

# Editorial: Community responds to children's needs

'Campus of caring' is latest philanthropy project

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Tom Tryon, Opinion Editor

Sarasota is known as a wealthy retirement community, but the concern that our residents and local organizations demonstrate for poor and struggling children is inspiring.

We see that concern, as we noted Wednesday, in the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a region wide effort to improve the ability of children from low-income families to succeed in school and in life.

And we see it again — at an even deeper and more intimate level — in the work of the All Star Children's Foundation.

As reported Sunday by the Herald-Tribune's Barbara Peters Smith, this local foundation is building a "campus of caring" for abused and traumatized children who have been forced into the foster care system.

These are children whose parents have been arrested, suffer from mental illness, are homeless or drug-addicted — maybe all of the above. The numbers are growing, and the foster care system is failing to accommodate them.

So the All Star Children's Foundation, spearheaded by Siesta Key residents Graci and Dennis McGillicuddy, set out to create a "homelike environment" for up to 60 abused children.

This campus would be a place, as Peters Smith put it, "where children from disrupted families could go to heal, together with their siblings, and receive the kind of treatment for trauma that will equip them for a better life."

The McGillicuddys and an unnamed family donated \$3 million to the effort. The foundation also received a state grant of \$2.5 million for building expenses and a \$1 million pledge by another local group, the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation, to fund a position at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital to design a child-trauma treatment program.

With the \$6.5 million committed, All Star is buying land on 17th Street in Sarasota and intends to break ground this fall on an initial complex of six family homes and a counseling center.

“We are basically going to be doing two fundamental things,” Dennis McGillicuddy told Peters Smith. “We are going to be healing children in our own community, but we are also creating a template that will be able to be used, replicated, exported, and influence the way child welfare systems deal with the foster care system.”

The mission of child welfare goes back decades for Graci McGillicuddy, sparked by the violent, 1986 death of 18-month-old Shannon Nicole Cook in Charlotte County.

Her initial shock led to her involvement with what is now the Child Protection Center, whose board of directors she chairs, and to creation of the All Star foundation to raise money to help abused children meet a lifetime of challenges.

It is people like the McGillicuddys and groups like All Star and the Barancik Foundation — along with other residents and foundations backing the reading campaign and numerous other vital local causes — that make the Sarasota-Manatee region so much more than a retirement enclave.

Our community is truly blessed to have so many residents and organizations willing and able to make investments toward a special kind of wealth: improving the lives of the youngest and least fortunate among us.