Extending A Legacy
CEO Mark Pritchett
Steers the Gulf Coast Community Foundation
to Greater Lengths

Season of Sharing
20 Years of Helping At-Risk Locals
Keep Their Homes

PLUS: Social & Arts Agendas, Spotlights, Out & About

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EXTENDING A LEGACY

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Jonathan Thaxton has envisioned the possibilities of the Legacy Trail almost as long as he can remember.

The fifth-generation Sarasotan grew up on a family farm in Osprey, less than two miles from the old Seaboard Air Line Railroad. Thaxton spent much of his youth wandering the wilds of then-undeveloped Palmer Ranch. He reckons he knew the area’s game trails and dirt paths better than the hallways of his own home.

He also recalls discovering the railroad at age 12 or 13.

“I can remember the day I first set foot on it — it was so exciting,” said Thaxton. Walking the tracks and, yes, even hopping trains became an adventurous way to explore farther-flung areas of his community.

At Venice High School in the 1970s, a wise (and patient) biology teacher helped Thaxton redirect his youthful energy into environmental activism. He soon began taking on community projects that he felt mattered. While his early career after graduation kept him in the family’s real estate business, Thaxton spent many hours applying his knowledge and passion to collaborative efforts to acquire public lands for preservation and recreation. The creation of the eventual Legacy Trail would become one of his most ambitious and long-running endeavors. So long-running, in fact, he insists it’s still far from complete.

BY GREG LUBECKI | PHOTOS BY MATT HOUKSN

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On Thaxton has envisioned the possibilities of the Legacy Trail almost as long as he can remember. Following graduation from Venice High School in the 1970s, he knew he wanted to see the trail built. He has been involved with the trail’s construction for two decades. As he walked along the trail during a recent ride, he shared his thoughts on the trail’s future.

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At Venice High School in the 1970s, a wise (and patient) biology teacher helped Thaxton redirect his youthful energy into an environmental activist. He soon began talking on community projects that he felt mattered. While his early career after graduation kept him in the family’s real estate business, Thaxton spent many hours applying his knowledge and passion to collaborative efforts to acquire public lands for preservation and recreation. The creation of the eventual Legacy Trail would become one of his most ambitious and long-running endeavors. So long-running, in fact, he insists it’s still far from complete.

“On the day the trail was dedicated, I was so proud and excited. It was a great day for everyone involved. But as we continue to build the trail, we have to keep in mind that there are still challenges ahead. We need to ensure that the trail remains accessible to everyone, regardless of their ability to use it,” said Thaxton. “We also need to make sure that new developments along the trail are done in a way that is respectful of the environment and the community.”

Community Connection

Thaxton’s involvement began as a private citizen, when he learned about Sarasota County Commissioner David Mills was working with a group to turn the space-abandoned railway into a recreational trail. The new trail opened in March 2008.

With donations made in his wife’s name, Nathan Lee turned to Gulf Coast Community Foundation for help. Pritchett was just weeks into his new job when the widower walked into his office and said he wanted to create a training center for local 9-1-1 operators. As Pritchett listened, he started to ask if there was a bigger problem—a systemic one. At his recommendation, the foundation invested in a study of Florida’s emergency response system. It found there was no system at all, but rather an underfunded patchwork of agencies and protocols.

The findings helped legislators push through new statewide standards for training and certification of emergency operators and dispatchers. With continued support from Pritchett and Gulf Coast, the Hedging Denise Amber Lee Foundation grew into a nationally influential advocate for public safety and 9-1-1 training. “We took a local tragedy, looked at the issue through a new lens, leveraged private donations with foundation resources, and improved public safety for all Floridians and our nation,” said Pritchett. “That’s when I saw the potential of philanthropy.”

TRAIL BUDDIES

A few years after Pritchett’s arrival, Hansen made another shrewd recruiting decision. Thaxton was completing his final year as a county commissioner and she wanted to bring another perspective to the foundation’s board.

Thaxton hit the ground running, helping to implement bold projects in workforce development, education, and safety-net human services. A new challenge for a man who loves them was connecting independent, impact-minded philanthropists with the needs of the community.
with the systemic initiatives the foundation was developing. An early example: convening a group of 10 donors he dubbed the Hunger Design Team to help Gulf Coast and All Faiths Food Bank identify and fund solutions based on a regional child-hunger study commissioned by the foundation.

"I had decades of experience pulling together public funding to get things done," Thaxton mused. "But this was a new world. Not only do Gulf Coast's donors generously invest their resources in transforming our community, but they also have brilliant ideas for how to get the best bang for their philanthropic buck."

Another new project in Gulf Coast's portfolio was one Thaxton knew well: the citizen-initiated effort to extend his beloved Legacy Trail.

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

Many proposals for trail names were suggested during the initial, formal naming process, but there was no consensus going into the county commission meeting with the important task on the docket. John McCarthy, county parks director at the time, successfully pitched the board on "Legacy Trail."

"Heritage Trail" had been seriously considered, he recalled. For 90 years until the last train ran in 1991, the stretch of railroad had helped Venice survive the Florida real estate bust and Great Depression. It supported the area's timber and turpentine industries and transported the Ringling Bros. Circus back and forth to its winter home. "But it felt like 'Heritage' only looked back," said McCarthy, "and this trail was about our past, our present, and our future. That's when I hit on 'Legacy.'"

Part of that future legacy was the trail's potential for expansion. And in 2013, the time was right to push for adding nine more miles of old railway to extend the Legacy Trail into downtown Sarasota. Gulf Coast Community Foundation partnered with organizations like Friends of the Legacy Trail and introduced a grassroots fundraising campaign that paid for a feasibility study. Soon the trail's expansion project was off and running.

Now representing Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Thaxton again teamed with the Trust for Public Land, which he'd worked with on the original rail-to-trail purchase, and helped the county plan and negotiate the new acquisition. Along the way, Gulf Coast Community Foundation continued to fund critical appraisals, boundary surveys, and environmental assessments. "Those studies aren't 'sexy' things to pay for," noted Pritchett, who had become Gulf Coast's CEO in 2015. "But they're vital to move these projects forward."

In 2018, Sarasota County voters overwhelmingly approved borrowing $65 million to extend the Legacy Trail north as well as add connectivity east from Venice to North Port. The referendum garnered over 71 percent approval. It passed in 99 of 100 precincts. "It's a common bond," Thaxton noted.

The expanded Legacy Trail will create almost 30 miles of multi-use trail within Sarasota County. It will provide access to more local neighborhoods and place nearly 30 schools within a mile of safe, non-motorized trail. But there is still more work to be done. "You don't want to stop with a single spine," said Thaxton. "We still need to connect to Newborn and Nathan Benderson Park, to Englewood and the Florida SUN Trail."

**BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE**

As community foundation executives, Pritchett and Thaxton often have legacy on their minds. This year the foundation is marking 25 years of operation. Created in 1995 from the sale of The Venice Hospital, it began with a single fund. Now Gulf Coast Community Foundation houses about 1,000 charitable funds, established by donors across the region. Together, the foundation and its donors have invested more than $340 million in health and human services, education, the arts, economic development, and the environment.

"Gulf Coast Community Foundation is a leadership organization that was created to be here forever," said Pritchett. "We inspire donors to expect the best of their philanthropy. And they trust us to carry out their philanthropy after they're gone."

The foundation also uses its resources to tackle the region's emerging issues and invest in its biggest opportunities. Like extending the Legacy Trail.

"The Legacy Trail is for everyone," Pritchett continued. "It expands fitness options, preserves parkland, offers safe transportation, and connects our communities. Just imagine what it will mean for our region in the next 25 years."