

Charlotte Community Foundation blends old ideas with new direction

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This aerial photo shows Charlotte Community Hospital in Punta Gorda (later, Charlotte Regional Medical Center, then Bayfront Health, now ShorePoint Health) prior to its expansion in 1965. COURTESY PHOTO

The Charlotte Community Foundation is a metaphor for the county's growth and diversification. Its first leaders are now largely forgotten, a commentary on the transitional nature of life in Charlotte County.

The foundation has long been concerned about health — which reflects its beginnings as a hospital support organization — and education. It traces its roots to the Adventist Hospital Foundation, founded to support the Adventist Hospital of Punta Gorda. Under a previous name, it was the first hospital built in Charlotte County, created in large part through a subscription drive in the 1940s. The Adventist Hospital Foundation focused primarily on fundraising for health and education.

In 1995 the Adventist hospital was sold and renamed Charlotte Regional Medical Center. The hospital is now known as ShorePoint Health Punta Gorda.

The philanthropic organization became a separate entity known as the Charlotte County Foundation.

The education component was best epitomized by the first president of the organization, the late Leo Wotitzky, and his mentor and successor, the late Vernon Peeples. Wotitzky, during the 1940s, lost his legislative seat after pioneering a new apportionment of state education funds to bring more money to poorer counties. He was tagged as being responsible for the new taxes needed. Wotitzky later taught at Charlotte High School, and Peeples gravitated to him, forming a lifelong bond.



WOTITZKY

Wotitzky's and Peeples' foundation policy was to focus on health and education. The organization made a commitment of \$100,000 a year to help fund a longitudinal aging study based at the University of South Florida. It also committed to supporting Learning in

Retirement, a national program that provided cultural and educational opportunities for seniors.

Both efforts reflected the county's natural focus on seniors, a rising demographic in Charlotte County at the time.

But all of that changed in 2004 when the foundation brought in Carolyn Freeland, who had spent 17 years managing nonprofit organizations and had actually authored a book about the process, "The Complete Guide to Non-Profit Management."

To his credit, Peeples, the last Democrat elected to the state Legislature, recognized the need for the organization to meet modern needs. In a statement released after Freeland was hired, Peeples said the foundation's new goal would be "to make a greater impact on more people's lives."

Freeland followed the board's mandate to move the foundation in a new direction.

One of her first acts was to insert the word "community" into the foundation's name and mission. Soon the foundation ended its commitment to the longitudinal aging study and cut back gradually on Learning in Retirement funding. That organization, later crippled by the COVID pandemic, folded in 2022.

Freeland also moved the organization from its home in the historic Freeman House, located within a walk of the hospital that gave birth to the organization, to swank new offices off Bal Harbour Boulevard in Punta Gorda Isles. That move alone marked a dramatic shift: The foundation was following the money, and PGI is the wealthiest community in the

county. In essence, it moved from its community of origin to a new home, perhaps reflecting its new mission.

Freeland helped establish the Nonprofit Network, an indexed matrix of community needs and funding sources compiled by helping agencies, based on networking templates she had developed during her career in nonprofits.

But since her retirement, the foundation's public presence has faded. During the March of Justice following George Floyd's murder in 2020 by police officers, foundation director Ashley Maher initiated a community dialogue with law enforcement and residents. It marked a foray into a controversial area — race relations — but Maher and the other participants pulled back once the threat level receded.

Strickland has demurred when asked her opinions of the county's needs, instead saying that her first goal is to listen. One clearly stated goal, however, is the introduction of philanthropic education sessions, a reflection of her academic work in that field.

Strickland opened her tenure with a public event that featured more listening than talking. Guests spent almost two hours meeting foundation officials while using Post-it notes to define what they felt the county needed.

Perhaps the organization defines its modern mission best in a statement on its history that reads, in part:

“Our enduring history, as it weaves its story of assisting those most in need, is one that must continue to honor our founder's ideals. From our initial focus on health and education issues, the Foundation now serves various community needs through grant-making and scholarships, all made possible by the generosity of our beloved donors.

“Day-to-day Foundation operations are guided by the Chief Executive Officer Shelley Strickland, Ph.D., with oversight from a volunteer Board of Directors. Our board members are chosen for their strong ties to the community and their local knowledge of the needs of Charlotte County and its residents. Under this guidance, the Charlotte Community Foundation has set a course that strives to encourage public and private philanthropy and support projects that offer unique solutions to community needs so that we may enhance and improve the quality of life for all of our residents.”¹