

I T ' S A L L

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AS NCEF, THE ORGANIZATION BEHIND WINTER WINE FESTIVAL, PREPARES FOR ITS 20TH ANNIVERSARY, WE LOOK AT HOW THE FOUNDATION EXPOSED CHILD POVERTY AND INEQUITY, REWROTE THE PLAYBOOK ON LOCAL PHILANTHROPY, INSPIRED A NEW APPROACH TO CIVIC PROBLEM-SOLVING AND CHANGED COLLIER KIDS' LIVES. BY JENNIFER REED, PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN TIETZ

Collier County used to be pretty good at some pretty slick stagecraft. Imagine a camera panning white-sand beaches and five-star restaurants and members-only golf courses and million-dollar mansions and medians that look like flower gardens—the carefully cultivated public face of one of the state's wealthiest regions.

Left out of the scene: ramshackle trailers, empty refrigerators, frustrated teachers and failing kids, frazzled mothers desperate for childcare or medical help or a dentist to tend their child's toothache.

Twenty years ago, a group of residents who live in those million-dollar homes and play at those membership-only golf courses started looking beyond the lens. These were philanthropic-minded people, some of whom had given endlessly in their native communities but hadn't yet examined Collier, their retirement home. Once they did, they were aghast.

"It felt like a Third World country, and I've traveled all over," Denise Cobb, a former CNN anchor and television station owner, says about Immokalee, the agricultural town in Collier's interior. "It was that dire."

Many Southwest Floridians know what happened next: The Cobbs and another couple, the Gargiulos, recruited civic-minded friends and organized a wine auction to raise money for two child-centered nonprofits. That fundraiser evolved into one of the world's biggest and most successful events of its kind: Naples Winter Wine Festival, the apex of the community's social season. The event that allows the trustees to pour money into some 45 nonprofit organizations each year—\$191 million since its creation.

But, behind the scenes and at the heart of the flashy affair, are the operations of the Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF), the nonprofit established to allocate wine fest revenue.

We won't pretend every issue has been rectified—that's impossible—but community leaders say the county's children are much better off today than they were two decades ago.

Back in 2005, the trustees commissioned "A Study of Child Well Being in Collier County." These people, who had built high-powered careers on data collection and strategic thinking, demanded no less of the nonprofit they founded. The research revealed a bleak reality behind Collier's posh image: 15 percent of children lived in poverty; 25 percent of newborns lacked adequate prenatal care; 31 percent—some 17,000 kids—lacked proper dental care; 24 percent of kids entering kindergarten weren't ready for school; and half of the children needing after-school care weren't getting it. "That's when we realized, 'We need to be creating systems of care,'" says Maria Jimenez-Lara, a longtime nonprofit administrator in Collier County who took the helm at NCEF in 2015.

With almost no county money allocated for human services and little coming from the state, the task of caring for the vulnerable falls on philanthropic groups. Cobb remembers once commenting about the "ridiculous" lack of human service spending to a former county commissioner. That official told her flatly: "That's what the Wine Fest is for," she recounts.



Children play outside as part of the after-school program at the Boys & Girls Club of Collier County in Immokalee.



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Their charge made abundantly clear, NCEF trustees and staff organized the study's findings into seven strategic initiatives: early learning, health care, hunger, oral health, mental health, out-of-school time and vision. Grants would go to organizations and projects promising to impact those areas.

**The grants committee, a subgroup of the trustees,** assigns a trustee to each qualifying applicant for a thorough review. Once a grant is approved, the organization continues to work with a trustee liaison. Lump sums are not handed over; instead, grants are paid in installments, and trustees monitor the organizations to make sure they are working toward the objectives outlined in the applications.

At first, the foundation went after the "low-hanging fruit"—concrete needs with concrete solutions, like the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center, an \$8 million, state-of-the-art clinic on the campus of Florida SouthWestern State College.

Goodness knows the community needs it. The place is busy with some 100 kids coming through each day. Dr. Lauren Governale, the clinical director who has been there since the start, says dental decay among Collier's children was among the worst she and fellow longtime pediatric dentists had ever seen. (Prior to the clinic's opening, 70 percent of the children screened at one elementary school had untreated tooth decay).

In addition to what Thomas and her fellow residents teach families about oral care, there is an NCEF-funded "promotora de salud," a community health educator who instructs parents on things

such as the sugar content of popular drinks; how to brush their children's teeth; and, using rather graphic photos, what's at stake when tooth decay takes hold.

"With places like Immokalee, which is a migrant community, there is constant flux and we are still fighting the battle," Governale says. Even so, she is cheered by what the clinic has accomplished. Since 2008, it has had an estimated 140,000 visits.

A vision initiative had a similar thrust. NCEF supports annual vision screenings for roughly 20,000 children in low-income schools and connects those who need follow-up care with partnering doctors. Kids who need glasses receive two pairs—one for school and one for home. Thanks to the vision initiative, principals can weed out the kids whose classroom performance had nothing to do with learning or language problems. "It's not necessarily that they didn't have the capacity to pass the test," Superintendent Kamela Patton says. "It's that they couldn't see the words."

**You can look at the big new dental clinic or the kids grinning in new eyeglasses and deem NCEF a success.** But the foundation's bigger contribution is one that the public doesn't necessarily see or experience.

To understand it, rewind two decades and witness what Cobb encountered when she convened nonprofit leaders to meet about the nascent auction. "A lot of them didn't even know each other," Cobb remembers.

Directors will confess they were possessive of their programs and protective of their donor pool.

A child at the \$8 million NCEF Pediatric Dental Center, one of the medical institutions created with Naples Winter Wine Festival funds.



From left: Megan McCarthy Beauvais, president and CEO of The Boys & Girls Club; Islande Victorin; Mark Trejo.

NCEF came along with a pretty firm message: You gotta learn how to play nice. The trustees no longer fund a patchwork of disconnected programs.

Two sweeping collaborative projects were born at the table, one focused on out-of-school time and the other on mental health.

"I can't believe how far I've come with the help of these programs," says Islande Victorin, 18, in the teen room at the Boys & Girls Club in Immokalee, a lounge-like space populated by young teens playing video games and toying with their cell phones (it's the last day of school—and a reprieve from homework and formal programming). Victorin has been a fixture at this place and other after-school offerings around the community, including the Guadalupe Center's Tutor Corps, since her parents moved the family here from Haiti when Victorin was in fifth grade. "I knew like six words," she says, grinning. "Good afternoon. Good morning. Thank you. Please."

After-school and summer program staff pushed her to speak, coached her through homework, instilled in her leadership skills, and held her hand through the college application process. Her parents are agricultural workers. "They always told me to take my education seriously so I didn't have to do the jobs they were doing."

In isolation, the after-school and summer programs might have produced a certain number of kids like Victorin, who is going to Arcadia University in Pennsylvania on a full scholarship and who worked as a second-grade camp counselor at the Boys & Girls Club over the summer. But NCEF staff and trustees questioned the fragmentation—in

some cases three different nonprofits operated three different after-school programs out of the same elementary school.

A few years ago, NCEF tapped Jamie Scott, who is with the Southwest Florida Workforce Development Board, to oversee all of the out-of-school programs it funds in Immokalee and find ways to unite them. Today, three nonprofits may serve the same elementary, but they work as a collective, and by doing so, they've eliminated redundancies, expanded the number of slots available and exposed kids to the best of what each program has to offer—like a newly hatched collaboration between the Boys & Girls Club and The Immokalee Foundation, which will pair certified reading teachers with academically at-risk kids.

Coupled with reforms within the school district, the out-of-school programming has contributed to a graduation rate that jumped nearly 20 percentage points in seven years and propelled the district from a lackluster 33rd in the state for its academic performance to a three-way tie for third, according to Patton. "It's not just about helping one kid to graduate—[a diploma is] a game-changer for that kid, for the siblings, for the parents and for the next generation," she says.

**NCEF took a similar approach to treat mental health, among the community's vexing challenges.** The organization used its clout to pull together organizations best equipped to treat children's psychological disorders: the David Lawrence Center; the National Alliance on Mental Illness; the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida; and Flor-

ida State University's College of Medicine, which already had a presence in Immokalee.

In 2008, those players established what's known as an "integrated health model"—pairing psychologists with Healthcare Network pediatricians to treat physical and psychological needs under the same roof.

Now, when kids arrive at a Healthcare Network pediatric office, they or their parents fill out an electronic mental health questionnaire. If the screening and doctor visit raises flags, the doctor introduces the family to the on-site psychologist. That specialist, in turn, will begin to unravel issues such as anxiety, depression, self-esteem and the emotional wounds caused by divorce, death or other family misfortunes.

"I don't have to tell you that mental health is the topic of the year and will be for decades, I think," says pediatrician Dr. Jose Salazar. "I can see the difference between the way I used to work without the psychologist and the way I work today. Most of the people in this town, they're shy, and they don't always tell you until you start fishing for things."

His next hope is to tackle childhood obesity, a problem that is as much behavioral as it is medical. He'll enlist psychologists and nutritionists for help—realizing his influence alone isn't always enough to provoke change. "When the nutritionist, the doctor and the psychologist all explain something, that will be a great thing."

At the David Lawrence Center, CEO Scott Burgess shows off one of his latest additions, a new building that houses a partial hospitalization program—funded by NCEF—for kids who need inten-

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sive, all-day therapy, but who are stable enough to go home at night. There's a sculpture in the lobby of a giant tree teeming with birds and butterflies, a gift from a parent grateful for her child's treatment.

David Lawrence Center has provided 13,000 more services in the past two years than its previous annual average, Burgess says. That's because of his expanding service line, because Healthcare Network is flagging more kids with mental health problems and because the collaborative approach has eliminated bottlenecks in the system. The system still needs refining, but it's a far cry from the wasteland that was mental health care a decade or so ago.

These days, other groups have taken note of what can be accomplished when multiple organizations come together. Borrowing in part from NCEF's approach, some 60 groups have formed a collective known as "Future Ready Collier" to tackle kindergarten readiness and post-high school career and college preparation. The partners include funders (NCEF among them), student-centered nonprofits, preschool programs and the school district.

"It is the next iteration, not just of philanthropy, but of how we should work together as a community," says Lisa Church, the vice president of Champions for Learning, the umbrella organization for Future Ready Collier. "The challenges in this community are huge, and none of us can do it alone." ■