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# VeroBeach

*Magazine*®

MAY 2026



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# Extended Family

'TO LIVE LIFE LOVINGLY, TO LEARN, AND TO LEAVE A LEGACY—LIKE IT OR NOT'



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

I scrawled the above words on a blank sheet of butcher paper borrowed from my children's arts-and-crafts basket and pasted it to the refrigerator door the morning after my wife's funeral in December 2008. Part impromptu family mission statement and part daily mantra, I labeled it the "Pickering Promise." My 4-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter

needed me, and the Pickering Promise gave me the inspiration I needed to be there for them, especially as our understanding of home and family was turned upside down.

While it has been some time since a written display of the Pickering Promise has graced our refrigerator, the sentiment and the spirit of those words still have an impact on my roles and responsibilities in

my family. I'm not perfect, but on my best days they remind me to be more kind, to be more curious, and to be more selfless in my interactions with others, even in the most challenging circumstances. When it comes to helping other families in challenging circumstances, I've recognized these characteristics in several servant-leaders of local charities whose missions and



Indian River Community Foundation board member John Corbett with Gerri Rorick, executive director of A Caring Center for Women

**“What a beautiful thing it is to see resilience turn into restoration. To see survival become stability.”**

— MARTY MERCADO

programs meet the needs of families in our community.

Gerri Rorick knows what it’s like to live life lovingly. Since 2013, she has served as executive director of A Caring Center for Women, providing free comprehensive health services, including pregnancy and wellness care, to women in our community. With 30 percent of pregnant women still not receiving prenatal care in the first trimester,

there is plenty of work to do and abundant care to give.

“We love and serve women, period,” she says. “That’s all we do—whatever it takes.”

Last year, this labor of love provided more than 11,000 services to vulnerable women and families, including 1,488 prenatal visits, 1,587 wellness exams, 1,900 ultrasounds, and 1,284 pregnancy tests. Their mission is for more than just moms and babies.

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Jeff Pickering presents a check to Nikki Boswell, founder of Helping Hands Program of South County, on behalf of the Community Foundation.

Creative programs like DadUp empower fathers to build and strengthen connections with their children. All together, these efforts help reduce infant mortality, increase health and prosperity for at-risk mothers and infants, reduce teen pregnancy, and increase prenatal care in the first trimester.

Nikki Boswell's number one priority is to learn and inspire children with learning disabilities and their families to do the same—one child, one family at a time. She founded Helping Hands Program of South County to help prepare underserved children for success in school and life.

“Our public schools cannot do it all when it comes to helping students with learning disabilities,” the former educator tells me. “We help parents and their children understand all of the resources available to them so they can advocate for what they need.”

By law, public schools are required to provide students with learning disabilities accommodations to ensure they have equal access to education. Resources like

individual education plans (IEPs) and 504 plans detail the specific types of help a student is entitled to receive, such as one-on-one reading coaching or extended time on exams.

In some cases, however, by the time an IEP or 504 plan is provided, students and parents have reached their limits, patience is thin, and they need guidance for putting these resources to work. In south Indian River County, Boswell is that helping hand, empowering parents and their children to learn how to use them to achieve specific results, such as increasing third grade reading proficiency, reducing risky behaviors after school, and increasing high school graduation rates.

Tara Wright, executive director of The Buggy Bunch, is too modest to take credit for the legacy she is leaving for moms in our community. One visit to the Family Center in downtown Vero Beach, however, and you can see it for yourself.

The 6,000-square-foot space opened, debt free, in June 2021 after years of hard work and generosity from local



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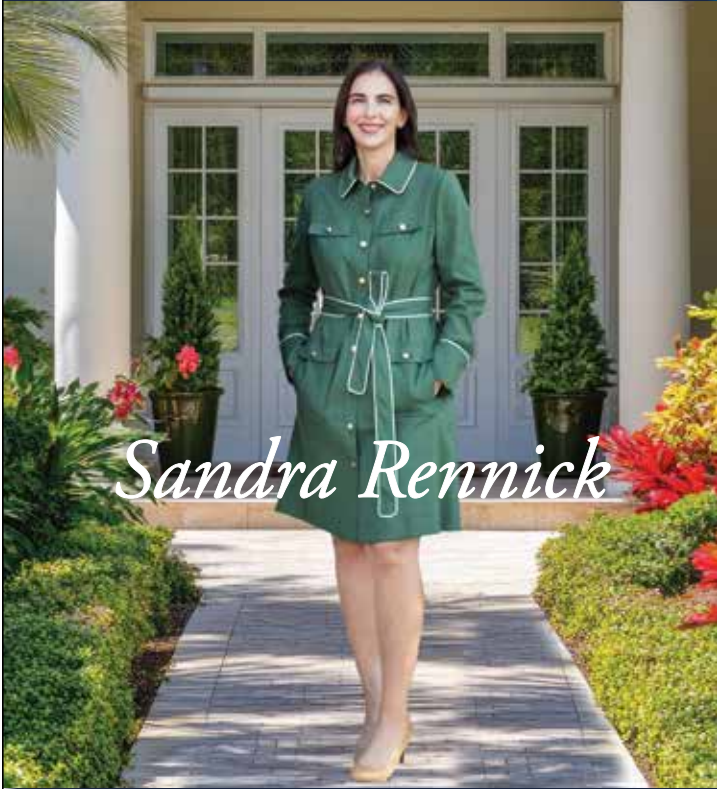
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## INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



The Buggy Bunch's executive director, Tara Wright, accepts a donation from Indian River Community Foundation's Jeff Pickering.

donors. The Family Center is more than just a building; it serves as a one-stop resource where moms and families receive free programs and services that nurture their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. On most days the Family Center is buzzing with classes, support groups, and children enjoying play areas. On other days, the work is more serious.

Through its Thriving Families program, The Buggy Bunch hosts supervised visitation and monitored exchanges at the Family Center for children and their non-residential parents. Whether because of a divorce or a more troubling situation, Thriving Families provides a safe place for broken families who are working toward reunification.

Each of these servant-leaders deserves recognition for the long-lasting impact their efforts will have on families in our community, much of which they will never see. Yet they continue with

integrity, as C.S. Lewis wrote, "doing the right thing, even when no one is watching." Every once in a while, however, the evidence of this good work is worth reporting.

"Last night, before I left work," wrote Marty Mercado, executive director of Hope for Families Center, "I said goodbye to an incredible family who finally found a place to call home.

"Mom is a full-time school-teacher. Educated. Hard-working. Dedicated. Her



Marty Mercado, executive director at Hope for Families Center

children—three teenagers—became part of our family here at Hope for Families Center. They quietly carried the weight of their situation, hiding it from classmates while showing up to school every day with courage. Their mom showed up too—every single day—determined to create stability again.

“I want you to understand something. She wasn’t lazy. She wasn’t struggling with addiction. She didn’t ‘mis-manage’ her money. She had a degree. She had a career. And then life happened.

“This is the story we see all the time. Housing instability does not discriminate. It can touch teachers, nurses, small



The Family Center at The Buggy Bunch was made possible through the generosity of local donors.

business owners—families who are doing everything right but face an unexpected storm.

“Last night I hugged those teens and wished them well.

I will miss them deeply. But what a beautiful thing it is to witness resilience turn into restoration. To see survival become stability. To watch a family move from hiding

to thriving.

“Mom kept showing up. The kids kept believing. And our community wrapped around them. That’s the power of hope.”

With families, sometimes the difference between an infant or maternal death and a healthy pregnancy and delivery ... between an academic failure and a success ... between a broken family and reunification ... between homelessness and home ... is not character, it’s support.

By choosing compassion over judgement, empathy over distance, kindness over criticism, we create space for miracles.

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