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■ Workforce apartments are in the approval stage for East Naples

## 4A | DRAWN BACK HOME

■ After a decade of professional ballet, and many years in the NYC arts scene, Elysia Dawn returned to Naples

## 3B | GOOD AND BAD

■ The arts in Collier County took a hit in 2024, but there were many positives as well



Tim Aten Knows  
Tim Aten

## More than 50 restaurants are coming in 2025

Happy new year! Get set for a scrumptious smorgasbord of restaurants preparing to open in the Naples area in 2025.

### January jam

The year begins with a series of restaurant newcomers setting tables for what is all but guaranteed to become a must-experience spread for Southwest Florida foodies.

**Tigriss**, an open-air Cantonese chophouse, is coming in January atop the new Perry Hotel Naples, which started welcoming guests in late December to its highly visible location next to the Bay House at Walkerbilt Road and U.S. 41 in North Naples. Celebrity "Top Chef" Dale Talde plans to showcase his innovative culinary style with dishes such as dry-aged crown of duck, dry-aged beef potstickers and blue crab fried rice with jalapeño aioli. The new hotel also will launch its **Easy Tiger** rooftop lounge with a view of the Cocohatchee River and the Gulf of Mexico.

Also in North Naples, **Lujacks All-American Grill** plans a mid-January launch in the former large space of The Pearl and Stonewood Tavern in Fountain Park at Airport-Pulling and Vanderbilt Beach roads. The remodeled full-service restaurant and lounge will be a tribute to Fighting Irish football legend and Heisman Trophy winner Johnny

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By Aisling Swift

2024 was a year of pros and cons for Collier County and its cities.

The 101st years for the city of Naples and Collier County marked a turning point. As the political climate turned nasty nationwide, it trickled down

locally, ending in Political Action Committees injecting lies and mudslinging into the city of Naples' elections.

For the first time in the city's history, PACs inserted themselves into the mayoral race, spreading negative and false information. Voters received not only mailers but texts from several PACs, including one that led to complaints filed with the

county Supervisor of Elections.

The March 19 three-way mayoral race pitted incumbent Mayor Teresa Heitmann against then-City Councilman Ted Blankenship and Gary Price, a former councilman and vice mayor, who ran on a property-rights platform with Bill "Coach" Kramer,

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# A LOOK BACK

## 2024 was a year of change, good and bad

## 2024's last push



Drew Whitcomb, left, Mia Luth, in the cart, and their dog Buddy during a laundry cart race at a Tamiami Trail anniversary celebration April 27. It's one of the many events, activities and citizens highlighted in The Year in Pictures photo spread on Pages 8A and 9A. Photo by Liz Gorman

# NWWF legacy the result of hard work, a giving community

By Harriet Howard Heithaus  
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Twenty-five years ago, the hope was that a wine festival might bring together people with money, heart and the spirit of a bon vivant to help address the staggering needs for Collier County's children in poverty.

Creating a legacy wasn't on the radar.

That's why several couples from its first year seem mildly surprised that they're here analyzing the festival a quarter of a century later. When a group of founding trustees and festival chairs who had steered it through the depths of

a recession in 2009 and the pandemic in 2021 sat down to talk about their years with the Naples Winter Wine Festival, they were more focused on what needs to be done.

Simone Lutgert recalled a recent trustees session at which the unmet needs were categorized for them: "That hit me like a brick," she said. Even with the strides made, she felt they were "a rock in the water. There's so much need here."



### From casual lunch to vintner dinners

The festival is one big stone, however. When the first vintners and chefs alight from private flights for the Naples Winter Wine Festival's glittering Jan. 24-26 weekend, they are being greeted by an organization that has raised \$302 million over the years for children's causes in Collier County.

Its granting arm, the Naples Children and Education Foundation, operates the Early Childhood Development Center serving at-risk and underprivileged children on the Collier County

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## NWWF

campus of Florida SouthWestern State College. Its NCEF Pediatric Dental Center there provides specialized, comprehensive dental care to children in Southwest Florida and offers mental health screenings onsite for children growing up in a sometimes-untethered life.

Its grants provide scholarship help to kids who would be otherwise on the outside looking in at opportunities for music and theater experiences and academic help.

In the beginning, however, it was simply a clutch of friends who began talking about ramping up aid to Collier County's most vulnerable population.

"There was a group that loved to drink wine, have dinner parties. They loved great food and great wine. But they wanted to do something for the kids of Collier County," recalled Valerie Gargiulo. Everyone in the group already was involved somewhere — on the board of the Immokalee Foundation, with the Boys & Girls Club. "We were all very involved in several nonprofits here. But we wanted to do something that would make a profound difference in the lives of kids."

They'd been to a small wine auction for Youth Haven and several of them had even been to that zenith of American wine festivals, the Auction Napa Valley. But a wine festival in a flatland with no vineyards for miles — and, for all its good food, no culinary stars on restaurant lists — took some strategic thinking. Six couples met for an informal Sunday lunch at the Gargiulos' home in January of 2000 to make the commitment, giving the festival a millennium birthdate.

"Our goal, and our promise, which we kept the promise the whole 25 years, was that 100% went to the kids," Gargiulo added. Valerie and her husband, Jeff, handled the chair duties for the first festival.

"After we met on Sunday, we each put money in the bank on Monday," recalled Jeff Gargiulo.

For each couple, that was a \$10,000 deposit on the future of what would become the Naples Winter Wine Festival, titled for its singular attribute: Winter. You could party outdoors in this sunny city while most other locations required chuffing around in coats and gloves.

"I think one of the brilliant things about this was [that] it was a winter wine festival. All the other wine festivals were in the spring or in the summer. There was nobody else in that time frame," recalled Scott Lutgert, another of the founding trustees. "The vintners were free. What were they doing in the winter?"



Original festival trustees and trustees through some of the challenging years who were able to gather before the silver anniversary celebration to remember the formative years: in couples, from left, Rick and Libby Germain, Barbie and Paul Hills, Jeff and Valerie Gargiulo and Scott and Simone Lutgert. Photo by Harriet Howard Heithaus

### Love for the vintners

To add to that, Jeff Gargiulo said, this festival would give the vintners their due; bring them out of the background pouring wine to celebrity status.

"We told them, 'You're going to be treated like royalty. You're going to be staying in people's homes. You're going to be flying in on Net Jets,'" Gargiulo recalled. There would be entertainment for them — golf, hunting or fishing. Later, the Meet the Kids Day was developed so that they could see the rewards of what they were doing in the young people they met.

Having the vintners there was critical, Simone Lutgert declared: "We always demanded that the principal of the winery came; the owner. That they didn't send their PR person or their president, and that set us apart."

It was easier in the first year, Valerie Gargiulo remembered, for those home stays with only 12 vintners and chefs for a dozen dinners. "And we didn't have budget to put them up at the Ritz," Lutgert reminded the group. Hotel stays became a necessity as the number of dinners grew to its current 26 — and has occasionally even surpassed that number.

To attract guests, each trustee was asked to find a potential ticket buyer from friends around the country with whom they'd been serving on boards. It would ease the burden on Neapolitans with means who were already tapped for so many causes and would introduce more people to the charms of Naples. As a result, 60% of the crowd bidding at the inaugural festival

were from out of town, many of them seeing Naples, Florida, for the first time.

One of the still-active pioneers, Denise Cobb, who was a trustee with her husband, Brian, knew the media from her anchor work with CNN. She was entrusted with bringing in national attention — and potentially more visitors. Those contacts would prove invaluable: A luncheon with the staff at *Bon Appetit* magazine, in fact, was key to their survival. The magazine gave them a list of celebrity chefs to contact for their first dinners.

There was another requirement: "It might have been the Sunday before, there was a trustee meeting. Jeff was chairman and he went around the room and said everybody has to protect a lot. What?" recalled Rick Germain, chucking about the moment. The trustees were going to leave no lot at auction below its value. Each one agreed to bid one specific lot up to a value they could handle and drop out if there were other bidders willing to go higher.

Symbolically, trustee Jim Figge bought the first lot — a huge bottle of Champagne, possibly a Nebuchadnezzar, the size of 20 standard bottles — and served it to the entire auction crowd. That, the trustees agreed, set the tone that this was an auction for charity.

### Setting the standards

Before the napkins were being teased into elegant shapes for Friday's vintner-chef dinners; before the massive auction tent with its recording studio-quality sound and celebration snippets of music was

erected; and before the shipments of rarified brands such as Screaming Eagle and Harlan Estates had arrived in their temperature-controlled containers, the template was being created for an institution.

It was a blessing that their auctioneer was Ann Colgin, owner of one of those wineries and still a vintner today. Colgin had both lived in Naples and conducted wine auctions before.

There was an abundance of blips. The Gargiulos rented a house in Napa Valley for the summer and talked to vintners and people involved with Auction Napa Valley.

"We didn't have a staff. If there was a problem, we had to solve it," Jeff Gargiulo said. One of their ideas, a safety move, was that guests would be transported to and from their vintner dinners the night before the auction. But there were not enough limos in Naples, so J.D. Clinton, the trustee in charge of transportation, hired them from Miami.

The year the festival was scheduled for the same weekend as the Super Bowl, that was thrown into chaos: Every limo in Miami was already rented. The group had to sleuth out cars from Sarasota and Tampa.

### Recipe for longevity

Some of their rules of success:

- Partner involvement: "Day one, that Sunday, it was couples who came. It was couples who started it, and we were going to do it as couples, so that each couple was really committed to the cause," Valerie Gargiulo declared.
- Setting the tone that care for

their community is a given: "I don't think you live in a community and don't give back," Libby Germain said of the decision she and her husband, Rick, made to join as trustees recently. "You have to give back where you're involved."

• Bringing in new people and new ideas: "The trustees are the heart and soul of this organization. The only reason we've been able to be sustainable is [because of] all the new trustees who come in," Gargiulo said. "Each new trustee brings something new."

Further, Paul and Barbie Hills emphasized, trustees were expected to work; this was not an organization with figureheads. Thirty-five to 40 trustees — 15 to 20 couples — spread the workload that is required. Jeff Gargiulo remembered the first one, when they had underestimated the help needed to get the buffet food for the auction out of the kitchen for a crowd of 300 to 400 people: "I remember, Shirlene Elkins and me, we were carrying platters of food out on paper towels."

He also remembers from that year an abundantly generous community in Naples, with Al Hoffmann donating auction tent space at the not-quite-complete Ritz-Carlton Tiburón for the auction, and local people volunteering as servers.

As with any grand event, the festival has had to deal with unexpected challenges.

One year, it was the emotional aftermath of the Space Shuttle Columbia breaking up as it re-entered the atmosphere, two hours before the auction. Festival leaders had to acknowledge it, memorialize it and move on with hope.

Rain was actually less of a problem. With umbrellas provided and a broad tent, the spirits never matched the weather.

The COVID-19 pandemic was potentially devastating.

"Everybody was sequestered in their house," recalled Paul Hills. "It was the first virtual festival we had. We were in some very uncharted waters." Still, the festival raised \$7.2 million from the generosity of online bidders and a streamed auction. Ridgway Bar and Grill assembled boxed lunches for watch parties.

That didn't surprise Libby Germain. A critical component of this 25-year celebration is this community, she said.

"It's just a very generous community. There's nothing like it anywhere. It's only in Naples," she said.

"Everybody wants to know what the secret sauce is," Hills said of the festival. "And that's hard to say, because there are a lot of moving parts. But the foundation of it is ... helping those kids. And if you have the heart for helping those kids, great things can be accomplished." ■

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