser.

Speaking on his cell phone, Turner said that of all the honors he has had, this one ranks at the top because it is based on humanitarian values and is countywide, and not so much business related.

"John Clarke is such a pillar in the community that to be considered in the same breath is a tremendous honor," said Turner, who actually worked for Clarke as a Lakewood Ranch contractor in 1995. "When she heard I won this, my wife, Mary Ann, was thrilled and excited, which told me right away that this was a biggie."

So with the spotlight on him, does Turner toot his own horn?

No way.

He takes the opportunity to stump for Meals On Wheels Plus, where he is chairman of the board. While he is driving, he quotes facts and figures that paint an amazing picture of what he is trying to do to feed the hungry in Manatee County.

Turner's company has recently donated tractor trailer trucks so fresh produce can be picked up for donation at Bruce Shackelford's 4-Star Tomato, Taylor & Fulton Farms and C&D Produce on State Road 64.

"Taylor & Fulton alone gave us over 240,000 pounds of tomatoes in June," Turner said. "Bruce Shackelford is giving us fresh vegetables, which we have a hard time getting. Global Organics gave more than 200,000 pounds of food so far this year. The O'Briens at C&D are giving us fresh strawberries. Del Monte, at Port Manatee, has given us 150,000 pounds of food so far this year, and Publix Supermarkets gives us 200,000 pounds two or three times a week."

Meals on Wheels has 110 agencies that dispense the produce, which is used in recipes, Turner said.

Not satisfied to just get the food, every Tuesday, from 10:30 to 11:30 am., Turner and his wife deliver Meals On Wheels to 12 needy families on 26th Street West in Bradenton.

"Our demand is up 400 percent this year," Turner said of Meals on Wheels' need.

State Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, who has known Turner many years, is not surprised by Turner's passion.

"If anything, the Turners as a group have just been exactly instrumental in developing the Sarasota-Manatee area," Bennett said. "They've always been there, played it low key, don't do things for publicity. They do them for the right reason. I think the community needs more people who do it for the right reason, not for publicity, not for a job, or for notoriety. It's just the right thing to do."

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