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With 10 years of working for local government recycling programs behind him, Andy Fairbanks found a graduate program at USF St. Petersburg where he could meld his professional experience, academic ambition and desire to research the policies that shape his field.

Fairbanks describes his research in the Florida Studies program as an “ethnography of the policy-making process” for the state’s recycling goals and regulations.

“I want to give a voice to the stakeholders,” said Fairbanks, a Jensen Beach native. “The Florida Studies program has added valuable political and cultural context to my research.”

But balancing work and completing his research proved too demanding and Fairbanks wanted to commit to his graduate program full-time.

Like many working adults, he couldn’t afford becoming a full-time student.

Then came Hope.

Fairbanks met Hope Black in January of 2011. She impressed him with what Fairbanks describes as “a humble, bright and charismatic personality.”

Black lives in Sarasota with her husband, Bob, and graduated from the Florida Studies program in December 2007, a program she completed after earning a bachelor’s degree in history at age 71. She started studying in the 1950s, but then “life happened,” she said, “marriage, my husband drafted into the army, children and a career in market research.”

The New York native’s lifelong commitment to finishing a history degree and a genuine interest in learning more about her adopted state of Florida led her to Florida Studies and the Snell House at USF St. Petersburg.

“I thought I had died and gone to heaven when I walked in that house,” Black said. “I enjoyed every single minute of the Florida Studies program. Even though I finished my degree, I’m auditing courses this summer. I’m still driving over the bridge to learn.”

Black’s thesis was on Bertha Honore Palmer’s contributions to Florida. Since completing her degree, she has given speeches on Florida History, worked as an archivist with the Sarasota
County History Center, and participated in recording the oral histories of people that moved to Florida in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

Besides continuing to study and work in the area of historical research, Black has also chosen to give back to the Florida Studies program, a generous gesture that is now helping Fairbanks commit to the program full-time.

“My husband and I felt that the Florida Studies program had enriched my life so much and changed it so much that we wanted to make a contribution,” Black said. “It’s an honor to help support someone like Andy – I think he can make inroads into the way government handles waste and recycling. He can change the environment of Florida. I believe he can do it.”

Black and Fairbanks, the former a septuagenarian and the latter in his 30s, are now friends. She learns from his research. He learns from her life experience.

The most recent $5,000 contribution, a grant made possible by The Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Inc. from the Bob and Hope Black Good Neighbor Fund, is Black and her husband’s second gift to the program.

“Supporting a program like this becomes a legacy,” Black said. “You can see that you’ve left something important for the future.”