

MANY PASSIONS, ONE PURPOSE

FIRST COAST
DIFFERENCE MAKERS

BY MARY WANSEER



In this edition of *Circles*, we're celebrating some sterling examples of those who are making a positive difference in Jacksonville and the surrounding region by way of their gifts. They are ordinary people engaged in extraordinary philanthropic endeavors. Their passions vary, but their goal is the same—to improve the lives of others.

The generosity of these difference makers has helped the ill get well and the illiterate read. It has taught children to appreciate art and caused communities to expand culture. The homeless have hope, and families unite.

These altruistic residents are leaving legacies in North Florida and beyond. They are sharing from their treasure but are quick to point out that making a difference is not only about money; donating time and talent is also an integral part of giving back and transforming lives.

In 2018, the United Way of Florida reported the results of its ALICE Project research, an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. The study shows that the average survival

budget needed in Florida is significantly higher than what the federal poverty line gauges. Based on their findings, approximately 34.6% of the population in the five-county area surrounding Jacksonville are ALICE and living in poverty. This equates to 202,921.68 ALICE households. Combining that figure with the United States Census Bureau estimates on number of people per household, means that more than a half-million people in our area cannot afford necessities like healthcare let alone luxuries like the arts.

Unmet social needs are tremendous here, but thanks to the unflagging benevolence, philanthropic leadership, and personal motivation of several who are able and willing to serve, the negative impacts faced by the unfortunate of our neighborhoods are being ameliorated.

What follows are spotlights on some of our area's top donors. The profiles you'll read are only a few of the many selfless people who are making a difference in North Florida, bettering our communities through their contributions.

“We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.”

— WINSTON CHURCHILL

Making a difference worldwide

SCOTT AND NANCY McLUCAS

Scott and Nancy McLucas have made a difference around the world for decades.

Scott comes from an ancestral line of fierce abolitionists and banking moguls. His proud American heritage, which is recounted in his 2013 biography *Lucky Life*, is his personal motivation for giving. “A long, lucky life of privilege compels me to reach out and help others,” he said. It was his mother, a talented writer and poet, who instilled in Scott his passion for beauty in life, literature, music, and the arts.

Scott says that his philanthropic spirit began when he was treasurer of the Yale Dramatic Association and saw the power of American music and drama to touch hearts. Meanwhile, his wife, Nancy, discovered her giving spirit when she served with the Peace Corps.

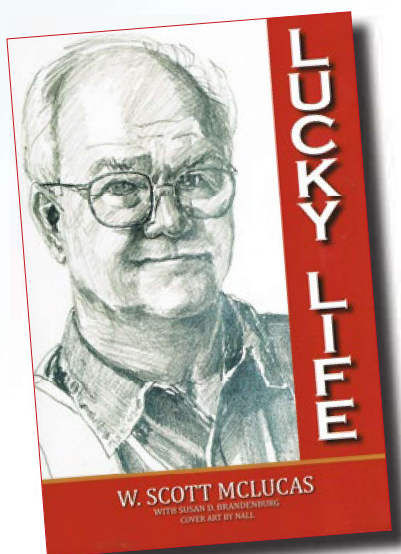
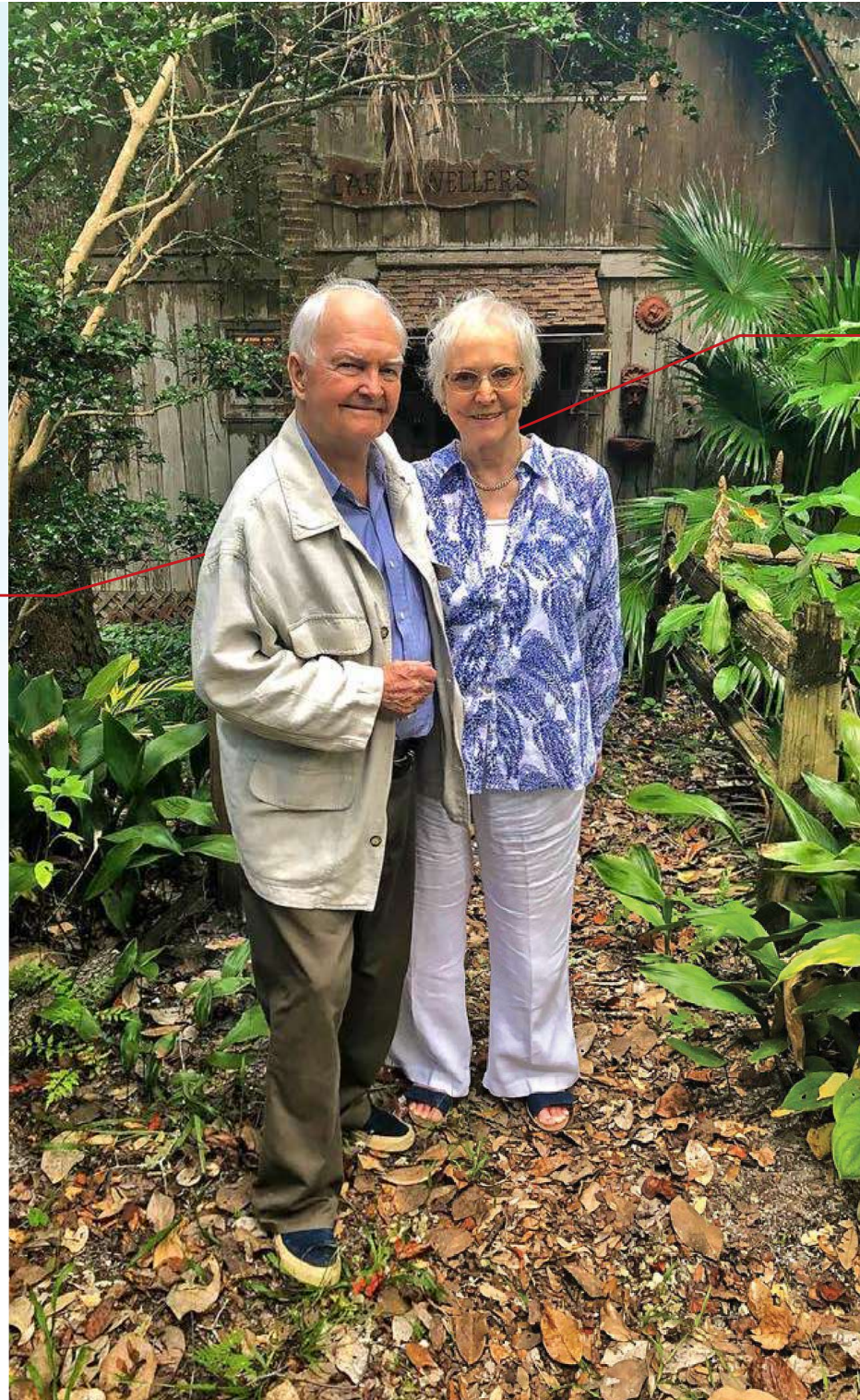
In 1981, the McLucas started the Florida-based One World Foundation to support the arts. Their motto: “Empower Children to Reach Their

Potential through Education and Long-Term Support!” Locally, their nonprofit has provided support to the Cultural Center at Ponte Vedra, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, Florida Chamber Music Project, and the Christ Church Nutcracker.

Beyond Florida’s borders, One World Foundation supported playwright Horton Foote’s work for the New York Theatre and helped fund a permanent home for the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City, which later established the W. Scott McLucas Studio Theatre. Internationally, One World supported operas, artists, dancers, and musicians throughout Europe, including creating the Synchron Orchestra in the South of France.

In 2014, Scott was honored by Amas Musical Theatre with the Cultural Humanitarian Award for global cultural philanthropy, the cornerstone of One World. That same year, Scott and Nancy closed One World Foundation to become private philanthropists. Since then, they have adopted the Stetson Kennedy Foundation (SKF) as their prime focus.

As Chairman of New Initiatives on the Stetson Kennedy Foundation Board, Scott designated monthly support to the St. Johns Riverkeeper, the SKF Artist-in-Residence Program at Beluthahatchee, which is Stetson’s old homeplace on State Road 13, now a Florida Heritage Park and National Literary Landmark for both Stetson Kennedy and Woody Guthrie. He also supports monthly Second Sunday at Stetsons, in partnership with the NE Florida Folk Network, and in 2019, helped sponsor Ibsen’s play *Enemy of the People* at the Limelight Theatre



The cover of Scott McLucas’s biography, *Lucky Life*

in St. Augustine. In 2020, through SKF Sponsorship, the Limelight Theatre will feature Horton Foote’s Pulitzer Prize winning play *The Young Man from Atlanta*.

Scott and Nancy recently attended the Read USA, Inc. luncheon that took place at TIAA Stadium in Jacksonville. “There, we witnessed the strongest, most forceful appeal for education of the very young that we’ve ever seen. For the future of the children of Northeast Florida, we must continue the momentum begun by Read USA.”

On September 28, 2019, Scott celebrated his 90th birthday. “At this time in history, I have deep concerns for our country and our world. I will address those concerns vigorously by donating to organizations like the

Stetson Kennedy Foundation, dedicated to human rights, social justice, environmental stewardship, and the preservation and growth of folk culture; the St. Johns Riverkeeper, with a vision to ensure a clean and healthy river for current and future generations; and Read USA, Inc., whose mission it is to end the cycle of poverty through reading education, for as long as I live.”

Public recognition encourages Scott to continue giving, and, in turn, he strives to recognize excellence in others. “When I was awarded an international medal by the United Nations back in the 1990s, I realized that it was in my power to make important and lasting changes in this world. I hope my example will inspire others.”

Humble Servants

ROBERT AND MARGARET HILL

Robert and Margaret Hill are making a difference in the Jacksonville region by supporting people who have significant needs in healthcare, education, and sustenance. They focus on the underserved, those who lack the resources that others take for granted. Robert observes, "Jacksonville is a caring place, but the needs around us are still significant."

The philanthropic engagement across health systems for all age groups in Jacksonville is remarkable, and the Hills are a vital component of that network. As of 2010, their names are on the Hill Breast Center, a part of the Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center. It's one of the largest breast centers in the world, housing all non-surgical breast health services under one roof and improving quality of care. Robert points out, "Healthcare services in our community are outstanding. Good healthcare in Jacksonville is supported by a good culture of philanthropy. People here don't have to get on a plane to get the care they need." Robert has served as Baptist Health's board chairman, helping lead other key initiatives, including the creation of Coastal Community Health.

Robert points out that giving to make a difference can be specific or

broad. The Hills not only give to particular establishments, but also to organizations like the United Way of Northeast Florida, which serves more than 70 agencies in Jacksonville, and The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, which is dedicated to connecting philanthropists with each other and with organizations that need help. He said that there are a lot of ways and places to get involved here.

Robert and Margaret Hill hope to make Jacksonville a stronger community, and they encourage people to share their resources and time to evoke positive change. "Philanthropic efforts are about giving, and giving does not have to be about writing a check. The gift of time can really make a difference."

Robert and Margaret attribute their giving spirits to their parents and grandparents who served as models of philanthropy. They also recognize their friends as inspirations, friends who introduced them to organizations worthy of their charitable efforts. "Good examples were set for us," said Robert. "We have been very blessed over the years, and now we have the opportunity and responsibility to give back."

The Hills are as humble as they are generous. Their personal motivation is nothing other than simply to help

people. They hope their generosity will "make Jacksonville a stronger community," and they believe that the strength of a region can be measured by the philanthropic climate. "There's lots of generosity here driven by generous people."

Robert points out that the needs around us are broader than we're aware of and suggests that we can all be more mindful of those needs. "We might be shocked." For example, according to Feeding Northeast Florida,

more than 280,000 people in the region are defined as food insecure. Robert believes that "simple acts of kindness can make a difference." He suggests that we open our eyes and see the needs.

The Hills hope to instill in readers this message: "Help others. Understand the broad needs in our community. Recognize those with healthcare needs, those who might need to catch up on education, those who don't have basic resources. It matters."



"We have been very blessed over the years, and now we have the opportunity and responsibility to give back."

— ROBERT HILL



Home is where the heart is

ANNE AND STEVE PAJCIC

When it comes to giving to others, Steve Pajcic's passion remains with his hometown. Born and raised in Jacksonville, Pajcic has pursued his law career in his home community because it is where his heart is, especially when it comes to his philanthropic pursuits. He said he believes in making a difference where a difference was made for him.

Pajcic established the Pajcic and Pajcic Law Firm with his late brother, Gary, in 1974, and they set up a significant college scholarship fund at Westside High School, their alma mater.

In 1992, the Pajcic brothers also established an endowment at the University of North Florida to pay the four-year tuition of any graduate of Paxon High School in need of financial help who was accepted and enrolled at UNF. Within four years, 35 Pajcic Scholars emerged. Steve later set up an endowment to pay the tuition of Paxon students who enroll at his college alma mater, Princeton University.

In 2002, the Pajcic family donated funds for teacher bonuses at Annie

R. Morgan Elementary School with the intention of attracting quality teachers to help revive the failing urban school. They also sponsored dinners, awards, and scholarships for Morgan's teachers and a carnival for its students. Within two years, the students' FCAT scores increased, causing the school's rating to jump from F to A.

In 2014, Pajcic and his wife, Anne, gave a significant \$2 million gift to Edward Waters College, the largest amount the school had ever received in a single donation.

It may seem the Pajcics only take a particular interest in supporting educational issues, but their generosity doesn't end there. They also support WJCT, the public broadcasting station that serves the First Coast region by providing local as well as national programming.

They donate funds to staff local parks in summer and contribute to the operation and improvement of Hemming Park in downtown Jacksonville, the city's oldest public park. In fact, the couple has dared

others with a matching gift challenge to help transform and modernize the urban space.

Perhaps the couple is best known as bountiful benefactors of Jacksonville Area Legal Aid (JALA), which offers civil legal support to those who cannot afford representation. Each year, they host an annual yard-golf event as a fundraiser to support the cause. "Word has spread about how much fun it is, and every year, more people attend; that means the contributions to this important cause also increase," they said.

They are also donors to the Guardian ad Litem Foundation of Florida's First Coast, Inc., whose mission is to recruit, train, support, and supervise volunteer court-appointed advocates to act as the voice of children in the local court system. "It makes us both feel good whenever we can help make life better for others."

In 2017, they gave to the Jaguars Foundation toward disaster relief for the areas hardest hit by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The Pajcics said they consider themselves "lucky" and

recognize "we have more than our share." They believe, "It is only right to try to help others who have it tougher."

They recently gave to the Clara White Mission, an organization that serves Jacksonville's homeless, veterans, and low-income population, including, among other services, adult vocational training, because they are passionate about helping those who have special burdens or obstacles in life. "We always hope it can be a turning point but know that it will be a help regardless." They were appreciative that so many others in the community also stepped in to help this mission. "We are always thankful when our donations inspire others to contribute."

It has been the Pajcics' experience that whenever they've helped people overcome their disadvantaged backgrounds and see them move on to happy and fulfilling lives, those people, in turn, go on to help others. There's a paying forward that seems to generate momentum. "We have no illusions about changing the world. We are just trying to help in our own small way," they said.

Fulfilling a vow

FRANK AND MARISA MARTIRE

Frank and Marisa Martire come from humble beginnings. They vowed that if they ever had the opportunity, they wanted to give back. And they have. Frank decided to be on as many nonprofit boards as he could fit in. And he is. Their philanthropic focus is mainly on healthcare and education, making a difference in Jacksonville and beyond.

Between them, the Martires have been multiple-term members of numerous boards of healthcare organizations, including Baptist Health, Mayo Clinic Leadership Foundation, and Wolfson Children's Hospital. In 2013, the couple established the Endowment in Pediatric Neurology,

the first of its kind at Wolfson, to support clinical research aimed at enhancing care and to provide treatment even when families are unable to pay.

Marisa's mom was diabetic, and Frank's dad had heart issues. So today, the American Diabetes Association and the American Heart Association are on the Martires' long gift list along with the American Cancer Society, all of which have offices in Jacksonville. "Along the way," they said, "we've seen how many people are affected by illness, children and adults alike." They've observed dietary needs and lack of basic medications like insulin due to families' limited resources.

In the world of education, Frank has served as treasurer on Jacksonville University's board of trustees, and Marisa is lauded for her considerable involvement with Cathedral Arts Project (CAP), the leading nonprofit organization that empowers thousands of Jacksonville children through arts education, providing instruction in visual and performing arts for elementary and middle schoolers. "Introducing them to the arts makes them better students," said Marisa. "Giving children the opportunity to learn theatre and dance gives them a broader outlook."

Her enthusiasm for the organization shines through as she recounts feeling pride at being able to make a difference in someone's life when she sees a child's face beam on stage. She's been a long-term board member and the recipient of the annual Guardian of the Arts Award bestowed annually by CAP. She and her husband have chaired multiple times CAP's Angels of the Arts campaign to help fulfill the mission that every child have access to an art-rich education.

The Martires care about inner-city development and people of all ages. There's no one particular group they want to assist. They are supporters of United Way of Northeast Florida and of Catholic Charities and its mission to transform lives, even chairing the nonprofit's Black and White Ball. They've been fortunate and find giving and helping personally rewarding. "It feels good!" they said.

Marisa points out, "We're all part of the same community, whether on the river or on the ocean. Jacksonville is important to us." But that doesn't mean the Martires' giving ends at Florida's border. They are devoted philanthropic supporters of Sacred Heart University, Frank's alma mater, in Fairfield, Connecticut. Frank attributes his business success to the education he received there and is doing more than his fair share to give back. He volunteers on boards and chairs university committees. He and his wife created the Frank and Marisa Martire Endowed Scholarship to bolster those from underprivileged backgrounds, and they built the Frank and Marisa Martire Business and Communications Center, which houses the Jack F. Welch College of Business and the Department of Communications and Media Studies.

The Martires say that giving is part of their value system and upbringing. "That's what we live by." They've witnessed others' generosity, not pinpointing any individuals, and follow by example. In turn, they wish to be an example to others. Frank said they desire "less words, more action. It's not only about money." Marisa added, "Nothing is too small."

With all they've done for the community and continue to do, the Martires acknowledge that there are other philanthropists who have done far more. "The part we play is small in comparison to some," Frank said. "Keep it simple. Make a difference in someone's life, one person at a time."



"Less words, more action. It's not only about money."

— FRANK MARTIRE

Big Heart, Small Target

GARY McCALLA

It's all about arts and children for Gary McCalla. His heart is big, and he prefers to target his giving toward small, local associations. It's these organizations, he believes, that have a harder time raising funds, and children seem to be getting left behind. Giving locally, he's able to meet many of the individual families of the children he's helping. He likes the coming-together. "It feels more special," he said.

McCalla has a particular passion for the Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, a magnet school for children. He's a lead giver who's proud to report that 98% of its students continue on to higher education. McCalla was a driving force in helping to bring this year's Arts Schools Network (ASN) annual conference to Jacksonville to be hosted by Douglas Anderson.

"Any art for children I want to support, not only the performing arts, but all phases of art," he said. He continues to support MOCA, Jacksonville's Museum of Contemporary Art, which displays national and international work, and where he and his late wife used to be docents, guiding visitors from kindergarten through elementary school. They felt they could be of more service in those roles than being board members. McCalla also has plans to involve himself with Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens in the near future.

McCalla helps the Cathedral Arts Project as they provide instruction in visual and performing arts to local elementary and middle school students, and he has his generous hand in Children's Home Society of Florida (CHS) whose mission is "Embracing Children. Inspiring Lives." CHS tends to matters of foster care and legislation involving children's rights, among other causes.

McCalla also contributes to the Make-A-Wish Foundation of Central

and Northern Florida through their regional office in Jacksonville, which grants the wishes of children who've been diagnosed with life-threatening medical conditions, and to a similar agency called Dreams Come True of Jacksonville. "Terminally ill children know no fear. It's the adults who are afraid," he said.

McCalla continues doing what he and his wife had done before she passed away five years ago. The couple knew they couldn't help everyone; they had to choose. "We chose kids," he said. There is great opportunity here in Jacksonville to make a difference by focusing on children, he said. "It's going to better our community in the long term. It's an initial investment. Get them at three to six years old, when they're like sponges," he continued. "The innocence of a child is beautiful. They only know what we tell and show them. Expose them to what there is." Doing this instills in them the importance of being a good citizen in the future, he insists.

McCalla's hope is that the children whose lives he touches will give back to Jacksonville when they're able. He supports their leaving if they can better themselves elsewhere, but he welcomes them back home to share what they've gained, to come back and perform.

With a deep desire to bring awareness to the public about the smaller Jacksonville galleries and local artists, it pleases McCalla to see the growing appreciation for art in the still-somewhat-sleepy town of Jacksonville. The recent opening of Home Street Gallery is another hopeful sign. McCalla said he enjoys watching the City of Jacksonville grow with arts. He's observed how city and state funding doesn't give much to the arts; much more is given to fund sports for kids. And

so, this is a way he knows he can make a difference.

In another effort to expose Jacksonville, McCalla points out that the Museum of Science and History (MOSH) isn't just for kids anymore. "It's all about our river, our city, our parks." It's important for adults to learn, too, he said.

"I've always been taught to give. It was instilled in me through my grandparents," McCalla said, noting he was raised in a church that taught its congregants to treat other people

the way you want to be treated. "I'm not a prude though. I love to party. I like to have events," he admits. But still, he hasn't lost the values he learned as a child.

"Those who give their time are just as valuable as those who can write a check," he said recalling when he was not able to give money. "But I have the means now to give differently." And he does.

In a nutshell McCalla's message is this: "Give! Give! Give! Support our children."



*"Those who give their time
are just as valuable as those
who can write a check."*

— GARY McCALLA

Turning the page on poverty through literacy

JIM AND ELLEN WISS

Residents of the Jacksonville area for only a decade, Ellen and Jim Wiss are making a difference in their new community. Their goal is “to turn the page on poverty through literacy.” The couple invests their time, talent, and treasure primarily in Read USA, Inc., a nonprofit organization in Atlantic Beach since 2011 that partners with other local organizations, businesses, and philanthropists to host book fairs at low-income elementary schools, distributing free books to students. “Books that go home with young students have ripple effects for the entire family,” Ellen said.

As CEO of Read USA, which she co-founded while serving as a volunteer classroom tutor with the Junior League of Jacksonville in a severely impoverished neighborhood, Ellen witnessed first-hand the lack of resources available to furnish students with books. She recognized the children’s chance at success was limited without them. Partnering with Vanessa Tussey, the teacher whom she assisted at George Washington Carver Elementary School, Ellen recruited private donors and volunteers to organize that school’s first book fair through Scholastic Book Clubs, a global provider of educational materials. The school’s overall ranking jumped by the end of that term, likely due to the increase in students’ reading habits now that they owned books of their own, especially ones that they had chosen.

Under Ellen’s leadership, in one year, Read USA doubled the number of schools it served from eight to 16 and added three community centers as recipients. Currently, the organization serves 40 schools, reaching over 16,000 students in the Jacksonville area. This year, in formal partnership with Kids Hope Alliance Literacy Task Force, Read USA launched a summer

tutoring program that offers teens the opportunity to earn wages.

The couple’s difference-making in no way ends with their engagement in Read USA. “If you can read, you can do anything, go anywhere,” Ellen said. That’s why she and her husband invest in a variety of education groups, such as City Year, Jacksonville Public Education Fund, and Teach for America, that work together for kids in Title 1 schools where the greatest need exists.

The Wisses are also passionate about helping those impacted by poverty and seek to inspire others to join collectively to end the cycle. Hence, they’ve been involved at the ground level with Lift Jax, a movement to prevent poverty in this region. “Poverty is not natural. It was created by humans,” Ellen said, quoting Nelson Mandela. And she points out, “Therefore, we, humans, have the power and the responsibility to reverse poverty toward prosperity for all.” To turn the tide, she and her husband believe in a multi-sector approach, which is what is planned through Lift Jax, now in the first phase of formation with the goal of raising awareness about poverty and coalescing around the common agenda of immediate reduction and eventual eradication.

Ellen is president emeritus of the Women’s Giving Alliance, a group made up of hundreds of women who pool their philanthropic giving and distribute grants to organizations that serve women and girls. Under Ellen’s leadership, the alliance was named Outstanding Civic Organization of the Year by the Northeast Florida Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

She also serves as co-chair of Florida Women’s Funding Alliance (FWFA), which is an affinity group of the Florida Philanthropic Network

(FPN), helping women and girls thrive. “When more people thrive, we are all better for it,” she said.

Earlier this year, Ellen was honored as a Jacksonville Woman of Distinction by the Girl Scouts of Gateway Council for her service to others and her impact on the region. She was also presented with an EVE Award by *The Florida Times-Union* for her community contributions. “When I received the EVE Award, I was humbled and somewhat embarrassed by the recognition, but I have realized, in retrospect, that the

golden apple is a symbol of achievement. If there was such a thing as an ADAM, Jim would deserve it!”

Through their giving, Ellen and Jim wish to inspire others to give as well. They are personally motivated “to help make our community better, to join collectively to solve social ills, specifically poverty.” Ellen said she believes that the first step in eliminating poverty is increasing literacy. “Frederick Douglass said, ‘Once you learn to read, you will forever be free.’ And, we completely agree!”



Helping enrich autistic lives

BOBBY AND LESLIE WEED

When it comes to helping families of children with autism, Leslie and Bobby Weed are making a difference.

Their third daughter, Lanier, was diagnosed with autism nearly two decades ago. At that time, there were no programs or activities in Jacksonville or its surrounding areas that catered to the growing autistic community and no help for their exhausted parents who needed support groups, no resources to help these families cope.

Nearly 15 years ago, as their two older daughters were heading off to camp, the Weeds realized there were no fun things for children like Lanier to do in the summer. Instead, those with autism were stuck in their homes. "I wanted these mothers to be able to get their kids out and do something!" Leslie said. So, in 2004, she and her husband stepped up: the HEAL Foundation was born. Since then, the Weeds have made it their mission to make life more normal for families like theirs.

A woman of faith, Leslie says it was prayer that led her to the name HEAL. She knew she wanted an A for Autism in the name of her new organization. The rest was divinely inspired and came to her as she slept. She awoke to the idea of Helping Enrich Autistic Lives.

The HEAL organization is grassroots; the Weeds, pioneers. They began by hosting gala events and activities to raise funds to support their mission. They recognized that corporations want to give locally and that "Jacksonville is very giving."

Since 2007, HEAL has raised over \$3.5 million, and nine out of every 10 dollars goes back to the community. So far, they've given over \$300,000 to the schools in the five counties surrounding Jacksonville.

As autistic people have trouble with balance and coordination, most find it difficult to ride bikes. Through the HEAL Foundation, the Weeds have provided 300 tricycles to local special physical education classes in public schools throughout the five-county area.

When Lanier was 16 years old, the Weeds learned through Syracuse University a technique known as Facilitated Communication, which employs computer technology to allow nonverbal autistic people like Lanier to communicate through typing. The Weeds discovered that although their daughter could not hold a pencil, she could, with assistance, tap and swipe.

"This certainly was a defining moment in our lives," said Bobby, after he read his daughter's typed message, "Thank you for releasing my voice."

Because finally being able to communicate with Lanier has meant so much to their family, the Weeds wanted to give others the same opportunity. Through HEAL, they have given 400 iPads to Exceptional Student Education ESE classes, thereby facilitating communication between nonverbal autistic students and their teachers. Each summer, HEAL hosts 15 camps, including those for surfing and golfing, that serve approximately 350 autistic children, teens, and adults. They've funded 55 service dogs that can act to decrease anxiety, interrupt self-harming behavior, and provide companionship. HEAL also supports group therapy sessions for parents while their children are taking part in activities specifically designed for those with autism.

"We've given to over 100 different organizations in Jacksonville," said Leslie proudly.



HEAL's next initiative is to build an all-abilities playground in each nearby county, an estimated \$2 million project, where "we can work on physical therapy things outside of the clinic," she said. Leslie envisions zip lines, merry-go-rounds, and exercise stations built to accommodate wheelchairs and other mobility aids. Even parents who are physically challenged can join their kids at the parks because they'll be able to use the equipment, too. The plan is for the playgrounds to be all-inclusive, not only for autistic children, but also for those who are not in need of accommodations as well as for those with Down syndrome, Angelman syndrome, cerebral palsy—for everyone!

Much of HEAL's success can be attributed to Leslie's innovative ideas for putting the fun into fundraising. Her energy and enthusiasm are palpable. "I have to do what no one else has done here," she explained. "I gotta figure out something really cool to do!"

Past HEAL events include a Chopper Drop, where golf balls were sold for 100 dollars apiece and dropped from a helicopter onto the course. The winner was the one whose ball dropped closest to the designated hole. The prize was a treasure chest filled with \$5,000 in one-dollar bills. Another event

featured artist David Garibaldi, a performance painter who specializes in painting pictures of celebrities facing upside down on canvas. Attendees guessed who was featured in the painting; then each painting was sold for several thousand dollars.

Annually, the Weeds host the HEAL Autism Walk at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, where participants stroll past the animal exhibits including the rhinos and giraffes and end up at the lawn area, where vendor tables, face painting, and games are there to enjoy. What adds to the excitement is the fundraising competition where the school to raise the most money receives iPads, and individuals who raise \$2,500 or more get to choose the school or organization to get a \$1,000 grant. At their first zoo walk, 13 years ago, Leslie sobbed when she saw between 800 and 1,000 show up. "I'd never seen that many kids with autism in my life," she said. This year, a record number—nearly 3,000—took part in the event. Those numbers speak to HEAL's principle: "You are never alone."

The Weeds will be one of four families featured in a documentary film still in the making, "Unlocked," which will focus on the challenges and triumphs of autism. The film is expected to debut in 2020.