

# AARP Wisconsin: Marshfield man wins top volunteer award

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MADISON, WISCONSIN – Marshfield resident Don Zais will be presented with AARP Wisconsin's highest and most prestigious honor – the “2017 Andrus Award for Community Service” – on Monday, Oct. 16, at the Marshfield Area United Way, 156 S. Central Ave., during a brief ceremony beginning at 1 p.m.

“This award honors Don's tireless commitment to making life better for others,” said AARP Wisconsin State Director Sam Wilson. “Through decades of volunteer service, Don has built up the trust, influence and respect it takes to accomplish great things for those in need throughout the Marshfield area and across all of Wood County. He is a true pillar of his community.”

Don, 75, and his wife, Lyn, have three grown children and four grandchildren. They have lived in Marshfield for 40 years. During this time he has established himself as a leader in the community, working with the Marshfield Area Habitat for Humanity, the Marshfield Area Community Foundation and the Marshfield Area United Way.

He also remains very active at his church, volunteering on numerous committees, and has been for many years, chair of the Building and Grounds Committee and past Clerk of Session.

For the people he assists, Don's goal is to improve their “dignity and purpose by allowing them to either remain living in their homes, after making needed repairs, or through his coordination – building them new, affordable homes,” said Marshfield resident Ed Korlesky, who nominated Don for the award after working with him professionally and as a volunteer for years.

“Through Don’s efforts, the Marshfield area has become known for giving individuals second chances,” Korlesky said. “Working with agencies like the United Way and Wood County Division on Aging and Disabilities, local and area residents know where to turn to when they are in need of assistance. Don always finds time to help those in need.”

As part of his award, Don was given the opportunity to select an organization to receive a \$1,000 donation from AARP. He has chosen to give \$500 to the Marshfield Area United Way and \$500 to the Marshfield Area Habitat for Humanity. He wanted to split his award money with both organizations because of all their great outreach.

“When I see all the things they do, from providing food to school supplies, they just have a tremendous amount of services and programs to help the community.”

Don said he is deeply appreciative and humbled by the award. “My dad is my role model. He was a blue-collar hard worker who was always willing to help out anyone in need. He was an electrician who would step up any time of day or night to provide help. He taught me that if you have the capability and experience to do things for others, you should do it.”

So when Don retired from a long career with Marshfield Health Systems in 2000, he turned his attention to doing anything and everything he could to make life better for others in his community. Serving in various leadership roles, including Chairman of the Building Committee for Habitat since 2000, Don has overseen the building of 12 homes and four rehabs.

“It’s great. You’re building a house, but you’re making a home for a family. I love to see the expressions on their faces when they put in the sweat equity and finally become homeowners. You’re helping families build a new life for themselves,” he said.

Don also used his retirement to become active with the local community center, his church and AARP’s Tax-Aide program, which operates at the United Way facility.

“I was a local coordinator for years and now serve as a counselor. We did approximately 900 tax returns and or Homestead Credits this year. It’s a lot of work, but it’s fun to provide that service. You meet a lot of people who need help and you come to appreciate your own status in life.”

Recipients of the Andrus Award (named after AARP founder Ethel Percy Andrus) in each state across the nation are chosen for their ability to enhance the lives of AARP members and prospective members, improve the community in which the work was performed, and inspire others to volunteer.

“Don clearly goes above and beyond the definition of volunteer, and serves as an inspiring example of the phrase ‘service before self,’” Wilson said. “He is committed to doing whatever he can to make life better for those around him and all of us as we age. He is truly one in a million.”