

Editorial

Divisive year, yes, but we have many gifts

NAPLES DAILY NEWS

EDITORIAL BOARD

To say 2016 was divisive would be the understatement of the year.

Yet as we look around Southwest Florida on Christmas and during the first days of Hanukkah, we realize that for every lump of coal in someone's stocking there are many-fold gifts bestowed on the community. Here are just a few that come to mind:

Volunteers

Collier County is home to some 2,900 registered nonprofit agencies and organizations with more than \$5 billion of assets, according to the decade-old website taxexemptworld.com. The site lists Lee at about 3,900 agencies with \$4.7 billion in assets.

Whatever the number, thousands of volunteers are at the heart of nonprofit operations. Across Florida, the value of each unpaid helper's time averages about \$22 an hour.

United Way of Collier County, itself a volunteer-intensive organization, partners with 34 nonprofits that provide human services touching the lives of more than 100,000 residents yearly. Collier's United Way, a top four-star-rated organization by respected watchdog Charity Navigator, helps connect agencies and volunteers through a web-based program where your information remains confidential. From mentoring young folks to brightening a senior's day to helping out at food pantries, you can go to www.volunteer-collier.com and connect. It's just one of the programs that exist thanks to the \$2.75 million donated to United Way of Collier County in 2015.

Philanthropy

Indeed, philanthropists are the region's Santa Claus, and they're real.

Start with the Community Foundation of Collier County's ability to distribute \$12.7 million to local nonprofits to top \$100 million historically as it holds nearly \$120 million in assets while assisting 400 organizations.

Tip a glass to the Naples Children & Education Foundation providing more than \$11 million this year to local organizations whose mission is to help children, money raised in January through the annual winter wine festival. Since it began in 2001, it has raised more than \$146 million to improve the lives of 200,000 children through the years.

Gaze skyward to the new Golisano Children's Hospital, south of Fort Myers on the HealthPark campus. The Lee Health system announced in November it reached a \$100 million fundraising goal in six years. Next spring, construction should wrap up on the seven-story, 128-bed hospital to care for the area's sickest children, largely made possible by a \$20 million matching donation by Thomas Golisano, of Naples.

Along with Golisano, the foundation bearing the name of Bonita Springs resident Richard Schulze commonly bestows philanthropic gifts, from working with the Harry Chapin Food Bank in tackling persistent hunger to the unbelievable remake of the Greater Naples YMCA since a Labor Day 2013 fire.

Well-being

It was reaffirmed recently that there's no better place for well-being.

The Naples-Marco Island-Immokalee area last week was rated No. 1 among all U.S. metropolitan areas for life expectancy. The 24/7 Wall St. rating put life expectancy in Collier County at 83.5 years compared with 78.8 years nationally, at a time the U.S. figure for longevity declined for the first time since 1993.

So we're by no means going to the dogs, or maybe we are. DogVacay, a website for dog sitting, this month rated the Naples area as No. 1 for dog friendliness when analyzing 20 factors in 1,100 major U.S. cities.

It was also a year when Retire magazine chose the Naples area as the ultimate destination for living the good life. The Kiplinger Letter put Naples in the top 10 cities in which to retire, and the Naples area came in first of the happiest and healthiest places in the country in a Gallup-Healthways 2015 analysis.

Certainly not everyone is well, and that brings us full cycle back to volunteers and philanthropists. They support the likes of Harry Chapin, the David Lawrence Center that works with those battling mental illness or addiction, the conservation-focused Conservancy of Southwest Florida and the expanding Neighborhood Health Clinic in Naples, to name a very few.

Describing this sometimes divided community as uncaring, well that would be the mischaracterization of the year.