

PERSPECTIVE

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF
VOLUSIA & FLAGLER COUNTIES

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COMMUNITY VOICES

Moms' group looks for positive school change

If you have been following the issues in Volusia County Schools, then you have read about the "3 Moms" group. You may be asking yourself, "Who are these moms?" and "What are their intentions?"

We are three mothers who each have three children, and who live in the three corners of our county. That may sound like the beginning of a fairy tale. What we are up against is anything but.

We are not teachers or employees of the school district.

We do not follow the directions or agenda set by the teachers union or the district or any political party. We have traveled to Tallahassee and other counties to meet with legislators and School Board members regarding education issues. We have consistently attended board meetings for the past three years to learn, comment and report back to our local schools.

We are active members of our PTAs and many other committees with the district and our schools. Most of all, we are parents who really



KIM SHORT

dislike the direction our public schools are going in. We know we are not alone, and we want an organized way to change it.

The state of Florida spends close to \$700 million on testing each year. We can't keep great teachers, in large part, because of the unimaginable demands on them. Our state rolled out new standards without all the materials even created to teach them. Parents like us are fed up, and we don't know why the majority of lawmakers are not listening.

We hear all the time that retirees don't care about education.

We refuse to buy it. Grandparents don't care about kids? Grandparents don't care that their tax dollars are being wasted on standardized testing? We believe that the

community and our parents just need a group to organize and represent their interests. That is why we started "3 Moms."

The most conservative Republicans and the most liberal Democrats have come together in unity over the issues facing our public schools.

Our parents are tired of politicians making money on the backs of our kids. Our parents want the School Board to care about their local and state concerns, and to act. Our parents want our district and our union to work together. Parents and community members need an organization that helps communicate between all of these groups. That is what "3 Moms" is.

"Things that matter most must never be at the mercy of things which matter least." This is a quote by Goethe, and we believe that it sums up our frustration with our School Board this year.

We have real problems that need real solutions. Our School Board has taken entirely too much time away from solving them with

things that matter very little. Volusia County Schools is the largest employer in Volusia County.

If we want to be the best, if we want to raise graduation rates above the 72percent they are currently at. We need our School Board actively working to find solutions.

We want not only the best education for our children, but we want to make sure that every child in Volusia County has the best education.

A few weeks ago we brought together over 300 parents, teachers and community members in three meetings we held around the county.

These people are all committed to turning our schools into places our children deserve. At these meetings, we had organized conversations about what our strengths and opportunities in our schools are, as well as the weaknesses and threats that they are up against. We believe it was a great first step in creating better lines of communication between parents and teachers.

We had some time for open conversations during our

meetings, and all of the notes were compiled and presented to our School Board.

The entire district staff was given copies of this information and set up a meeting with School Board Chair Ida Wright. We have also met with Greg Akin, chief operating officer of Volusia County Schools, and we have plans for more community conversations with district staff involved to work to solving these issues.

We would like to thank everyone who has attended our meetings and has taken an active role in improving our schools. We are anchored in the simple idea that effective communication will bring the change we want to see. The only thing we know for sure is that our children deserve more and we have to do better.

— Short, of Port Orange, wrote this on behalf of herself and the other two "moms": Leslie LaRue of DeLand and Joanna Kaney-Olivari of Ormond Beach. Their emails are 3momskim@gmail.com; 3momsleslie@gmail.com and 3momsjoanna@gmail.com.



COMMUNITY VOICES

A new and hopeful journey

"Journey to hope" was recently the theme of a sermon delivered by my pastor, Tom Nelson. I heard and felt the sincere passion behind his words and could not help but also relate it to the mission of Hope Place, a homeless service facility that will house children and families.

As a newly retired elementary school principal in Volusia County, the word "journey," to me, refers to the children. What does hope mean to them?

For most of our own children, we find them hoping for a new bike, toy or the newest piece of technology coming out next week. However, many of our 2,300 homeless children and unaccompanied youth in Volusia County schools hope for a bed to sleep in at night and food to fill their stomachs so they can sleep without the pain and anxiety that accompany an empty belly.

I often picture in my mind the two little boys, ages five and six, who came running through the gates and up the sidewalk of our school one Monday morning.

My first reaction was to stop the running on campus. After all, they were now at school and procedures need to be followed. As I stopped them, the six-year-old, holding tightly to his younger brother's hand, looked up at me sadly with tears welling in his eyes.



JUDI WINCH

He said, "Mrs. Winch, we haven't had anything to eat for a long time and are so hungry. We are hurrying to get to breakfast."

That morning, the only hope of these two precious boys was to find food to take away their pain. I hurried them on their way knowing that sometimes rules need to be broken.

In my new position, as the executive director of Food Brings Hope, I encountered a group of DeLand High School art students led by teacher Peggy Banks, who wanted to make a difference in our community.

These students completed a survey at the beginning of the year and overwhelmingly stated that homelessness in children and youth is the most pressing problem in our society. They named their group "Kids Helping Kids" and decided to sell their artwork with 100 percent of the proceeds donated to Food Brings Hope. They understand firsthand that it is difficult to come to school to learn and be successful when you are tired and hungry.

These are the youth of our

community doing their part to bring hope to the homeless.

I applaud the Volusia County Council for recently voting unanimously to support the building and development of Hope Place. It was a joyous occasion to witness the standing ovation given to the council by so many members of the community. The Volusia County School Board will be voting on the Hurst School contract on Tuesday.

Thank you to the man with the dream, Troy Ray, past executive director of Halifax Urban Ministries; to Forough Hosseini, for her passion and mission to eradicate the epidemic of homeless children in Volusia County; to Mark Geallis, current executive director of Halifax Urban Ministries, who will continue his leadership and oversee the operation of Hope Place; and to the countless others in our schools and the community who worked incessantly to support and make this dream a reality.

Through your dedicated efforts, Volusia County will be providing our children and their families the opportunity to begin their own "journey to hope" as they step across the threshold and through the doors of Hope Place to a new life with endless possibilities.

— Winch, of Port Orange, is executive director of Food Brings Hope.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Local children need help

I'm writing to undergird the importance of collaboratively coming together to provide resources and services to our homeless youth and families. One Voice for Volusia operates one of the largest health and human services coalitions in the region. Through our mission of improving the quality of life in Volusia County through leadership, strategic planning, cross-system partnerships, problem solving and capacity building, we can offer the following insights as we determine whether or not to fund and support projects such as the proposed community center, Hope Place:

■ According to the Institute for Children and Poverty, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs than their housed peers. Volusia County Schools reported that 2,322 students met the federal definition of homeless

and 213 Volusia County students were classified as homeless and unaccompanied in the 2015-16 school year.

■ In a recent Community Health Survey we conducted with over 2,600 respondents, homelessness emerged as the No. 1 health issue our Volusia County residents were most concerned about (out of 29 health concerns).

■ Our One Voice for Volusia February coalition meeting boasted our highest attendance rate of 125 community leaders, for the meeting topic of homelessness — with Halifax Urban Ministries and Hope Place being featured in panel presentations.

As you can see by the numbers above, we have a community that is deeply concerned about this issue, and we have a body of leaders and providers who are very interested in getting to work.

Julie Barrow

Daytona Beach

— Barrow is executive director of One Voice for Volusia.

Port Orange protest

Recently, the Planning Commission of Port Orange accepted a proposal for a subdivision called Serenity Hills of 82 acres, with 95 lots on Hensel Road, despite many concerned citizens opposed to the subdivision. Many of them are part of a group called STOP. Some members of the commission expressed confusion about the group and its agenda.

STOP was born following the presentation of a plan for the subdivision by the developers to residents of the area surrounding the property, because of the overwhelming opposition to the plan as presented. It was formed because of the shared feelings of distaste for this plan. The residents felt that it would be more effective to be united in fundraising needed to hire professionals to advise and negotiate, and for creating signs to inform those who are interested. It is the right of the citizens under the First Amendment to form this group, and it should not be discredited or viewed with suspicion.

The City Council could vote soon, and there still will be much opposition to the subdivision. Most people in Port Orange are in favor of development and are expecting a plan with fewer homes

and larger lots that minimizes traffic congestion. The project should respect the unique topography, without the large centralized lake that would remove the property's most prominent feature (the ridge that is one of the highest points in east Volusia), and maintain the continuity and integrity of the subdivision with the same flavor of the semi-rural nature of the area.

This is the last large piece of undeveloped land in Port Orange east of Interstate 95. Many citizens hope the City Council will respect it and the feelings and input of the people of Port Orange, and give them the opportunity to provide meaningful input and not merely be tolerated.

Beth Goldey

Port Orange

Noisy neighborhood

In response to the March 10 letter, "A noisy intrusion," about the noise of Bike Week on State Road A1A, why on Earth would the writer choose to live on such a busy and noisy street? The bikes have been here for 75 years. The writer should have chosen to live far from such a noisy and congested area.

Bill Bosco

Palm Coast