

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: *Lucette Chizik, 69*

Widow's volunteer work recognized as labor of love

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Lucette Chizik doesn't like romance novels, but she does believe in true love.

It was love for her late husband Max that led her to volunteer for the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association. He was a retired government worker and had asked her to get involved in the association.

And it was love for him that propelled her to get even more involved after he died 20 years ago. Her dedication to the organization came to the fore recently when she received its Woman of the Year Award.

The honor, given her by the Florida chapters, came as a bit of a shock to Chizik, who said she doesn't like a lot of attention. People told her that she didn't react for at least 20 seconds after her name was called.

"This is something that happens to someone else ... not me," said Chizik, who, as district vice president of the organization, oversees six chapters from Boynton Beach to Barefoot Bay in Brevard County. "I just never give it any thought."

Chizik's love story, and the journey that led her to volunteer with the association, started when she left her native France for Philadelphia at age 23.

The move was a bold one in the 1960s. The man who sponsored her move — sponsorship was a requirement in those days — would become her husband about six years later, but she didn't know at the time what would unfold. She simply started working at an advertising agency as a typist and eventually rented her own apartment.

"Back in those days,



DAVID SPENCER/Staff Photographer

Lucette Chizik stands in her backyard garden wearing the medal she was given for being named Woman of the Year by the National Ac-

tive and Retired Federal Employees Association's Florida chapters. She is the district vice president, overseeing six chapters.

if you came from France by yourself, that's pretty gutsy," she said.

She tried to move back to France two years later, but changed her mind.

"I was pretty independent," she said. "And I guess you never go back."

Instead, she kept working. Max Chizik, at the time, was simply a friend.

"He might have had more romantic ideas about me, but I never saw it coming," she said.

She felt their relationship was becoming a little more than friendship when Max showed up after she was evacuated to a nearby hotel because of a fire in her apartment building.

She didn't expect him to come, but he did. He searched for her amid an array of people, pets and birds in the hotel lobby, but she saw him first. Standing behind him, she said, "You looking for someone by any chance?"

He proposed three days later. After getting married, Chizik decided to become a U.S. citizen, but she wanted to surprise her

husband. So, she hid the books she studied about the U.S. government under the sofa.

When it was time to be sworn in as a citizen, Chizik told her husband to meet her at the courthouse. His first question: "What did you do?"

Chizik smiles at the memory.

"I loved to spring things like that on him," she said. "I kept him on his toes."

When he realized what she was up to, Chizik said her husband beamed.

"He was the proudest man," she said.

The couple later lived in Washington, D.C., Germany and New Jersey because of Max Chizik's top security job with the government. In 1980, they retired to Port St. Lucie.

Max, who had diabetes, died in 1988 while the couple was traveling to St. Augustine. They had stopped to get coffee when his heart failed and he collapsed in the parking lot.

She keeps a black and white picture of her husband smiling in her living

room, and she thinks of what he would think of everything she's done, including her fund-raising efforts for the Alzheimer's Care Center in St. Lucie County.

"He would be proud of me," she said.

What's your favorite French food?

Good French cheese. "It's my downfall actually — bread, cheese and a glass of wine."

What are your favorite places to visit?

"Besides France, of course, it would be Norway."

What are your hobbies?

Reading, gardening and cooking for friends.

What do you like to read?

History books, biographies and novels by John Grisham and Carl Hiaasen.

Who has been a mentor to you?

"My husband. He was a very generous person. He was a positive person, and he was funny."

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