



Hometown Civitan Club, Inc. Hometown Charities, Inc.



Villages Daily Sun April 9, 2026 "Only in the Villages"

ONLY IN THE VILLAGES
By Chasity Boutman

During Civitan Awareness Month this April, Hometown Civitan is honoring Gay Aaron for 50 years of dedicated service, and celebrating the group's decade of contributions to local nonprofits and international research on developmental and intellectual disabilities.

"This is Civitan Awareness Month," said club president Deb McCoy at the local group's April meeting at Evans Prairie Country Club. "It's a time to gain knowledge, demonstrate how we serve and show the impact of our projects on our community."

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Founded in 2015, Hometown Civitan operates under the motto, "Making a Difference One Person at a Time." The 501(c)(3) nonprofit has donated more than \$100,000 to organizations in Lake, Marion and Sumter counties, including over \$90,000 in direct grants. Beyond local support, the club contributes to the Civitan International Research Center, which conducts clinical research on intellectual and developmental disabilities.

"I love Civitan, or I wouldn't still be a member," said Aaron, of St. Augustine. "The reason you join a service organization is the camaraderie, the friendships and the sense of community. You're not just serving. You're building relationships."

Civitan International was founded in 1917 in Birmingham, Alabama, by Dr. Courtney Shropshire, who envisioned a service organization dedicated to hands-on community work.

"In 1974, Civitan was the first community service organization to accept women as official members," Aaron said. "I joined in 1975, and now over 50% of our members are women."

In 1989, Civitan International established the Civitan International Research Center with a \$20 million pledge.

"I've toured the research center five or six times, and it's an awe-inspiring place," she said. "More than 150 Civitan scientists and staff are dedicated to improving the



Photos by Chasity Boatman | Daily Sun

Gay Aaron, left, receives her 50th anniversary pin from Hometown Civitan club president Deb McCoy during the group's April meeting at Evans Prairie Country Club.

well-being and the quality of life of individuals and families affected by intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

Aaron said that she's amazed at the research led by the chair of the UAB Department of Neurobiology, Dr. Craig Powell, who has been the CIRC director since 2018.

“He's helped develop treatments for Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease,” she said. “Because of the complexity of the brain, research can take years to make significant breakthroughs. Civitan International's funding helps spearhead larger projects.”

As part of the Division of Developmental-Behavioral

Pediatrics in the University of Alabama at Birmingham, Civitan-Sparks provides evaluation, consultation, primary care and even dental services for individuals with a range of neurodevelopmental conditions.

“In a dentist office, the smells, lights and noises can be overwhelming,” Aaron said. “Most people don't enjoy going to the dentist, but for some children, these sensory experiences can be especially intense.”

During her time as a Civitan, Aaron has held roles including Civitan International president and district director. She received the International Honor Key in 2010-11, which

is the highest honor recognizing outstanding volunteer service to the organization.

“I'm proud to present Gay Aaron with an anniversary pin for her 50 years of service with Civitan,” said McCoy, of Lake Panasoffkee. “She has been a pioneer in the organization and we are grateful to her years of service.”

The April meeting also included the induction of new member Jackie Wasserman, of the Village of Pine Hills, recruited by member Lana Rosenberg, of the Village of Gilchrist.

“I'm a retired special education teacher,” Wasserman



Gay Aaron holds up a Civitan vest she received in South Korea. Civitan International maintains a presence in South Korea as part of its global community service network.

said. "I'm excited to be part of this club."

During the meeting, club secretary Judith Higbee, of the Village of Belvedere, read aloud a letter from the Florida Guardian ad Litem Office in Lake County.

"Thank you, Hometown Civitan, for bringing cheer to Lake County's most vulnerable children," she said. "We appreciate your beautiful hearts, and they made a lot of children smile."

Locally, Hometown Civitan has supported the Guardian ad Litem Program, PACE Center for Girls, Hand in Hand in Eustis, Shepherd's Lighthouse and Beacon College.

"I learned about Beacon College a few years ago, and everyone in the club has someone with special needs close to them," Higbee said. "One of my grandsons has cerebral palsy and has been

wheelchair bound. Another grandson has ADHD."

Club founder Betty Rohan, of the Village of Collier, said she is proud of Hometown Civitan's impact.

"Initially, I was told it couldn't be done," Rohan said. "But I thought, maybe it can. We're small, but mighty."

McCoy said the club's June meeting will include a presentation by the Civitan International Research Center, giving members another chance to see the tangible outcomes of their support.

"We are making a difference," McCoy said. "And we want others to see how they can be part of that. Civitan is about serving your community, supporting those in need and knowing that even small contributions can have a global impact."

For more information about Hometown Civitan, visit hometowncivitanclub.org.