

PERSPECTIVE



Your Turn
 Maria Jimenez-Lara
 Guest columnist

For the kids

Foundation positively impacting lives of local children

The Naples area ranks among the wealthiest communities in the country. So, it is often a shock to newcomers when they learn that no local taxpayer dollars are allocated for essential children’s services. • To fill this gap, a group of community-minded citizens banded together to establish a foundation which would hold an annual wine festival to support charitable programs that significantly improve the physical, emotional and educational lives of underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County.

This month, Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF) will host the 25th annual Naples Winter Wine Festival, offering a weekend of unforgettable memories. Guests will enjoy world-class food and wine during intimate dinners in elegant, private homes and other landmark settings throughout Naples and be invited to bid on once-in-a-lifetime travel and wine experiences during an electrifying live auction. Since its inaugural event in 2001, the Naples Winter Wine Festival has raised almost \$302 million for children in need.

With a focus on the well-being of the whole child, NCEF fills a critical void for children in our community as the largest single source of funding for their essential services. Through its annual grants and strategic initiatives, the Foundation has impacted close to 90 of the most effective charitable programs in the community, providing 350,000 children with the essential services and resources they need to excel.

NCEF’s recently released 2024 Social Impact Report offers an extensive overview of how funds raised have been meaningfully invested in our community and exemplifies the significant impact the organization has had over the years in Collier County. Information contained in this report goes as far back as 2001 and includes research data collected as recently as July 2024.

Tracing nearly 25 years of significant improvements for children in need, this report serves as a testament to the extraordinary progress made possible by our donors’ generosity and heartfelt commitment. The Social Impact Report clearly illustrates how NCEF has helped level the playing field for



Guests take part in the Naples Winter Wine Fest at The Ritz-Carlton Naples, Tiburón, in Naples on Jan. 27, 2024.

JONAH HINEBAUGH/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

at-risk children in our community. Among the key successes are:

- 91.5% high school graduation rate in Collier County, up from 72.5% in 2011.
- 87.4% graduation rate in Immokalee, up from just 65% in 2011.
- 65% of children who attended Voluntary Prekindergarten were deemed “Ready for Kindergarten” in the 2023-24 school year.
- 35% decrease in the number of juvenile arrests from 2019-2022.

By uniting charitable groups into coalitions, NCEF strategically invests in organizations that serve children within four service categories: Child Advocacy, Early Learning, Medical/Healthcare and Out-of-School Time. Furthermore, working cre-

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Atkinson

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Act.

The WEP created a formula that, in effect, divided a 25-year government employee's 10 years of private sector Social Security contributions by a number closer to 10, rather than the 35 that inflated the subsequent Social Security benefit.

In simple terms, it eliminated double dipping. The Fairness Act has repealed the WEP and restored the public employee windfall.

Today, the Social Security system is facing an existential crisis. By 2033 the system's trust fund, made up of U.S. government securities, will be fully depleted.

Beginning in 2034, beneficiaries

would face a 21% across the board cut in benefits. Congress and the new administration will need to make some difficult decisions, and make them sooner rather than later, to avoid this scenario.

But the so-called Fairness Act is a step in the opposite direction. The Congressional Budget Office estimates it will cost close to \$200 billion over ten years.

To curry favor with public sector unions, Congress has restored a costly inequity in the system that was eliminated 40 years ago and has added to the unsustainability of Social Security's finances. If caving to powerful interest groups continues to impact Social Security reform, the road to 2033 will be a bumpy one.

Paul Atkinson, a Bonita Springs resident, is a contributor to The Hill and the New York Sun.

NCEF

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actively with other private or public charitable entities, NCEF has established seven major strategic initiatives, including Early Learning, Healthcare, Hunger, Mental Health, Oral Health, Out-of-School Time and Vision.

NCEF is able to accomplish this thanks to the generous support of Festival patrons, donors and the community. This year's silver anniversary Festival is set for Jan. 24-26 at The Ritz-Carlton, Naples Tiburón.

We also will be offering our popular online auction, which will return for an 11th consecutive year starting on Jan. 17 at 8 a.m. and running through Jan. 28 at 5 p.m.

The online auction allows supporters from across Southwest Florida and beyond to bid on more than 100 unique, one-of-a-kind items such as rare collectible wines, private wine tastings, exclusive dinners with top chefs, exotic travel experiences, custom art, golf and more.

For details, you may visit [nwwfonline](http://nwwfonlineauction.com)

neauction.com.

Another way you can show your support is by tuning into our special televised event on Jan. 23 at 7 p.m. Courtesy of WINK News, this half-hour broadcast will be an opportunity for NCEF to build awareness of the organization and the systems of care it has created to support children in our community.

This inspiring program will highlight the transformative impact of NCEF through funds raised at the Naples Winter Wine Festival and will include stories about all the excitement to come on Festival weekend.

With the continued support of our community, the future is bright. Together, we can positively impact an entire generation of children.

For more information on our vision of making a profound and sustaining difference in the lives of underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County, please visit NaplesWineFestival.com.

Maria Jimenez-Lara has been Chief Executive Officer of the Naples Children & Education Foundation, founders of the Naples Winter Wine Festival, since 2015.

We honor our heroes only when it seems politically expedient to do so



Your Turn
David Minnick
Guest columnist

A lament increasingly voiced and heard in today's world is "where are the heroes in the world today?" So many are longing for models of proper living in these times, often disappointed by political leaders, sports figures and celebrities. Parents are especially eager to raise up those they hope their children will look up to and model themselves after.

In recent years, many have highlighted the "everyday heroes" in our midst; first responders in civil service, those in the armed forces and educators. But while we raise these professions up, they do not receive the compensation (a critical measure of just what we value) that reflects our praise, a message our children read loud and clear.

Adding to this dilemma is how we eventually honor our heroes. Our nation was shocked and traumatized on January 28, 1986, when the Challenger exploded on its mission to widen the vision of space travel. In the years that followed, many communities sought to honor Christa McAuliffe, the New Hampshire school teacher who died on that mission, in an effort to show the potential for space travel to be something for more than just trained astronauts.

In October 2019, the Cape Coral City Council voted to change the name of the Christa McAuliffe Middle School to Oasis Elementary North, the name that continues to this day. So much for honoring an educator who sought to inspire her students as well as all young people to follow their potential.

Challenger Boulevard in Fort Myers similarly was named to remember and

honor those who tragically died in an effort to show a future to strive toward. Now Lee Memorial Health System wants to replace that name for the road that will lead to their new hospital. Not catchy enough? Not trendy enough? Who knows? The message embedded within the message here is that 1986 heroes are old news and this is a new day.

In the negotiations that finally led to the U.S. Congress approving a budget for the near future, one of the most telling cuts came with the decision to no longer fund the World Trade Center Health Program. This program was established to aid those "heroes" who rushed into the toxic mix of the collapsed towers to aid in rescue and recovery efforts. As we have seen in the years since then, that toxic mix took a brutal toll on first responders as the cancer rates significantly grew in the years since and continue to rise.

In the days that followed 9/11, so many sought to do so much to help out. These brave first responders rushed in to help when and where it was most needed. Many are now paying the price for their heroic response, and for some, it is the ultimate price.

Now when it is politically expedient to do so, their sacrifice and their suffering is minimized and ignored.

"Where are the heroes in the world today?" Probably doing the smart thing, in the wisdom of today's world, and looking out for themselves.

Robert Fulghum, a Unitarian minister with a sense of history and a vision for the days to come, once wrote, "Don't worry that your children aren't listening to you, worry that they are always watching you."

These politically expedient decisions in recent years are sending a strong message to our children and all the world. It's up to us to determine if that is a message we truly want to send.

The Rev. David Minnick retired in 2016 as a United Church of Christ minister and now lives in south Fort Myers.



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