

THE FIRST ✿ THE ONLY

# VeroBeach Magazine®

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*Mothers and daughters  
share their secrets for*

## Keeping Close



Access to high-quality mental health care is vital to our children's well-being.



# Minding the Children

CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Over the span of my 30-year career in philanthropy, I have consoled and counseled my fair share of parents who have tried to make sense of the loss of a child, surely every parent's worst nightmare. Many seek to honor their son's or daughter's memory by doing something to make life better for others. Some plant trees, while others name a park bench or other public structure in their child's honor.

A few have established memorial scholarships. Others just drift, waiting for the right opportunity to present itself. It is heartbreaking work, yet an unexpected, sacred privilege that is part of the helping profession.

Research suggests that adolescents with serious conduct and substance use problems are five times more likely to die premature deaths than their peers. When a child's death is caused by risky behaviors, includ-

ing the use of alcohol or drugs, society sometimes blames parents, and parents sometimes blame others, inhibiting meaningful understanding of the issue.

In our community, progress is being made to reduce such adverse outcomes. Since 2000, the number of Indian River County high school students who report drinking alcohol in the past 30 days has declined by almost 50 percent. Similar reductions



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## Sustaining a robust safety net for behavioral health care will require substantial resources.

are recorded for high schoolers regarding binge drinking. Unfortunately, despite these overall improvements, alcohol and drug use and accidental deaths due to these risky behaviors among our community's children remain higher than Florida's average.

The Substance Awareness Center, led by executive director Carrie Maynard-Lester, is working to change that statistic. Together with her board and staff, May-

nard-Lester has developed a coalition of youth, parents, educators, health care professionals, law enforcement officers, and business and civic leaders working to reduce the use of alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs by youth in our county. Other helpful community programs include school-based prevention education and recovery assistance along with outpatient and day treatment.

Indian River Community Foundation has

awarded grants of more than \$200,000 over the past several years to support this meaningful work. We see it as an investment in hope, a bet on the potential of healthy young people, and a hedge against the cycle of shame and blame surrounding substance use that prevents children and families in our community from thriving.

After accidents, the Centers for Disease Control lists suicide as the second-leading cause

of death among 15-to-19-year-olds. Unlike deaths related to substance use, when a child dies by suicide, parents almost always blame themselves. On the occasions when I have helped parents use philanthropy to memorialize these children, they are rarely consoled by the facts or the overwhelming evidence that these tragedies cannot be predicted.

According to the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, the rate of hospitalization for mood and depressive disorders, conditions often associated with childhood suicide, is more than twice as high in Indian River County as it is for the state overall. In 2019, more than 1,400 children under the age of 18 were in this group. One of the highest rates of reports of poor mental health is among LGBTQ youth. In a recent survey conducted by The Trevor Project, 70 percent of this group reported their mental health as "poor," and 42 percent were found to have seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.

One organization working to ensure our youth have access to lifesaving mental health



The Mental Health Collaborative works with other local organizations to find and fill unmet needs.

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## Private philanthropy is already leading the way.

programs and services is the Mental Health Collaborative, led by executive director Brett Hall, a licensed clinical social worker with a master's in business administration. Together with dozens of member organizations, including Community Foundation grantees Mental Health Association, Substance Awareness Center, and Tykes & Teens, Hall and his team work to identify and fill gaps in services to improve the mental health of all community members, including children.

In addition to supporting proven programs and operating the McCabe Connections Center, the Mental Health Collaborative also recently advocated for a public-private partnership involving the Indian River Hospital District, Indian River Community Foundation, and other local grantmaking foundations to fund an intensive outpatient program for adolescents at Cleveland Clinic's Behavioral Health Center. This promising practice increases access to mental health care for children and youth and reduces unnecessary hospitalizations, increas-

ing the likelihood that more of our community's children will thrive.

If there is a silver lining to any of the school-based tragedies from the last decade or the massive disruptions and loss related to the global pandemic, it is that more governments, institutions, businesses, and individuals are talking about the importance of children's mental health and well-being.

This conversation matters, because sustaining a robust safety net for behavioral health care will require substantial resources. In the coming months, our county government will have an opportunity to significantly increase public dollars allocated to its Children's Services Advisory Committee. Indian River Hospital District will have a similar opportunity to allocate some of its accumulated assets to fund programs for children's behavioral health services.

Private philanthropy is already leading the way. From the early investments made by The Robert F. and Eleonora W. McCabe Foundation to improve mental health services in our commu-

nity, to the United Way's advocacy on behalf of children's services, to the recent growth in the number of permanent endowments at the Community Foundation benefiting similar efforts, a substantial down payment on a healthier future for our community's children has been made by local donors.

Perhaps this generosity is inspired by

first-hand experience of what it is like to help a child. Perhaps it comes from knowing the despair that follows a child's untimely death and a desire to prevent others from experiencing it. Whatever the motivation, this support of children's behavioral health services is an inspiring and important investment in the future well-being of our entire community. ✨



Investing in programs that support childhood mental health affirms our hope in a thriving future.