Caren Bonisteel:

The Friends Retired and Senior Volunteer Program – or RSVP - marshals a corps of 600 volunteers who contribute 60,000 hours each year to help 130 non-profits and public agencies to advance their missions and serve their clients in Merrimack, Rockingham, Strafford, and parts of Belknap counties.

Within RSVP, we operate three Signature Programs - Friends Caregivers, Bone Builders, and an Pen Pal program. The volunteer we are recognizing this evening participates in all three of these signature programs.

Caren Bonisteel of Chichester has been a Friends RSVP volunteer since January 2013 and has made a tremendous impact on the people in her community.

Twice a week, Caren co-leads Bone Builders strength exercise sessions at the Concord Community Center – the former Dame School. The Bone Builders Program helps seniors improve bone and muscle strength, balance, circulation, and general health. As a session co-leader, Caren ensures that all participants can get healthy in a safe, comfortable, and fun setting. Caren not only helps seniors stay fit but takes a sincere personal interest in them. She’s a wonderful example of how the program’s social aspect enhances the overall fitness experience. She knows participants by name, even if they’re new to the program. And if one of her regulars doesn’t attend for a couple weeks, she’ll check in to make sure they’re alright.

Caren also volunteers as a Friends Caregiver, providing rides for area seniors to medical appointments, the grocery store, and to run other errands. The Friends Caregiver Program is essential for many seniors to remain in their homes and live independently. Caren has been taking a local homebound woman named Patricia each week to appointments. Patricia has some chronic health issues that require frequent medical attention – but she doesn’t drive. Through the Caregivers Program, the pair have become fast friends. Patricia likes to say, “She makes everything rosy.” Patricia feels like she can talk to her about anything. Caren opens up the world for Patricia, beyond the four walls of her apartment.
And if this wasn’t enough, Caren has begun volunteering through our Pen Pals Program, which matches seniors with 3rd graders to exchange letters during the school year. The whole class participates, and each student writes and receives letters from a matched senior Pen Pal. The students feel excitement about getting letters and, as a result, become more motivated to learn vocabulary, spelling, reading and writing.

Caren has touched the lives of so many. We are so fortunate to have her. The purpose of the Friends Program is to build relationships that make our community a better place to live. Caren embodies that purpose and we are honored to celebrate her contributions.