



Photos by Myron Leggett



The Garden Worship Center and Pastor Norman Lee Schaffer are on a mission to bring "a little light into the darkness."

GROWING FOR GOD & COMMUNITY

For years, he was Ocala's Golden Boy. Starting in the late-'80s, Norman Lee Schaffer's name was on marquees across town. He was the hottest country act in Florida, playing 250 shows a year in the state and at venues across the country.

Schaffer performed with country's biggest names, from Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn to LeAnn Rimes and The Judds. In 1992, he scored a record contract in Nashville. Along with a national radio release, his music video aired on CMT and he appeared on TNN. In 1997, he began performing regularly in The Villages.

"I was at the top of my game, on top of the world. I worked hard and played hard," recalls Norman Lee. "I made some bad decisions and choices in life and fell to the bottom. It was time for a change. When you are down to nothing, God is up to something"

After rededicating himself to God in 2003, Norman Lee's life turned around. Instead of singing about the classic country themes of falling in (or out) of love, he started using his talents for God.

"I began writing inspirational songs about God's saving grace and the blood of Jesus," he says. "I borrowed \$200 and recorded my first Gospel song, *God is with Me*, which became the title track of my first Gospel CD. Since then, we've started our own Christian record company and released five more CDs. Now, we sell Christian music to 75 countries around the world"

It appeared God had more than music in store for Norman Lee. In 2009, the singer/songwriter became an ordained minister, and in November of that year, he and wife, Terri (they've been called the "Joel and Victoria Osteen" of Central Florida), launched The Garden Worship Center in Belleview.

The multi-denominational church is over 500 members strong and growing.

"I couldn't have done it without the support of Terri, who's my 'guardian angel,' and our wonderfully talented worship team," says Norman Lee.

Music is obviously a big part of the church, but it doesn't stop there.

"With music, costumes and props, we use all the senses to literally bring the Word of God to life every Sunday," says Norman Lee. "We're just trying to bring a little light into the darkness."

In addition to serving God, The Garden Worship Center serves the community, offering a Christian 12-step recovery program and outreach for the entire family. The church is also active with such community endeavors as the Marion County Humane Society, Hospice, Operation Shoebox, Love Inc., USA Cares, various area food pantries and more.

The Garden Thrift Store and Boutique, which Norman Lee refers to as "probably the best thrift store on the planet, thanks to our wonderful donations," is another area of ministry.

"At 51 years old, I never thought I would be doing this, but I'm having the greatest time in my life, serving God and serving others," he says. "I'm still the same Norman Lee—just cleaned up, straightened up and looking up, praise God!"

The Garden Worship Center

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Sunday services at 9 & 11am
Childcare for kids
(The Punkin' Patch)
The Garden Cafe & Gift Shop
The Garden Thrift Shop and Boutique
Wednesday-Saturday 10am-4pm