

Fresh Start for Foster Care

‘Campus of caring’ will offer a safe haven and state-of-the-art trauma treatment



By Barbara Peters Smith

Imagine being taken in the middle of the night from the only home you have known, your parents under arrest, your brothers and sisters bundled into the back seats of separate police cars.

Then, imagine an immediate future when you may or may not have a safe place to live, with enough food and decent clothes to wear to school — but nobody ever asks you about what happened that night, or all the days and years that led up to it. What kind of adult can you hope to become?



This is the bleak scenario that compelled a Sarasota startup team — two philanthropists and a child welfare professional — to conceive of a “campus of caring” 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 All Star Children’s Foundation, led by Executive Director Lucia Branton and philanthropists Graci and Dennis McGillicuddy, is buying land and starting the construction process on a “campus for caring” for up to 60 young victims of abuse.

Now that vision is catapulting closer to reality. The All Star Children’s Foundation is buying the land and starting the construction process on a 17th Street property near Lockwood Ridge Road to provide a “homelike environment” for up to 60 young victims of abuse.

With momentum from a fresh state grant of \$2.5 million for building expenses, plus a \$1 million pledge by the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation to fund a position at Johns Hopkins All Children’s Hospital to design its trauma-informed treatment program, All Star aims to break ground this fall on an initial complex of six family homes and a counseling center. With a project goal of \$10 million, \$6.5 million is committed, thanks to \$3 million from Siesta Key residents Graci and Dennis McGillicuddy and another unnamed family.

For the McGillicuddys, it’s a particularly satisfying chapter in a long story that goes back to the notorious violent death in 1986 of 18-month-old Shannon Nicole Cook of Charlotte County. While hers was one of an estimated 135,000 child abuse cases in the state that year, the appalling story of her torture shocked Floridians and inspired new approaches to child welfare. Graci McGillicuddy was so shaken, she says, that she told her husband that instead of jewelry for her birthday, she wanted to make a donation to help spare other children.

This led her to what is now the Child Protection Center, where she joined a board of directors that she now chairs. As the McGillicuddys learned more about the challenges abused children face through their lives, they assembled a group of child advocates into a new foundation that would raise money to help break those patterns. The effort was put on hold

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during the Great Recession; in the meantime, an abundance of new research on how to counter the neurological effects of toxic stress during childhood had materialized to point them in a new direction.

Lucia Branton, the executive director for All Star, was just finishing college around the time of the Shannon Nicole tragedy. She spent two years working in psychiatric children's hospitals, then joined the child welfare system as a case manager. As director of external affairs for the YMCA-led Safe Children Coalition, she has watched the caseload explode in recent years.

"The profile of the children coming in today is very different than when I started," Branton says. "They're dealing with much more complex issues," including mental illness, homelessness and addiction. "This is probably, in the last two to three years, the highest rate of removals for children coming into foster care, and I know that our local area is struggling with trying to keep up with demand."

A national model

The "campus of caring" is designed not only to meet this pressing need for placements, explains Dennis McGillicuddy, but to find and demonstrate a better path out of trauma for these children.

"When children are first removed from the home it's a very traumatic time, so we were beginning to look for a safe landing place for them, to have in effect a facility to nurture these children until they were ready to go back to their parents or go to a more permanent foster home," he says. "We realized that we could build a campus of caring and do it in conjunction with an institution like Johns Hopkins, that brings the latest in brain research and understanding of trauma, as well as having the tools to follow children as they go through the system."

The study of the changes in young brains and bodies inflicted by "adverse childhood experiences" — abuse, neglect and other dysfunctions in the home — began with a groundbreaking report in 1998. Since then evidence has piled up that the very thing that makes youngsters so impressionable, the neuroplasticity of their developing brains, could also hold keys to reversing the damage. If therapeutic interventions are started early enough, research suggests that the toll of toxic stress can be mitigated, if not completely erased.

"One of the saddest things you could ever see," Branton says, "is when you can look in the eyes of a 6-year-old child, and not see that sparkle and their spirit behind their eyes, because it's just been dulled by all the negative experiences they've had. And to know that we can change that for them and make them feel loved and learn to love themselves and see their value — it's priceless."

Heart of the mission

The science is still developing on which interventions, from cognitive behavioral therapy to mindfulness training, work best to help traumatized children become more resilient and confident. This is the kind of research underway at Johns Hopkins All Children's Institute for Brain Protection Sciences, and the position there being created by All Star will be responsible for developing the treatment programs used in Sarasota. In turn, the findings from this work will be shared with others in the field.

"This project was right at the heart of our mission," says Jenine Rabin, executive vice president of the hospital's foundation, whom Dennis McGillicuddy describes as the "glue" that put the partnership together. "Having a relationship like this is exactly the kind of synergy we want and need to happen."

The mutual goal, says Dennis McGillicuddy, goes far beyond providing a temporary safe harbor for kids, all the way toward upending the nation's outmoded and inadequate provisions for foster children.

"We are basically going to be doing two fundamental things," he says. "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."

Another affiliation, with the University of Buffalo's Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, will allow everyone connected with All-Star — "from the janitorial staff to the board of directors," Branton says — to receive training that will give them insight for working with children suffering the aftershocks of stress.

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Graci McGillicuddy says that exposing the roots of childhood trauma will also improve the performance of foster parents.

“As well-intentioned as they are, they don’t have the tools to deal with these children who have been through so much,” she says. “We’re going to make Sarasota a trauma-informed city, and take care of our kids.”



The All Star Children’s Foundation received a \$2.5 million state grant to start construction this fall on an initial complex of six family homes and a counseling center.



Property has been acquired for the new Sarasota “campus of caring” for foster children on 17th Street, just east of Lockwood Ridge Road. The land will be cleared to make way for family homes and services.



This property east of Lockwood Ridge Road on 17th Street will become home to a “campus of caring.”



Philanthropists Graci and Dennis McGillicuddy and Lucia Branton, right, the executive director of All Star Children’s Foundation.