

# Military retiree finds new way to serve

Man, his family help people 'learn to fish' as RealSense volunteers

*When people volunteer, they can change lives — including their own. Each week in Reason, we will highlight a volunteer's story of giving back and how that selfless act was a true revelation. The volunteer project is a collaboration among the Times-Union, the University of North Florida, the United Way of Northeast Florida and HandsOn Jacksonville.*

By Nancy Winckler-Zuniga  
United Way of Northeast Florida

A rainy Saturday kept down the number of clients coming into the Robert F. Kennedy Community Center. But it did not stop the care taken to make sure that the tax paperwork was complete and rides home or umbrellas were provided, if needed.

Ron Howell, a site coordinator for United Way's RealSense initiative, was there to make sure things went smoothly, just as he has for the last 10 years. His wife, Patricia, and daughter, Rhonda, were also there ready to help others.

"We all get involved," said Howell. "My daughter is a tax preparer, and my wife is a greeter."

Serving others is a family tradition going back three generations. As the youngest of nine children, Howell looked up to his older brothers and sisters in their Sheffield, Ala., home. But it was his brother, Preston, who set the example that they all wanted to emulate.

"We never knew we were poor," Howell said. "We didn't act poor. We didn't know that we were poor."

Preston Howell urged the family to be more faithful and giving, participating in a Boy Scout troop and having them join the local Catholic Church. It



United Way

Ron Howell, RealSense site coordinator, with his daughter Rhonda and wife, Patricia, on site at the Robert F. Kennedy Community Center to help clients prepare their tax forms.

## CHANGE A LIFE — AND YOURS

If you would like to volunteer for the RealSense program of the United Way of Northeast Florida like Ron Howell, you can get more information from Corinne Hinds at [corinneh2@uwnefl.org](mailto:corinneh2@uwnefl.org), or by calling her at (904) 330-3962.

### Here are some other volunteer opportunities:

- Make a difference by volunteering at Daniel, which helps community children and their families, at fundraising activities, organizing game days or mentoring a child. Contact Daniel at [volunteer@danielkids.org](mailto:volunteer@danielkids.org) or call (904) 296-1055, extension 1007.
- United Way's 2-1-1 hotline, a 24-hour information and referral help line, needs help with resource database updates. Volunteers who can type and who have basic computer skills are needed, but will receive data entry training. Contact Holly Diz at [hollyd@uwnefl.org](mailto:hollyd@uwnefl.org), or call (904) 390-3238.

Check out many more opportunities at [www.handsonjacksonville.org](http://www.handsonjacksonville.org) and [www.unitedwaynefl.org](http://www.unitedwaynefl.org).

was Preston who helped convince his parents to have Ron and his sisters educated at the Catholic school. It was Preston who signed up to serve during the Vietnam War as an army paratrooper with the historic 101st Airborne Division — an act that cost him his life. Preston Howell's name is carved onto the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Howell remembers his other brothers joining up

to serve in the military, each one leaving home to carry on a family tradition to give back to their country. The loss of their brother only pushed them to sign up. Service was both an expected responsibility and opportunity for the nine children in the Howell household. But, as the youngest, he had to wait for his turn.

"My parents weren't going to let me sign up," Howell said. "I had to go to

college first."

Eventually, he did join the military, becoming an officer in the Navy Medical Service Corps. His last placement brought him to the Jacksonville Naval Hospital.

Retiring from the military meant finding a new way to serve, and 10 years ago, he and his family committed to helping other families through United Way's RealSense initiative.

"We are helping people to be self-sufficient, to 'learn to fish,'" he said.

In addition to his volunteering activities, Howell became the program director of the Northeast Florida Community Action Agency. Under his direction, the agency has partnered with United Way's RealSense tax and financial programs in Duval and surrounding counties, helping thousands of low-income youth and families improve their financial stability.

"I'm proud of the change we make in people's lives," Howell said. "It's giving them the tools to raise themselves up."