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Their Unique Legacy

Meet Jessica Muroff, the New President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County



After an extensive national search, the Community Foundation's Board of Directors has selected Jessica Muroff as the organization's new president and chief executive officer, effective Jan. 20, 2026.

With 20-plus years of experience in the nonprofit, philanthropic, and business sectors, Muroff has most recently led United Way Suncoast, one of the largest United Ways in Florida. During her tenure, Muroff led a comprehensive transformation of the organization by prioritizing community impact through modernized grantmaking and collaborative initiatives and partnerships grounded in data, all while stewarding \$51 million in fiscal assets, including a notable unsolicited donation of \$20 million by the philanthropist MacKenzie Scott.

"It is an honor to have been selected to lead this extraordinary organization and steward the charitable wishes of the generous people of this community," Muroff says. "The culture of compassion, integrity, and quality within the foundation is unmistakable, and the community's commitment to a brighter future is deeply inspiring. I look forward to building on the Community Foundation's many strengths and partnerships while working alongside our community to develop innovative solutions to the region's ever-evolving challenges."

Our Mission

Community Impact Powered by Philanthropy

Our Work

We unite people and organizations to create opportunities for families across generations to improve their lives through cultural, educational, economic, and social support.

Every one of us has the potential to impact another person, a cause, a community.
Be The One.

LETTER FROM OUR BOARD CHAIR AND INTERIM CEO



Dear Friends:

The legacy of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County extends back nearly five decades, and over the course of those years, the organization has been led by only two CEOs. That changes in January, when Jessica Muroff becomes the third individual to guide the foundation as its president and chief executive officer.

Jessica brings more than 20 years of leadership experience in the nonprofit, philanthropic, and business sectors. Most recently serving as CEO of United Way Suncoast, she is known for her strategic, data-driven approach to philanthropy and her deep commitment to community well-being. Jessica's collaborative spirit and proven ability to inspire meaningful partnerships will strengthen the foundation's impact and build on the legacy left by our generous donors, whose stories continue to inspire.

Take Ira and Patricia Strauss, who created the blueprint for the Ira and Patricia Strauss Fund for Children's Literacy. Established in 2018, the fund powers our Strauss Literacy Initiative, which is designed to help students in our area who are struggling with dyslexia and other reading disabilities. While the fund has been in existence for seven years, it continues to grow and evolve as our partners at local school districts and nonprofits deepen their understanding of dyslexia. Overall, the foundation has awarded more than \$1.2 million in grants through the Strauss initiative just in the past year. Particularly exciting is a new partnership with the School District of DeSoto County, which you can read about on page 4.

Another fund with a fascinating backstory is the Eluned and Edward Russell Charitable Foundation, which came to the Community Foundation in 2019. Managed by Patricia "Patty" Smith and her father, Maurice "Moe" Dinneen, the fund is named for Moe's aunt and uncle, who passed in the 1990s. The couple led a fascinating life. Eluned immigrated from Wales as a young woman and worked in Hollywood, while Edward was born in Massachusetts and became a high-ranking executive in the insurance industry.

One thing they had common? Generosity. The fund they left behind has supported dozens of causes in our area, from Tidewell Hospice to Habitat for Humanity. Their story appears on page 10.

Many of our funds have generously supported area arts organizations, many of which are facing challenges on multiple fronts as they struggle to recover from last year's hurricane season while also dealing with funding cuts and budget shortfalls. On page 6, you'll learn about a recent program we forged with the Arts & Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County. The alliance invited a number of small and mid-sized arts nonprofits to attend a series of workshops that were designed to help them improve their marketing, grow their fundraising capacity, and increase their sustainability and resilience.

Of course, the arts sector wasn't the only one devastated by last year's storms. We're hearing more and more from families who are struggling to pay their bills as the cost of things like home insurance, groceries, and childcare continues to rise. We recently launched our annual Season of Sharing campaign in partnership with the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* and it remains an effective, proven way to help neighbors in crisis. Fully 100 percent of donations to Season of Sharing goes to help people in need.

Building on our past while moving boldly into an exciting new era, all of us at the foundation want to thank you for what you do to make our community a more generous place.

Happy holidays,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paul G. Hudson". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Paul G. Hudson,
Board Chair and Interim CEO

FLOODING THE ZONE

The Strauss Literacy Initiative expands to help students of all ages across the region.

When students struggle to learn to read, the impact extends far beyond their report card or their test scores. When called upon to read out loud in class, they may feel acute embarrassment when they find themselves unable to do so, and homework sessions can generate intense stress and frustration as they stumble through a lesson plan. As a result, many begin to internalize the idea that they are less intelligent than their peers, even though they may be extremely smart and creative.

That's why early detection of reading challenges like dyslexia is key. Identifying students who need extra help with their reading at a young age alerts teachers that those students need direct, explicit instruction, and helps parents and the students themselves understand that their struggles are the result of a neurological disorder, not the result of a lack of effort or a shortage in intelligence or attention span.

But detection is still just a first step in a long journey, which is why the Community Foundation of Sarasota County's Strauss Literacy Initiative works with a growing number of partners around the region to reach students of all ages.

Overall, the initiative has issued more than \$1.2 million in grants in the last year. While much of the funds have been directed to longstanding Strauss Literacy Initiative partners, a grant to the School District of DeSoto County represents the fund's first foray into DeSoto County public schools and marks a new chapter in the evolution of the Strauss Initiative.

Across the region, students are receiving literacy support in a wide variety of ways.



Sarasota County teachers at a training session funded by the Strauss Literacy Initiative

• In **Sarasota County**, charitable dollars are being used to support Literacy for All, a Sarasota County Schools initiative to strengthen K-12 literacy skills by enhancing professional learning opportunities around literacy for educators and administrators in collaboration with the University of Florida's Lastinger Center for Learning, a widely respected leader in providing research-based learning programs for educators. Through the initiative, literacy specialists and interventionists can pursue dyslexia certification opportunities, while literacy interventionists and coaches receive additional training. Funding for a full-time district-wide program specialist staff position, meanwhile, supports efforts to provide effective instruction to struggling readers and students with dyslexia, and dyslexia screeners help identify students who may need extra reading assistance. Also in Sarasota, St. Mary Academy—a private school for students with learning disabilities—is able to offer scholarships to students with dyslexia so that they can benefit from the school's expertise in helping diverse learners.

- In **Manatee County**, the school district is also working with the University of Florida's Lastinger Center to help administrators, elementary teachers, literacy coaches and interventionists, and paraprofessionals improve their early learning and literacy teaching skills. Elementary schools have also implemented small-group teaching strategies proven to be effective and are using dyslexia screeners.

- In **DeSoto County**, a new partnership between the school district and the Community Foundation, established just this school year, will soon deliver decodable text lending libraries, professional learning opportunities, dyslexia screeners, and more.



Students practicing their reading skills



Who Were Ira and Patricia Strauss?

Dyslexia deeply affected Patricia Strauss, who, together

with her husband Ira, helped create the blueprint for the Ira and Patricia Strauss Fund for Children's Literacy, the fund behind the Strauss Literacy Initiative. Patricia found it difficult to read and write well into her adulthood, when she was finally diagnosed with dyslexia, an experience that filled her with a resolve to help as many young people as possible avoid the frustration that she experienced.

The Strauss fund was established at the Community Foundation in 2018 with an endowment of nearly \$23.6 million from Ira and Patricia's estate. To date, the fund has awarded more than \$4.3 million in grants, and the initiative's efforts—and impact—are growing exponentially each year.

- At **State College of Florida's** campuses across the region, students are receiving psychoeducational testing services that help diagnose reading challenges, as well as devices and technology that boost their classroom performance.

- And outside of school walls, **Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota and DeSoto Counties** help maintain progress made during the school day through the summer and after school hours. The organization hired teachers this past summer at six sites to provide reading instruction for students hoping to catch up—or at least maintain skills—between academic years.

"Dyslexia is a neurological condition that affects so many students in so many different ways, and addressing it requires a similarly wide range of strategies and techniques," says Kirsten Russell, the vice president of community impact at the Community Foundation. "In working with this coalition, we hope to build understanding about dyslexia itself and reach every student we can so that no one is forced to endure the frustration and low self-esteem that often accompany dyslexia." 📖

To learn more about the Strauss Literacy Initiative, scan this QR code to watch a short video.



ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

The Arts & Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County helps small nonprofits make a big impact.

Sarasota's arts sector has faced unprecedented challenges in recent years. Hurricanes have damaged theaters, concert venues, museums, and other facilities, leading to canceled shows, lost revenue, and costly repairs, and public arts funding cuts have led to unexpected budget shortfalls.

While large arts organizations with established brands and committed supporters or patrons may be able to weather such challenges, many small and mid-sized arts organizations have been forced to grapple with an uncertain financial future. To help those smaller arts nonprofits increase their resilience and sustainability, this summer, the Arts & Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County invited a handful of arts nonprofits to take part in a series of workshops made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, and 11 participating organizations also received capacity

building grants from the foundation. The series provided the nonprofits with both education in how to grow their internal capacity, as well as funding to put those plans into action.

At the workshops, a variety of experts guided participants through a series of exercises that challenged them to develop concrete plans for how they can make their organizations more successful. Sessions focused on helping nonprofits improve their marketing and storytelling efforts, strengthen their fundraising capacity, grow their public profile, widen their community support, and partner effectively with others in their field. Arts leaders walked away with clear goals and plans for their organizations, helping ensure that Sarasota's cultural fabric remains strong and vibrant.



The Pops Orchestra of Bradenton and Sarasota is a 65-piece orchestra that has produced critically acclaimed musical events for audiences of all ages since its founding in 1975.

“We benefited from taking a deep dive into our ‘why’ and were able to engage our board members through the activating questions presented at the workshops, which helped them reach a deeper level of understanding of our organization and their role in making it thrive. The bonus to these classes was that all of the participating organizations got to know each other better, and on a personal level. I felt as though I gained 15 new friends and mentors through the process.”

– Robyn Bell, The Pops Orchestra of Bradenton and Sarasota

“What stood out most was how personal and actionable the sessions felt. For an organization like SPAACES, which is growing quickly, but still modest in size, it was empowering to connect with mentors and peers who understand that stage of growth. It gave us both the confidence and the strategies to tell our story more boldly.”

– Asya Stuart, SPAACES Foundation



SPAACES Foundation provides both exhibition space and studios for artists, and works to advance contemporary visual art while supporting professional artists.



“We heard a clear need from our arts community, and it was incredibly rewarding to help to meet it and learn alongside such passionate organizations and professionals. We see this type of collaborative work as pivotal to our mission of being a resource, voice, and advocate for the arts in Sarasota.”

– Brian Hersh, Arts & Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County

“The sessions opened new ways of thinking, offered fresh perspectives and resources, and were very informative all around. It was also inspiring to share space with other organizations—exchanging ideas, discovering common ground, and even sparking possibilities for collaboration.”

– Keren Shani-Lifrak, Artist Series Concerts of Sarasota

Artist Series Concerts of Sarasota presents concerts by outstanding musicians performing in a wide variety of genres and introduces young people to interactive music experiences.



The Mike Block Trio, who will perform as part of the Artist Series Concerts of Sarasota in January

AND THE SURVEY SAYS...

What donors have to say about working with the Community Foundation of Sarasota County.

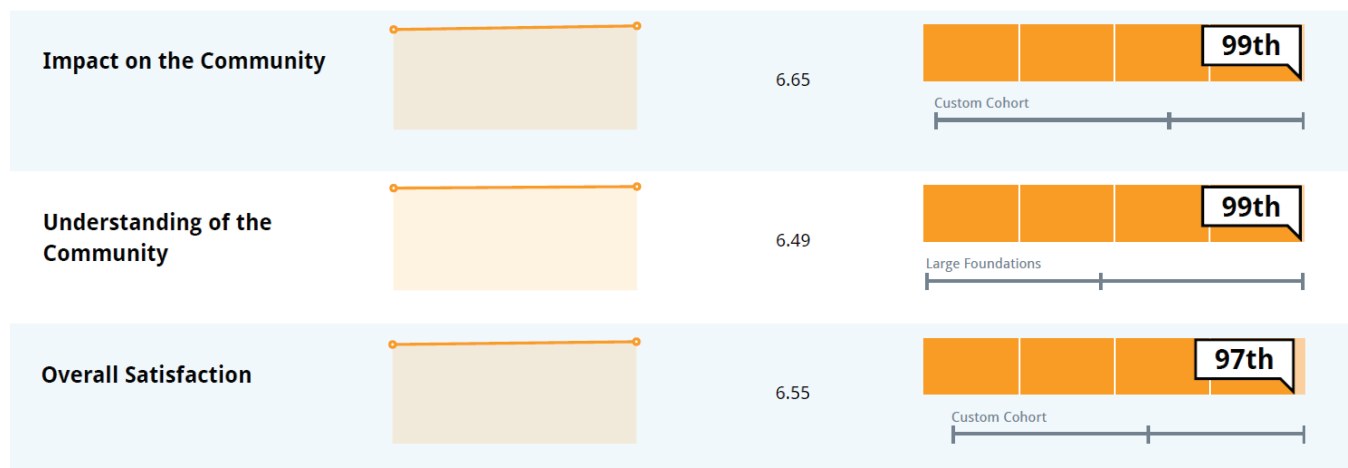
“Asking and listening.” It’s a simple mantra, but it’s central to the work we do at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. It’s a reminder that no one has all the answers, and that we can only succeed in our mission when we actively solicit input from the families we hope to help, the nonprofits we work with, and the donors whose generosity powers our impact.

But what do our donors *really* think of us? We’re always asking that question, but it’s useful to step back on occasion and hear the unfiltered, unvarnished truth, which can come only when people can speak their minds anonymously. That’s why, earlier this year, we asked the Center for Effective Philanthropy to anonymously survey our donors, analyze the results and prepare a Donor Perception Report with their observations and recommendations.

We scored well: In overall donor satisfaction, we earned a score of 6.55 out of a maximum of 7, ranking in the top 3 percent of community foundations

nationwide. That’s a terrific score for several reasons, but particularly because it represents an improvement from our previous Donor Perception Report, which was compiled in 2019. Donors clearly recognize the steps we’ve taken to grow and improve in the intervening years and see that those steps are making a noticeable difference.

In addition to our overall rating, we achieved similarly high scores when donors were asked if they would be likely to recommend us to a friend or colleague (in the top 5 percent) and when they were asked to rate how responsive we are to them (in the top 7 percent). Perhaps the most impressive results came when donors were asked to evaluate our impact on the community and how well we understand Sarasota County and our region. In both cases, we scored at the very top of the center’s national rankings—setting a new high-water mark for not only our foundation, but for community foundations nationwide.

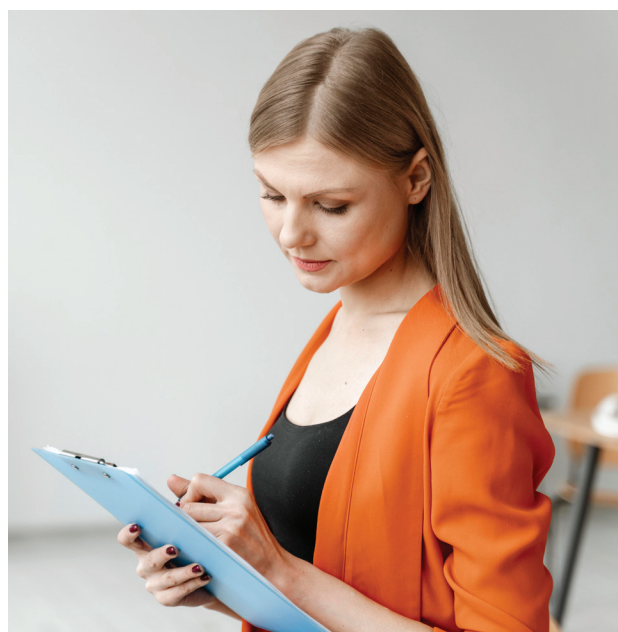


“When donors were asked to evaluate our impact on the community and how well we understand Sarasota County and our region, we scored at the very top of the center’s national rankings—setting a new high-water mark for not only our foundation, but for community foundations nationwide.”

All of that is a testament to the work we do collectively throughout the foundation, from the warm greetings people receive when they stop by our office to the support offered by our Finance department and the in-depth research and stories of impact generated by our Community Impact and Strategy and Communications departments.

But the whole point of doing surveys like this isn’t to pat ourselves on the back and focus on what we’re doing well—it’s to ask and listen, and to identify areas where we can improve in partnership with our donors. Survey respondents were encouraged to share their thoughts on things we could do to better our operations, and we’re taking those answers to heart. Some asked us to be more proactive about reaching out to them more regularly, while others suggested improvements to our events to better connect them with local causes, and still others recommended that we expand our efforts in areas like the environment and sustainability.

That kind of feedback is invaluable and provides added motivation for us to grow and improve. We’re happy with the results of this year’s survey, yes, but until our community is a place where every last person can thrive, there’s always more work to be done. 🏡



THE CENTER
FOR EFFECTIVE
PHILANTHROPY

The Center for Effective
Philanthropy is a
national nonprofit that

provides data, feedback, and programs for
donors and foundations to help them maximize
the effectiveness of their philanthropic giving.

LARGER THAN LIFE

How the Eluned and Edward Russell Charitable Foundation came to be.

When Edward Russell and Eluned Breckenridge met on a cruise ship in 1974, romance struck immediately, and theirs was much more than a fleeting encounter.

Eluned, who went by “Lynne,” was born in the village of Pontllytyn, Wales, a small working class town where most of the men, including her father and brothers, worked deep underground in coal mines. Lynne left Wales for Canada shortly after her 18th birthday, arriving in Toronto with little to her name and nowhere to stay except for a Salvation Army hostel. She eventually arrived in the United States in 1948 and launched a career in the travel industry that included a stint in Hollywood with MGM, for whom she coordinated logistics for long-distance movie shoots. By 1969, she found herself in Sarasota, where she owned and operated multiple travel agencies.

Edward, meanwhile, was born in Revere, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston. “Ted,” as he was known, attended Boston University and Northeastern University before entering the insurance industry at John Hancock. While there, he pioneered the idea of group life insurance, in which employers would deduct a small percentage of their employees’ pay and send it directly to an insurance company, which supplanted the old business model of insurance sales reps collecting on individual plans door to door. Ted spent his entire career in the insurance industry, eventually retiring as a senior vice president with Martin E. Segal Co. His expertise in the industry led him to be tapped by the Australian legislature to study its Social Security program and recommend upgrades, and he was known for mentoring up-and-coming insurance executives throughout his career.

While Ted and Lynne may have had very different backgrounds, they had deeper things in common.

They had both recently lost their spouses (Ted his first wife, Margaret “Peggy” Dinneen Russell, and Lynne her first husband, Bill Breckenridge), they both loved music and dancing, and they were both passionate about sharing their good fortune with others. They married in December of the year they met and settled down in Sarasota, where their generosity blossomed.

The Impact of Edward and Eluned Russell

A very partial list of local organizations that have benefited from the Eluned and Edward Russell Charitable Foundation:

- St. Michael the Archangel Parish
- Tidewell Hospice
- Marie Selby Botanical Gardens
- All Faiths Food Bank
- Big Cat Habitat
- Boys & Girls Clubs of Sarasota and DeSoto Counties
- Safe Place and Rape Crisis Center (SPARCC)
- Sarasota Memorial Healthcare Foundation
- Safe Children Coalition
- Florida Studio Theatre



Clockwise from top left: Eluned and Edward Russell on a cruise in the mid-'70s; Eluned (second from right) in Los Angeles as a young woman; the Russells at the Bird Key Yacht Club; Maurice Dinneen and Patricia Smith at a Habitat for Humanity project funded by the Russell foundation.

A devout Catholic, Ted enjoyed supporting religious causes with his giving, while Lynne loved to give to animal welfare nonprofits and organizations like the Salvation Army, which had helped her so much when she was a young immigrant in Canada. They were also generous to individuals in their sphere—buying a new car for one family member, flying in others for visits, helping another graduate from ballet school and go on to a prestigious dance career.

According to family members, the couple was decidedly fun to be around. Lynne was known for her extravagant St. David's Day dinners, which took place every March 1 in honor of the patron saint of Wales, and the couple also hosted raucous cocktail parties on their boat docked at Bird Key. Having met on a cruise,


they continued to travel for the rest of their lives, gallivanting around the globe and enjoying the good life.

Ted passed in 1997 and Lynne followed in 1999. Without children to bequeath their estate to, the Russells thoughtfully created a trust to carry on their philanthropic legacy. Family members Patricia Smith, Ted's great-niece, and her father, Maurice Dinneen, Ted's nephew, were asked to oversee the trust, with assistance from close friend and advisor Kathy Hendricks. Patricia, who goes by "Patty," says she had become "thick as thieves" with Ted and Lynne after she moved to Sarasota to attend college, and as the couple aged, Patty acted as a caretaker for the couple. "They died being loved," says Patty.

“A common thread of the gifts given over the years in the Russells’ memory is accessibility: At Historic Spanish Point, a Russell grant helped the organization purchase golf carts and all-terrain wheelchairs for visitors, while a donation to Big Cat Habitat allowed the animal sanctuary to invest in wheelchairs for its patrons.”

Since 2019, the Russells’ legacy has lived on as the Eluned and Edward Russell Charitable Foundation at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. Patty says that she and her father do their best to support causes they think Ted and Lynne would want them to, like health and human services providers, nursing scholarships, children’s charities, arts organizations, animal shelters, and more. In total, \$6 million has been donated from the Russells’ estate since they passed, with nearly \$3.2 million of that coming since the partnership with the Community Foundation began. That includes more than \$1 million in donations to St. Michael the Archangel Parish on Siesta Key, in honor of Ted’s strong Catholic faith.

Other prominent recipients of aid from the foundation include Tidewell Hospice (in particular its Blue Butterfly program, which supports children who are grieving), Marie Selby Botanical Gardens (where a grant provided defibrillators and staff training on how to use them), All Faiths Food Bank, and many others. A common thread of the gifts given over the years in the Russells’ memory is accessibility: At Historic Spanish Point, a Russell grant helped the organization purchase golf carts and all-terrain wheelchairs for visitors, while a donation to Big Cat Habitat allowed the animal sanctuary to invest in wheelchairs for its patrons.

“Ted and Lynne were empathetic people with big hearts who saw themselves in other people,” says Patty. “They never forgot where they came from.” 



A donation from the Eluned and Edward Russell Charitable Foundation allowed Historic Spanish Point to purchase golf carts and all-terrain wheelchairs to increase accessibility.

FOUNDATION UPDATES



Betsy Pennewill Retires

After a decade as the Community Foundation's general counsel, Betsy Pennewill, J.D., retired in September to care for her aging parents. She leaves behind an enduring legacy. As part of the foundation's success over the past 10 years, Pennewill ensured that the foundation remained up-to-date on all rules and regulations around charitable giving and worked closely with professional advisors and donors to ensure that their philanthropic goals were met. She is greatly missed by everyone at the foundation.



Community Foundation of Sarasota County Director of Community Impact Michelle Croft with Out-of-Door Academy football captain Dylan Walker

Leadership on and off the Field

After seeing the devastation caused by Hurricane Milton last year, Out-of-Door Academy senior and football captain Dylan Walker felt compelled to do something to help his community. This summer, he approached Out-of-Door leaders with a plan—to turn the school's biggest rivalry game of the year, against Saint Stephen's Episcopal School, into a fundraiser for the Community Foundation's Suncoast Disaster Recovery Fund.

Walker asked local businesses to contribute raffle items for the fundraiser, recruited friends to sell raffle tickets before and during the game, convinced Out-of-Door Academy to donate a portion of the sales at the football stadium's concession stand, and even connected with his rivals at Saint Stephen's, who agreed to join in.

Out-of-Door student volunteers ended up selling \$5,395 in raffle tickets and another \$500 was generated through concession sales, creating a total impact of nearly \$6,000 in one Friday night.

Now Accepting Crypto!

The Community Foundation recently began accepting cryptocurrency donations. When you make a charitable gift with crypto, the donation will be converted to cash upon receipt. Donating appreciated crypto may also offer potential tax advantages.



Questions?

Contact Mike Ippolito, the foundation's director of finance and investments, at 941-556-7174 or mippolito@cfsarasota.org.

LEADERSHIP

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Lori Liggett



Presented by the
Community Foundation of Sarasota County

Save the Date!

APRIL 15-16, 2026

NOON TO NOON

The Giving Challenge is an exciting 24-hour online giving event that connects nearly 700 nonprofit organizations with passionate donors and community members to support diverse causes and create enduring impact in Sarasota, Manatee, Charlotte, and DeSoto counties.

GIVING STRENGTHENED BY THE PATTERSON FOUNDATION

Visit givingchallenge.org to learn more.

WE ARE ONE COMMUNITY.

Many families in our region are just one paycheck away from unimaginable losses. For more than 25 years, Season of Sharing has helped our neighbors in crisis regain stability after an unanticipated setback, and in that stability, rediscover the joy that arises with the assurance that this community cares for one another. Over two and a half decades, more than 60,000 gifts have been made. Neighbors helping neighbors: That's something to smile about.

EVERY GIFT MATTERS.

As a community, we can continue to provide a helping hand. We believe that everyone can be a philanthropist, and because of support from Season of Sharing partners, all of your donation—100 percent—goes directly to those who need it.

Additionally, thanks to a matching gift opportunity from The Patterson Foundation, every \$500,000 raised by the community will be met with an additional \$100,000! Give through Jan. 31, 2026, to amplify your contribution through matching funds.

SEASON of SHARING
SERVING OUR COMMUNITY SINCE 2000

A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN
THE HERALD-TRIBUNE
MEDIA GROUP AND THE
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
OF SARASOTA COUNTY





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