

DELIVERING RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

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WHEN A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER MAGIC HAPPENS

Amazing things happen when caring, compassionate people come together to work toward a common goal.

Collaboration and mutual respect that turned into deep friendships are what makes the story of Southwest Advocacy Group (SWAG) special.

SWAG has a wonderful history, but before the group existed, a local community leader named Joan Canton had a vision for her neighborhood. Almost 20 years ago, Joan moved into Linton Oaks, and soon after, she started working to help revitalize the area.

Joan, along with some of her neighbors, became the voice of the neighborhood. Their goal was to provide residents in their community with the resources they needed to flourish and to ensure that resources would be delivered in a way that respected the residents. "When you have a stake in what you are doing, you do it better," Joan said.

Around the same time that Joan's group was working to bring resources

to the community, University of Florida's Dr. Nancy Hardt published maps that pinpointed a one-square-mile area in southwest Gainesville where in one year's time as many as 450 babies were born to parents living below the poverty line.

Alachua County Sheriff Sadie Darnell had similar maps that showed a high concentration of crime in the same square-mile area. This information published in the

Gainesville Sun in a letter to the editor from community volunteer Alison Law and caught the eye of Dorothy Benson. These women had never met, but their paths were about to intersect. Through a series of what now seem like fateful decisions and coincidences, the women met to discuss what the data meant to the community. In that moment, and during subsequent months of hard work, the vision for SWAG was born.

In 2009, Dorothy and Alison connected with young mothers in the community after they learned that the moms needed something positive for their kids to do after school.

Dorothy and Alison helped transport a group of moms to the Alachua County Board of Commissioners so they could advocate for the resources their families needed.

Two years later, the SWAG Family Resource Center (where families can access supports such as help finding a job, a food pantry, a clothing closet, after-school enrichment, and parent-child activities) opened in Linton





Oaks. Soon after, the group began working to create a clinic in the neighborhood, just across the street from the resource center.

Just as the clinic seemed to be on track to open, Dorothy moved to Kentucky.

After Dorothy moved, another Dorothy, Dorothy Thomas, entered

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the picture when she delivered a donation of coats from her son's kindergarten class to SWAG's Family Resource Center and felt an immediate love for the place.

"I did not know anything about SWAG at the time," she said. "But as soon as I walked in the door, I felt a connection." Dorothy Thomas quickly went from someone who was just "dropping off coats" to someone deeply invested in the mission of SWAG and what it was doing to empower the community.

Before long, she was asked to step in and help the clinic project, which was in peril because of budget considerations, and she helped raise the money to make the clinic a success.

Two years later, Dorothy Benson moved back to Gainesville, just in time for the SW Health Clinic ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Together, the "Dorothys," as they have become known, began working to open the newest SWAG resource: The CHILD Center, an early learning center where children 6 weeks to 5 years old from the SWAG neighborhoods can access high-



quality early childhood care and education.

The CHILD Center, which opened this past summer, is a result of a partnership with several community organizations in Alachua County and the University of Florida's Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies.

Because SWAG aims to serve families of all ages and stages and in life, the need for the CHILD Center, also located in Linton Oaks, was critical. Dr. Patricia Snyder, Director of the Zucker Center, has also played an ongoing role with the CHILD Center.

"I have been in this business for more than 30 years, and this CHILD Center is remarkable," she said. "This is a great model for the country for helping families and children get a leg up."

This group's decision to raise funds and put together the partnerships to build the CHILD Center inspired them to bring these same resources to children all throughout Alachua County, and three and a half years ago, they began advocating for a local children's services council that was on the November 6 ballot. The Children's Trust referendum, which passed, will provide the leadership and funding to care for all of Alachua County's children starting prenatally and through a child's high school years.

Joan Canton, whom Dorothy Benson calls a pillar of the SWAG community, has witnessed the SWAG neighborhoods come to life. Joan, an active volunteer at the Family Resource Center, still lives in Linton Oaks, and she plans to stay.

"If everyone who can leave leaves, then we are not truly helping," she said.

SWAG partners with many different organizations to help make life easier for low-income families by helping them to help themselves. Not only have these ladies brought resources to the community, but they have also developed a deep love and respect for each other.

"We have such a patchwork quilt of people involved," Dorothy Thomas said. "We each bring our perspectives, background, and skills to the table. Sometimes, our differences require us to have hard conversations, but these conversations are what make our projects better."

Dorothy Benson added, "A lot of great things have happened over the years because some very good people really cared and never quit."

Great leaders inspire our communities



In every community, there are people who can inspire others to work for positive change. True leaders know how to forge a consensus and create a lasting legacy of success.

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