

Style

PHILANTHROPY EDITION



Extending A Legacy

CEO Mark Pritchett
Steers the Gulf Coast
Community Foundation
to Greater Lengths

Season of Sharing

20 Years of Helping
At-Risk Locals
Keep Their Homes

PLUS: Social & Arts Agendas,
Spotlights, Out & About

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EXTENDING A LEGACY

The Legacy Trail connects communities across Sarasota County while improving health and safety, spurring economic development, and enhancing quality of life. This is reflective of the work Gulf Coast Community Foundation has been doing for 25 years.

Jon Thaxton has envisioned the possibilities of the Legacy Trail almost as long as he can remember. The fifth-generation Sarasotan grew up on a family farm in Osprey, less than two miles from the old Seaboard Air Line Railroad. Thaxton spent much of his youth wandering the wilds of then-undeveloped Palmer Ranch. He reckons he knew the area's game trails and dirt paths better than the hallways of his own home.

He also recalls discovering the railroad at age 12 or 13.

"I can remember the day I first set foot on it – it was so exciting," said Thaxton. Walking the tracks and, yes, even hopping trains became an adventurous way to explore farther-flung areas of his community.

At Venice High School in the 1970s, a wise (and patient) biology teacher helped Thaxton redirect his youthful energy into environmental activism. He soon began taking on community projects that he felt mattered. While his early career after graduation kept him in the family's real estate business, Thaxton spent many hours applying his knowledge and passion to collaborative efforts to acquire public lands for preservation and recreation. The creation of the eventual Legacy Trail would become one of his most ambitious and long-running endeavors. So long-running, in fact, he insists it's still far from complete.

BY GREG LUBERECKI | PHOTOS BY MATT HOUSTON

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Thaxton's involvement began as a private citizen, when he learned then-Sarasota County Commissioner David Mills was working with a group to turn the since-abandoned railway into a recreational trail. The persistent activist connected with the public official. Soon Thaxton began working quietly on a deal that eventually secured the county's \$11.75-million purchase of the railway corridor and development of an 11-mile, multi-use trail through the heart of Sarasota County.

By the time the Legacy Trail opened in March 2008, Thaxton was a veteran commissioner himself. An avid runner, he ran the entire trail on opening day, making four speeches along the way. (He even donned a sport-coat he kept rolled up in his runner's pack at each stop.) He delivered his final remarks that day at the Historic Venice Train Depot, the southern terminus of the Legacy Trail, where it connected with another community-created trail—the Venetian Waterway Park (VWP).

The VWP was a project of the City of Venice and civic group Venice Area Beautification, Inc. Gulf Coast Community Foundation had invested about \$1 million in grants to help make that paved path, which paralleled each side of the Intracoastal Waterway, possible. "Together, the new Legacy Trail and the Venetian Waterway gave us 20 miles of paved trail for all ages and all kinds of non-motorized recreation," said Thaxton. "It was such an important milestone. Celebrating it at the Venice Train Depot junction was perfect."

The same year the Legacy Trail opened, Mark Pritchett arrived in Venice, recruited by Gulf Coast Community Foundation's then-CEO Teri A. Hansen to head up the foundation's grantmaking. Pritchett had built a statewide reputation in business and public policy. During his 12 years at the Collins Center for Public Policy, he was handpicked by Governor Jeb Bush to lead Florida's election reform task force after the 2000 Presidential election.

Looking back, Pritchett admitted he was skeptical of foundations. "I said I'd never work for one," he laughed. "I thought foundations were too bureaucratic and didn't get things done. But that was before I met Teri and Gulf Coast." Hansen convinced him this foundation was different. Its board liked big ideas. They wanted to invest in innovation. "I'm an entrepreneurial guy," he said. "And the Gulf Coast board wanted entrepreneurial thinking."

The first test of Pritchett's public-policy skills at the foundation was also his most heart wrenching. In early 2008, a 21-year-old mother named Denise Amber Lee had been abducted from her North Port home, brutally assaulted, and murdered. It turned out multiple calls to 9-1-1, including one from Lee herself, were mishandled. Nearby law-enforcement officers who might have saved her were never dispatched. An emergency system we all rely on, even



Opposite page: Mark Pritchett, president & CEO and Jon Thaxton, senior vice president for community investment with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation (GCCF). Above: The Legacy Trail connects communities across Sarasota County.

[HERALD-TRIBUNE PHOTO/MIKE LANG]

take for granted, had failed.

With donations made in his wife's memory, Nathan Lee turned to Gulf Coast Community Foundation for help. Pritchett was just weeks into his new job when the widower walked into his office and said he wanted to create a training center for local 9-1-1 operators. But as Pritchett listened, he started to ask if there was a bigger problem—a systemic one. At his recommendation, the foundation invested in a study of Florida's emergency response system. It found there was no system at all, but rather an underfunded patchwork of agencies and protocols. It made tragedies like Lee's all too possible.

The findings helped legislators push through new statewide standards for training and certification of emergency operators and dispatchers. With continued support from Pritchett and Gulf Coast, the fledgling Denise Amber Lee Foundation grew into a nationally influential advocate for public safety and 9-1-1 training. "We took a local tragedy, looked at the issue through a new lens, leveraged private donations with foundation resources, and improved public safety for all Floridians and our nation," said Pritchett. "That's when I saw the potential of philanthropy."

TRAIL BUDDIES

A few years after Pritchett's arrival, Hansen made another shrewd recruiting decision. Thaxton was completing his final term as a county commissioner and she invited him to apply for a new position on Pritchett's team. Thaxton's mix of local knowledge, strategic vision, and public service recommended him over applicants nationwide.

Thaxton hit the ground running, helping to implement bold projects in workforce development, education, and safety-net human services. A new challenge for a man who loves them was connecting independent, impact-minded philanthropists

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- Mark Pritchett

with the systemic initiatives the foundation was developing. An early example: convening a group of 10 donors he dubbed the Hunger Design Team to help Gulf Coast and All Faiths Food Bank identify and fund solutions based on a regional child-hunger study commissioned by the foundation.

"I had decades of experience pulling together public funding to get things done," Thaxton mused. "But this was a new world. Not only do Gulf Coast's donors generously invest their resources in transforming our community, but they



Jon Thaxton, Gulf Coast's senior vice president for community investment, envisions even more miles to go for the Legacy Trail.

"The Legacy Trail is a dream coming true for me."
-Jon Thaxton

also have brilliant ideas for how to get the best bang for their philanthropic buck."

Another new project in Gulf Coast's portfolio was one Thaxton knew well: the citizen-initiated effort to extend his beloved Legacy Trail.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Many proposals for trail names were suggested during the initial, formal naming process, but there was no consensus going into the county commission meeting with the important task on the docket. John McCarthy, county parks director at the time, successfully pitched the board on "Legacy Trail."

"Heritage Trail" had been seriously considered, he recalled. For 90 years until the last train ran in 1991, the stretch of railroad had helped Venice survive the Florida real estate bust and Great Depression. It supported the area's timber and turpentine industries and transported the Ringling Bros. Circus back and forth to its winter home. "But it felt like 'Heritage' only looked back," said McCarthy, "and this trail was about our past, our present, and our future. That's when I hit on 'Legacy.'"

Part of that future legacy was the trail's potential

for expansion. And in 2013, the time was right to push for adding nine more miles of old railway to extend the Legacy Trail into downtown Sarasota. Gulf Coast Community Foundation partnered with organizations like Friends of the Legacy Trail and introduced a grassroots fundraising campaign that paid for a feasibility study. Soon the trail's expansion project was off and running.

Now representing Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Thaxton again teamed with the Trust for Public Land, which he'd worked with on the original rail-to-trail purchase, and helped the county plan and negotiate the new acquisition. Along the way, Gulf Coast Community Foundation continued to fund critical appraisals, boundary surveys, and environmental assessments. "Those studies aren't 'sexy' things to pay for," noted Pritchett, who had become Gulf Coast's CEO in 2015. "But they're vital to move these projects forward."

In 2018, Sarasota County voters overwhelmingly approved borrowing \$65 million to extend the Legacy Trail north as well as add connectivity east from Venice to North Port. The referendum garnered over 71 percent approval. It passed in 99 of 100 precincts. "It's a common bond," Thaxton noted.

The expanded Legacy Trail will create almost 30 miles of multi-use trail within Sarasota County. It will provide access to more local neighborhoods and place nearly 30 schools within a mile of safe, non-motorized trail. But there is still more work to be done. "You don't want to stop with a single spine," said Thaxton. "We still need to connect to Newtown and Nathan Benderson Park, to Englewood and the Florida SUN Trail."

BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

As community foundation executives, Pritchett and Thaxton often have legacy on their minds. This year the foundation is marking 25 years of operation. Created in 1995 from the sale of The Venice Hospital, it began with a single fund. Now Gulf Coast Community Foundation houses about 1,000 charitable funds, established by donors across the region. Together, the foundation and its donors have invested more than \$340 million in health and human services, education, the arts, economic development, and the environment.

"Gulf Coast Community Foundation is a leadership organization that was created to be here forever," said Pritchett. "We inspire donors to expect the best of their philanthropy. And they trust us to carry out their philanthropy after they're gone." The foundation also uses its resources to tackle the region's emerging issues and invest in its biggest opportunities. Like extending the Legacy Trail.

"The Legacy Trail is for everyone," Pritchett continued. "It expands fitness options, preserves parkland, offers safe transportation, and connects our communities. Just imagine what it will mean for our region in the next 25 years."