

Strickland aims to include the “community” in the Community Foundation

May 16, 2024

[BY JAMES ABRAHAM](#)

Florida Weekly Correspondent



“I believe that people want this Community Foundation to serve the county long term,” said Strickland. COURTESY PHOTO

For Shelley Strickland, running a community foundation means living the essential principle of “community.”

“I’ve appreciated how people are willing to share their perspectives and their hopes, and people have strong passions and feelings, and that means they care,” she said during a recent interview. “And so, I really do feel, I believe, that people want this Community Foundation to really serve the county long term, and that they’re behind it. You know, it’s not just me coming in as the new CEO; it’s the board that really helps drive the mission.”

A diplomatic conversationalist, Strickland avoided criticizing foundation history and instead gave shout-outs to officers and staff to whom she’s listened since arriving several months ago.

She praised her leadership team of board chair Jill McCrory, who leads a blue-chip law firm in Punta Gorda; vice chair Bob Peterson, an education consultant and longtime foundation stalwart; and Jo Ann Tompkins, who retired from running a nursing business and has been involved with a host of philanthropic and cultural entities in Charlotte County.

Treasurer Kim Savasuk, who runs an accounting firm based in Port Charlotte, represents efforts to cross the bridge and expand the foundation's footprint.



Shelley Strickland's goal is to expand the reach of the Charlotte Community Foundation. COURTESY PHOTO

Living the community life is a mission with which the Charlotte Community Foundation is still coming to grips. In its latest iteration of leadership, the foundation is going back to the future by bringing in a CEO who is both an academic and a go-getter.

Strickland served as the vice president for philanthropy at the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation in Michigan. The organization says she was instrumental in doubling the foundation's assets from \$75 million to \$200 million. Part of that success may be that, like Carolyn Freeland, who revolutionized the foundation during her tenure, Strickland has made both a study and a career of philanthropy.

Freeland authored a book on community foundations and contributed to more than 40 publications on the subject. Strickland held concurrent appointments at the University of Michigan, teaching an undergraduate philanthropy course and designing a concentration in fundraising and philanthropy for a master's degree program.

Despite thriving in the cloistered world of academia, Strickland knows that her success — as with any community foundation — depends on public engagement.

“Through meetings, through our presence, through our grantmaking, through involving volunteers, the whole county is stronger when there's engagement across the whole county,” she said. “And so, I'm hoping that — especially as we have an open call for

people to serve as reviewers on our grants committee — we might have some volunteers from Englewood and Babcock Ranch and Port Charlotte that we bring in the whole county.”

Even before assuming the role of CEO, Strickland was networking.

“I’m very grateful that, even before I started, Angie Matthiessen (executive director of the United Way of Charlotte County) and I have been in conversation,” she said. “The United Way is like the community’s checking account and the Community Foundation is like the savings account, the endowment. They should be complementary. United Way focuses on human services and the Community Foundation does, too — but we also can help arts and culture.”

Strickland, who apparently has done her homework, knows that the foundation has long been seen as a Punta Gorda thing. Her goal is not only to expand the organization’s reach but also to speak to the new needs of the county.

“One of the points of pride at my previous community foundation was the Teen Center,” she said.

The program existed before she became CEO, but Strickland embraced it.

“It became a place to hang out. The foundation had done some studies and looked at the community and did a study and saw there were younger people involved in foundation work, but the teenage population was missing. And so, they actually created this teen center that still exists today.”

That emphasis on listening and delivering was evident last month when Strickland led an open house at the foundation’s office at 227 Sullivan St., Punta Gorda.

Instead of making a series of speeches and introductions, Strickland and foundation officials greeted visitors. Guests filled out Post-it notes listing what they’d like to see in Charlotte County. Strickland plans to use what she heard in conversations and data culled from the notes to help her shape a vision for the agency’s future. She hopes to align that vision with her concept of how giving agencies serve.

“Philanthropy addresses systemic need; charities the direct aid,” she said. “What I’ve heard so far is that community members want to see the foundation shape that long-term philanthropic source of community capital endowment.”

One means of doing so, she said, is to strengthen the web of helping agencies that utilize the foundation as a clearinghouse and resource center. Freeland helped create the Nonprofit Network during her tenure almost 20 years ago, but it has languished.

“We’d like to develop a philanthropic resource for professional advisors and for nonprofits,” Strickland said. †

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