



We're In This Together

Community

BY ROXIE JERDE SRQ DAILY SATURDAY PERSPECTIVES EDITION SATURDAY
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Those who have spent any time with me know I have a favorite motto that I am often heard saying—“all of us are smarter than one of us.” The most inspirational leaders I’ve learned from in my career have always been the ones who believe in the power of collaboration and the results that happen due to working effectively together. Our community is a shining example of so many individuals and organizations that convene and work together to find innovative solutions to shared challenges.

One of our most recent pioneering collaborations is with the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. I’m excited to share that the national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has once again recognized our region as a Pacesetter for leading by example to overcome barriers for literacy for children in our region. What set us apart from other communities was our commitment to supporting parent success through a two-generation approach, addressing family health factors, driving results with data, building cross-sector collaboration, prioritizing children and families in public housing and utilizing technology to make a bigger impact.

Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a critical milestone toward high school graduation and career success because it marks the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” National tests show that two-thirds of U.S. fourth-graders are not reading proficiently. This disturbing statistic is made even worse by the fact that more than four out of every five low-income students miss this critical milestone, and students who have not mastered reading by that time are more likely to drop out of high school and struggle throughout their lives.

The Pacesetter honor is not only a win for our students, but also a win for our region's models of collaboration. The success of the Suncoast Campaign is made possible thanks to a consortium of supporting partners including the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, the Manatee Community Foundation, School District of Manatee County, School District of Sarasota County, The Patterson Foundation, United Way of Manatee County and the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee.

A part of the collaboration I recently got to enjoy personally was last month when Embracing Our Differences coordinated "Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences Day." Celebrated on the birthday of Dr. Seuss, this day saw dozens of community leaders and volunteers enter more than 600 elementary school classrooms in Sarasota and Manatee counties to share their love of reading and the whimsical rhymes intertwined with important messages of Dr. Seuss books. Not only were the students engaged in fun activities and learning, many of the ones from Title 1 schools were able to take the books home for their personal libraries.

I was delighted to spend time with a second-grade classroom at Gocio Elementary School and read to a group of 16 students, all donned with Dr. Seuss hats. And yes, I wore one too! What I loved about our reading adventure with "Horton Hears a Who" was how inquisitive the students were and how their curiosity led to great discussion. I especially enjoyed how the students all chimed in when we got to the line that was the central theme of the book, "a person's a person no matter how small". They grasped the meaning of everyone one of us is important and matter in this world. It was great to see how they could relate this to their younger brothers and sisters. And lucky me, they even invited me back later in the semester to read another book.

As we all go about our work I hope our community and its leaders can continue to acknowledge and engage in the opportunities to work collaboratively to address the needs of our region, so that we all have better and brighter futures. Like I always say, all of us are smarter than one of us!

Roxie Jerde is president of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County.