Economic turmoil, foreign conflicts, habitat destruction, fires and floods are sad news headlines. Counseling professionals guide us to worry only about things we can take some control over. What can one person do?

Osceola County is fortunate to have many generous citizens that make other's heart aches and misfortune their concern. They work to reduce the pain or improve the quality of our lives. Volunteers help throughout the community in a variety of ways. One at a time, individuals are making a difference. You can make a difference, too.

Several years ago, more than 3000 citizens were involved in a visioning process where they collectively identified key goals, objectives and action plans for a better Osceola County. Local residents identified protection and preservation of our natural resources, life long education, quality of life through growth management, careers and economic development and a sense of community as key issues. Recently, both Buena Ventura Lakes and Poinciana residents have participated in a similar process which is being modeled across the nation.

The organization that made it happen is called Community Vision. Their mission is to bring people and resources together to achieve the community's vision. Soon they will be helping us with a re-visioning process where we look back at what we have accomplished and where we want to continue to go as we move through this new century. They are making plans to help Osceola County government involve more citizens in the Comprehensive Planning process, the process that will guide our growth, balance our need for housing and roads with environmental protection and help us maintain our reputation as a caring community with good quality of life.

Though natural habitats are being destroyed in the development process, citizens are restoring pieces of the natural puzzle by improving their landscapes to be more attractive to wildlife. Residents can take control over environmental issues in their own yard by following basic recommendations from the University of Florida's Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program.

Gardeners have many options to help maintain environmental quality, one yard at a time. Butterfly gardening, planting native plants for food and shelter, and reducing the use of fertilizers and pesticides have wildlife benefits.

Classes and information are offered through our Osceola County Extension Office If you want to learn about horticulture, attracting wildlife and gardening in our area and have time to volunteer, consider becoming a Master Gardener for the Osceola County Extension Service. Call 321-697-3000 for more information.

Now that school is back in session, many teachers will be helping students cope with stress. One way to de-stress is to get involved in an activity that helps you feel useful. High school students are looking for opportunities to help in the community. Community Vision has a list of service projects and needs if you are looking for a worthwhile activity or want to have one listed. You can contact Community Vision at 407-933-0870.

Teachers are finding that gardening is a practical learning experience for students. Complex ideas such as planning, sequencing, plant growth and development and insect study can be learned hands-on in a vegetable or butterfly garden. Children enjoy the "outdoor classroom" and can see first hand what they are studying in math and science. Math concepts are learned when figuring square footage, weighing produce, measuring rows and calculating harvest yield. Origins of vegetables help students learn
geography. Language skills can improve with a variety of teaching methods including gardening. And gardening is fun! As an adult, you could help start a school garden, establish a wildlife refuge planting or help read to local youth.

Another volunteer organization matches volunteers with needs, RSVP. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program, coordinated through the Osceola County Council on Aging, is always looking for adult volunteers to help in a variety of ways. Whether mentoring students, helping deliver meals to the home bound, answering questions at government offices or helping visitors learn about our local attractions, residents can do something to feel better about the world situation by doing something close to home. I know they will need many volunteers to help with the upcoming National Trails Symposium November 10-13. Call 407-846-8532.

Learn more about our community and the variety of activities and services we offer. Plan to attend the upcoming Discover Osceola on Thursday, September 5 from 4:30 to 8 PM at the Kissimmee Civic Center. It is like a visit from the "welcome wagon" combined with a home town celebration atmosphere. Community Vision is coordinating the event with a variety of community sponsors. There will be many exhibits by county and city government offices, community organizations and schools. There will be a special area on local history and the environment. I hope you will join us.

This year, find a need and make a difference. Our community will reap the rewards.

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