

# Women saw the need, and built a foundation for solutions

By **Cindy Swirko / Gainesville Sun**

On the face of it, Joan Canton and Dorothy Benson are an unlikely partnership.

Canton is black, Benson white. Canton lives in Linton Oaks, a neighborhood of poverty and all of problems that go with it. Benson lives in Haile Plantation, one of the premier addresses in Alachua County.

But together, they are among a core group of people who formed SWAG — the Southwest Advocacy Group — and pestered enough people in government in the past five years to get a community center full of resources to improve lives of kids and adults alike in the downtrodden neighborhoods west of Interstate 75.



*From left to right, Amanda Elliott, the SWAG Family Resource Center manager, Dorothy Benson, SWAG board member, Joan Canton, SWAG vice chair, and Mclinda Gilchrist, SWAG board member, gather at the SWAG Family Resource Center. **Erica Brough/Gainesville Sun***

They also worked to get the Alachua County Health Department to open a satellite clinic in Linton across from the community center.

And their latest victory: In a partnership with the University of Florida, a new childcare center will be built in Linton that will be staffed by UF and serve as a demonstration site for daycare providers through the county.

"We are really action oriented. We are really solution focused. We don't just get together and talk about what the problems are," Benson said. "We want to talk about the concrete things we can put in place — the support system, the safety net, the continuum of care that can follow children and families throughout their life and help them be better prepared for what comes."

Other longtime advocates for the poor and minorities in Gainesville, meanwhile, have been so focused on the east side of the city some barely know of SWAG's existence or its role in the apartment complexes over the bridge.

That became evident in the days following the March 20 shooting death of Robert Dentmond in the Majestic Oaks parking lot. The 16-year-old was fatally shot by law enforcement after he called 911 saying he was suicidal and had an M-16 rifle, which turned out to be a replica.

Days after the incident, leaders of the NAACP in Alachua County, the African American Accountability Alliance and clergy had a meeting in the area. None of the organizers called the SWAG leaders or those at the resource center.

That perceived snub got Canton and Tower Oaks resident Mclinda Gilchrist, a SWAG board member, fired up.

"At that meeting I was shocked — none of you have ever heard of the SWAG Center?" Gilchrist said. "That's what really came to my mind. I was about to jump out of myself."

"The people from the east side coming here to do things for Majestic Oaks — what are they coming to do that is not already here, and who are they doing it for?" Canton said. "And why was it necessary to get leaders from east Gainesville to work with a problem that was over here?"

*Intern Ross Quarles, left, works with youth in the after-school enrichment program at the SWAG Family Resource Center. Erica Brough/Gainesville Sun*

The same organizers also did not reach out to SWAG before the April 30 event billed as a day of healing at Majestic Oaks in Dentmond's memory until SWAG board member Dorothy Thomas responded to emails about the event.

"His death is not just about race, it's not just about poverty. It's a disenfranchisement issue that the kid had no backstop," Thomas recently told The Sun. "And all of the things that are getting yelled about are really not the reasons he was in the situation that he was in."

NAACP President Evelyn Foxx said none of the groups intended to disrespect SWAG. Foxx said she is aware of SWAG's accomplishments and role in the communities, and has attended SWAG meetings and plans to attend more.

"We don't have a lot of participation with the NAACP or the Martin Luther King Commission from that area but it was in no way intended for them to think we were neglecting them," Foxx said. "I need to call Joan and perhaps make a visit out there. We want to continue to work in the area and to work with SWAG."

Benson used to drive by the low-income communities in the SWAG area — roughly from south of Newberry Road to Archer Road between Interstate 75 and Tower Road — and wanted to learn how such poverty existed in an area of middle- and upper-income subdivisions.

Canton lives it — the crime, absence of services, lack of infrastructure such as sidewalks, everyday hardships residents endure. Her activism arose from a desire to improve life in the neighborhoods.

"Some of us choose to live here. It's convenient for me. I've always thought that if everybody who has the means to leave does leave, then the youngsters coming up have no examples to follow," said Canton, whom Benson called the driving force of SWAG.

*LaVeta Carroll, center, a prevention specialist with Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, works with youth in the after-school enrichment program at the SWAG Family Resource Center in the Linton Oaks apartment complex. Erica Brough/Gainesville Sun*

The origins of SWAG began in the mid-2000s. Allison Law, another Haile resident, had been trying to persuade the Alachua County Commission to provide more services, including recreation, to the Tower Road corridor. Law said at the time that the proliferation of higher-end subdivisions along Tower Road masked the low-income housing areas.

In 2010, SWAG was formed as a nonprofit by the joining of residents from the poor and rich areas.

Its efforts got a major boost when Dr. Nancy Hardt, now retired from the University of Florida as a professor of pathology and ob-gyn, discovered that the southwest area had the highest numbers of Medicaid births and low birthweight babies in the county. Obesity rates were also high.

Hardt had maps that showed the preponderance of the health issues in the southwest area. She shared them with Sheriff Sadie Darnell, who realized instantly that they corresponded to her maps of crime by patrol zones — ASO's Mike Zone has the highest crime rates of unincorporated Alachua County.

Armed with evidence of poor health and high crime, SWAG began pitching ideas for remedies to the County Commission.

Commissioners in 2011 bought two foreclosed quadruplexes in Linton Oaks that became the SWAG Family Resource Center, which opened in 2012, and the health department clinic. The clinic had been operating out of a trailer until the duplex was refurbished and opened last year.

The center, staffed by the Partnership for Strong Families, has computers, tutoring, GED classes and other services. It gives away donated food weekly and has a clothing closet. It holds summer programs for kids and special events such as bike giveaways.

*Linton Oaks resident Sadie McBroom, center, volunteers every Wednesday morning at the food give-away for residents. Erica Brough/Gainesville Sun*

Meanwhile, the clinic's patients can get primary care, dental care, pediatric care, birth certificates, vaccinations, treatment for communicable diseases and other services.

"The quality of service is what Joan...and everyone else in the community has done such an excellent job of establishing at the resource center and for SWAG as a whole," center manager Amanda Elliott. "People now know that if they have a problem they can come here and there is someone who can help them understand the right channels to advocate for themselves. They will get the same service here as they would if they were going somewhere they had to pay for it."

The resource center and the clinic are already making a difference. Data compiled by the Partnership for Strong Families shows a verified decrease in child maltreatment in the SWAG area since the resource center opened.

"Since the SWAG Family Resource Center became fully operational in 2012, data has shown an incredible 45 percent reduction in the verified child maltreatment counts in the 32607 zip code," said Partnership President Stephen Pennypacker

The health clinic is also making inroads in providing services to residents of the area and from throughout western Alachua County.

Health Department Administrator Paul Myers said the clinic has served 1,777 medical clients in 2015. The dental clinic served 2,120 clients from June through February.

Myers said it is difficult to determine if the clinic has improved the health of clinic users but added that 14 percent of respondents in a survey that they had not been getting health care before the clinic opened.

"That's always the million dollar question. When you do preventative care as we do, how do you prove a negative? How do you prove what we are doing is having an impact," Myers said. "It's not a cause and effect with with the services we provide out there. People can reach their own conclusions."