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OUR MISSION

Founded in 1926, The Junior League of Tampa, Inc., is an organization of 1,900 women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women, and improving communities through effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. Its purpose is exclusively educational and charitable.

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**denotes non-voting member*

OFFICE STAFF

Marysue Mathews, Office Administrator
Chelsie Krencik, Accounting Associate
Leslie White, Communications and Member Administrator



10
Celebrating Our Mission: The 2024 Gala



18
A Legacy of Giving:
Celebrating Two Decades of HGM



28
Centennial Horizon:
A Blueprint for The JLT's Future



32
Purpose, Passion, and Pride:
The POLL Presidents Come to Tampa

The Sandspur Magazine
Designed by: Sensory 5

Cover Photo: Lyndsey Siara and daughter
Sydney at a Diaper Bank packing.

contents



14
Celebrating Legacy: The Remarkable
Journey of Celeste Roberts



24
Collaboration in Action: How JLT's
Community Action Committee
Supports Tampa's Nonprofits



30
The Evolution of Love Bundles Partnerships

- 6..... A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT**
- 7..... A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR**
- 9..... MESSAGES TO THE LEAGUE**
- 38..... 2023-2024 PROVISIONAL CLASS SPOTLIGHT**
- 45..... SUSTAINER PRESIDENT'S NOTE**
- 54..... ENDOWMENT FUND**
- 57..... DONORS**
- 62..... JLT COOKBOOK RECIPES**
- 64..... OUT AND ABOUT**



a note from the president

As the President of The Junior League of Tampa for the 2023-2024 term, I am filled with gratitude as I reflect on the incredible accomplishments of the past year. With nearly 1900 members spanning seven generations, our League has truly thrived through the dedication and passion of each and every one of you.

I extend my deepest appreciation to our members for their tireless commitment to our mission and their unwavering support throughout this year. Your enthusiasm and hard work have been instrumental in driving our initiatives forward and making a lasting impact in our community.

I also want to express heartfelt thanks to our generous donors and community partners. Your support has been invaluable in enabling us to fulfill our mission and advance our programs for the betterment of our community.

One of the highlights of the upcoming year is the launch of our Diaper Bank in Hillsborough County. This initiative underscores our commitment to providing essential care and support to families in need, and I am thrilled about the positive impact it will have on our community.

As we gear up to celebrate our Centennial, I am filled with excitement for the incredible projects and events that lie ahead. This milestone is a testament to the enduring legacy of our League and the profound impact we have had on the Tampa community over the past century.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I want to extend my sincerest gratitude to our Gala Committee for their hard work and dedication in organizing a memorable event that not only celebrates our achievements but also raises vital funds to support our mission.

Together, we have achieved so much, and I am inspired by the passion and commitment of each and every member. As we embark on another year of service, let us continue to uphold the values of The Junior League of Tampa and work together to create positive change in our community.

With gratitude and excitement for the 2024-2025 year ahead,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Meg Severino".

Meg Severino
President, 2023-2024

a note from the editor

It is hard to believe we have reached the end of the 2023-2024 League year. As I reflect on the year, I am in awe of the incredible wealth of passionate, dedicated women who give selflessly of their time and talents to create positive change through The Junior League of Tampa.

We did so much this year, making tremendous strides to support women, children and families across our communities. In this edition, we spotlight some of the impactful work done by our committees and community partners.

This year was record breaking in so many ways. The Holiday Gift Market, Gasparilla and Gala Committees took fundraising to a new level in support of the League's community projects. We recognized Celeste Roberts as the 1926 Legacy Award winner and Nancy Buchanan Crane as the Sustainer of the Year, acknowledging both for their achievements and impact in our communities. Local organizations such as Grow Into You, ECHO of Brandon and West Florida Foster Care Services expanded their impact this year, thanks in part to their partnership with JLT.

Of course, none of our accomplishments this year would not have been possible without you. Whether you are a current member, donor, partner or someone who simply believes in the power of women lifting up their communities, thank you for your support. I hope that after reading this issue, you will be motivated to get more involved.

Finally, I would like to give a bouquet of thanks and flowers to my talented Sandspur Committee members who worked tirelessly all year to produce two exceptional issues. Your creativity, perseverance and commitment to our Mission shines through on every page. To next year's committee members, chaired by Sara Larsen and Karen Smreker, the sky really is your limit.

Thank you everyone! It has been an honor to serve as the 2023-2024 Editor-in-Chief and Sandspur Committee Chair.

Murewa Olubela

Murewa Olubela,
The Sandspur, Editor-In-Chief 2023-2024

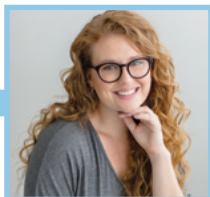


Meet The SANDSPUR EDITORIAL STAFF



Murewa Olubela, *Editor-in-Chief*

Murewa is a second year Active member. She is the Founder and CEO of Erudyte, an edtech startup facilitating accelerated STEAM learning for students, especially those not proficient in English or who have learning differences. She enjoys reading, watching Netflix and traveling.



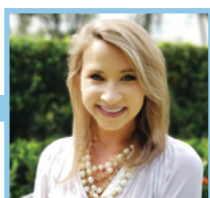
Madeline Morris, *Copy Editor and Contributing Writer*

Madeline Morris is a digital marketer at the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, where she leads global social media strategy and supports creative content development. Formerly the Member and Communications Administrator at JLT, Madeline continues to support the League's communications efforts. Madeline is based in Washington, DC.



Michelle Aihe, *Sustainer-Spur Editor*

Michelle is a first year Active member. She works as a Project Manager for Endpoint Clinical, where she leads software development initiatives for pharmaceutical companies to use during clinical trials. When she is not working or volunteering at church, she enjoys traveling, trying new foods and exploring Tampa Bay.



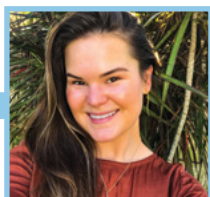
Meredith Haley, *Advertising Coordinator*

Meredith works at Permira, a private equity firm in Tampa, and finds fulfillment volunteering with The Junior League. She joined The Junior League of Greensboro in 2013 and transferred to The Junior League of Tampa in 2016. She is also an active member of Hyde Park United Methodist Church and cherishes moments with her family, exploring new destinations alongside her husband.



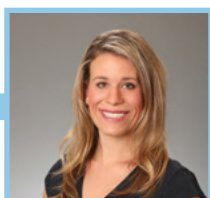
Hannah Ogden Starr, *Feature Editor*

Hannah is an Active JLT member who has enjoyed volunteering her time in various positions within the League. She works for a marketing consultancy on a variety of brands. When she is not working or volunteering, she enjoys running, reading and traveling with her husband and golden retriever pup, Dunkin.



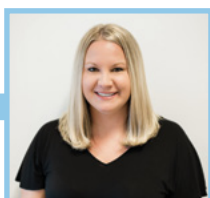
Morgan Rinaldo, *Contributing Writer*

Morgan Rinaldo is a South Tampa native and fourth-generation Floridian who is currently focusing her efforts on building State Soleil (her florals and calligraphy company) and enjoying life with her darling husband, Anthony.



Lauren Kerr, *Contributing Writer*

Lauren is a sixth year Active member. She enjoys spending time exploring Europe, as she is currently living in Germany with her husband and daughter due to her husband's military service. Lauren is a junior partner with Cogburn Law Firm, P.A. in Tampa and practices in construction litigation.



Lauren Guerrero, *Contributing Writer*

Lauren Guerrero, an 11-year Active member, is dual licensed as a mental health counselor, and as a marriage and family therapist. She is married to Tirso, with a 16-year-old step-daughter Ava, 3-year-old daughter Bella, and 2-year-old son Christian. She loves concerts, trying new restaurants and taking her kids around Tampa.

Messages to the League

The Junior League of Tampa

We love to hear from our partners on social media. Join the conversation by following The Junior League of Tampa on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. **#JLTampa**

Read about our community projects, members, and more.
jltampa.org/sandspur

Keep a finger on the pulse of what's going on in the League.
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Soroptimist International of Pasco - Southern Region

Thank you to The Junior League of Tampa for hosting the showing of Blind Eyes Open at the Tampa Theater tonight. The more we know, the more we can help.

Heart Gallery of Tampa

Days spent with our kids are the BEST days. Thank you to our friends at The Junior League of Tampa for always planning the most amazing days. We appreciate your commitment to our mission and our kids.

Children's Home Network

We are continuously grateful to The Junior League of Tampa Diaper Bank for supplying diapers and pullups to the families we serve. Thank you JLT for being our primary partner for diaper needs.

Lurlene-Kay Diaz, Created Women's Executive Director

Thank you The Junior League of Tampa for [your] generous donation and volunteers who spent their Saturday assembling cabinets for us. We love our new cabinets.

Water Smart Tots Foundation Board

Thank you for recognizing Kari Bahour as a finalist for the Legacy Award. We are honored to receive recognition from your incredible organization and very thankful for your contribution to our work. Thank you for helping to keep Tampa Bay Water smart.

University Area CDC

Thank you to everyone who joined us for our incredible Family Health Day event. We had an amazing day filled with laughter, fun activities, food and valuable health resources for the whole family. A special shoutout to our partners, The Junior League of Tampa and Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office for their incredible support in making this event possible.

CELEBRATING OUR MISSION

THE 2024

GALA



by MADELINE MORRIS

Photos by Carlos H. Rello Photography and Design

“I can attest to the impact of JLT that I have witnessed in my 14 years of membership.” President Meg Severino’s words rang through the crowded ballroom as she welcomed guests to the 2024 Gala at Hotel Haya on Saturday, April 20th.

The event, equal parts a celebration of the League’s legacy and a fundraiser for its future, raised over \$175,000 and left attendees feeling inspired by JLT’s mission and the women who move it forward.

PLANNING WITH HEART

The Gala, like all League initiatives, was completely volunteer-run and led by Kaitlin Howell and Julianne Fudge.

“We were so excited to build upon the foundation laid in 2022 and worked hard to continue paving the way for our centennial gala in 2026,” said Gala Co-Chair Julianne Fudge. “We tapped into our complimentary skills and years of event planning and fundraising backgrounds to pull off a record-breaking event.”

Working for almost two years, the committee selected a venue and led event design, solicited sponsors and auction item donations, and promoted ticket sales. Their dedication paid off and on April 20th, they welcomed over 200 guests to a sold-out event.



Event Emcees Walter Allen and Natalie Taylor



Laura Everitt & Steve Edinger at the Patrons' Party



Celeste Roberts and guests at the Gala After Party

A CELEBRATION OF IMPACT

The Gala was a stylish ode to Tampa with palm leaves and gold decorations adorning Hotel Haya. Patrons arrived first, gathering in The Library for the Patrons' Party. Then cocktail hour began and guests filled the space, celebrating and sharing their unique connections to the League.

"The 2024 Junior League Gala was an incredible event that we were proud to share with so many in our circle," said attendee Greg Tomlin. "I was impressed to learn about all the work the League does throughout Tampa Bay and I, among others at my table, were inspired to help support the League in their mission."

The program led by emcees Natalie Taylor and Walter Allen, featured moving videos about the League's impact and purpose. The premiere of "I am JLT," a PSA-style video featuring members of all ages, captured the attention of the crowd, moving some to tears.

The highlight of the program was the announcement of Celeste Roberts as winner of the 1926 Legacy Award, sponsored by Tampa General Hospital. Roberts accepted the award, directing the \$10,000 grant towards The Skills Center, the sports-based youth development organization she heads.

"We had three incredible finalists for this year's award," said JLT President Meg Severino. "Kari Barbour of WaterSmart Tots, Laura Jones of CUP (Coffer Uniting People) and Celeste. Our panel of judges were blown away by all The Skills Center has accomplished and Celeste's dedication to the community. She truly embodies the qualities of the 1926 Legacy Award."



Attendees at the 2024 Gala

A SHINING SUCCESS

A fundraiser, first and foremost, the evening ended with a spirited live auction. Attendees raised their paddles passionately to win coveted items, like a week-long stay in a Costa Rican Villa and a Chicago Cubs ticket package.

This passion continued when President-Elect Nicki Mohr Hall stepped onto the stage to kick off bid from the heart.

“The Junior League of Tampa has the opportunity to enrich and enable the lives of not only our members but those of the community that we serve,” President-Elect Hall said as she addressed the ballroom. “It is so powerful.”

Guests around the room raised their paddles, committing to supporting the League’s mission and closing out the night with record-breaking generosity.

“I’ve loved being a member of The Junior League of Tampa,” said Kaitlin Howell when reflecting on the Gala. “This organization has helped push me to be the best version of myself. Getting to use my skills to help give back to the League as we build a new signature fundraising event has been a truly rewarding experience.”



The 2023-2024 Gala Committee Members



President Meg Severino and President-Elect Nicki Mohr Hall address guests





CELEBRATING LEGACY: THE REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF CELESTE ROBERTS

by LAUREN ROZYLA WONG

In the heart of East Tampa, Celeste Roberts stands as a true advocate for change. Awarded The Junior League of Tampa's 1926 Legacy Award, Celeste's life embodies dedication, advocacy and compassion for families and children.

The 1926 Legacy Award recognizes people who demonstrate exceptional leadership and commitment to long-term community impact, specifically in child welfare and education. Through her groundbreaking initiatives, Celeste has left her mark on Tampa, shaping the future of many young lives.

In 2007, Celeste co-founded The Skills Center, building upon what she learned from previous work experiences to create a full-service support system for at-risk youth. Offering school-based and community programs, The Skills Center works to instill important life skills, create opportunities for academic success and pave the way for each youth's brighter future.

Through Celeste's leadership and determination, The Skills Center launched its state-of-the-art youth opportunity center in East Tampa. Celeste, over two years, raised \$23.5 million and secured a permanent home for The Skills Center, laying the foundation for sustainable impact.

"My goal is to improve educational outcomes, economic prospects and life options for young people," Roberts said. "Our site also includes a 40,000 square foot business park with 13 small businesses that I manage. The journey is far from over, but with every step forward, we come closer to realizing the dreams of those we serve."



Her efforts have transformed the landscape of East Tampa and sparked economic growth, job creation and is anticipated to generate over \$25 million in five years. Yet, for Celeste, the true measure of success lies in the tangible impact on the lives of those she serves.

The Skills Center currently serves 1,000 youth yearly, with a track record of 100 percent on-time grade promotion, 80 percent program retention and 98 percent high school graduation rates. Through strategic vision, collaborative partnerships, and relentless pursuit of excellence, The Skills Center now stands as a beacon of hope for generations to come.



Celeste’s path to success began with a deep-rooted commitment to service and a keen understanding of her community’s needs. As she thinks back on her career, Celeste remains steadfast in her commitment to lasting community impact.

“I began my journey with a simple goal – to make a difference in the lives of those around me,” Roberts said, reflecting on the early years of her career.

While working as an associate with United Way of Hillsborough County, she immersed herself in the fabric of Tampa Bay, working tirelessly with local nonprofits to address pressing issues and bridge the gap for underserved youth.

Her tenure at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay marked a pivotal moment in Celeste’s career, as she spearheaded the Youth Opportunity Movement initiative. She witnessed firsthand the transformative power of mentorship and community engagement.

“I am often asked ‘why have you taken this on,’” Roberts said. “I am sustained by my faith in doing what is right, passion to realize dreams and working with purpose. I know that my leadership can help to change circumstances for others for the better. I hope that the legacy that I leave through my work is serving others.”



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A Legacy of Giving:

CELEBRATING TWO DECADES OF HGM

by MICHELLE AIHE

Twenty years does not happen by accident. It takes dedication, strategic planning and a group of women working tirelessly towards one vision. All of these efforts led to a record-breaking, successful Holiday Gift Market (HGM), grossing \$775,639.

For the past two decades, HGM has steadily grown to become a Tampa tradition. While it started as a single-day affair, today HGM is a weekend-long extravaganza, curating over 200 specialty merchants and drawing attendees from across the state.

Held at the Florida State Fairgrounds, HGM is also the League's largest fundraiser, supporting JLT's mission-based projects.

This year, the League hosted its 20th annual Holiday Gift Market on November 9–12, a momentous occasion celebrated with unique events to honor the League's legacy and the market's history.

"It was truly amazing to see how our team brought it all together," said HGM Co-Chair Lauren Rice. "I feel incredibly proud and fortunate, especially considering the scale of our undertaking this year."

The weekend commenced with Preview Party, a ticketed event providing early access to vendors. Amidst delightful food, drinks and live music, there was a special gathering for past Holiday Gift Market Chairs. The party featured a commemorative video to showcase the history of HGM.

"We wanted to do something to make our past Chairs feel special and acknowledge how important HGM is to the League," said Shelby Smith, HGM 20th Annual Celebration Party Planner.

The following morning kicked off with the early bird shopping hour, where attendees enjoyed the ribbon-cutting ceremony with Mayor Jane Castor. Throughout the weekend, over 20,000 shoppers visited the venue, exploring offerings from more than 200 merchants, including jewelry, clothing, household items and pickleball equipment. The HGM selection committee ensured there were a diverse range of products to cater to everyone's interests.

Angelina Spampinato, the 2023 Young Entrepreneurship Program winner and owner of Angelina Bakes, received a free booth and





THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF TAMPA HOLIDAY GIFT MARKET

a \$3,000 grant from The Lu and Dot Tinsley Family Foundation. As a former mental health nurse, Angelina found solace in baking during the height of the pandemic. The creative hobby ballooned into a lucrative business with a wide array of clients.

“Being the YEP winner was an amazing feeling of recognition for the hard work I’ve put into my business,” said Spampinato. “It gave Angelina Bakes the chance to network with so many amazing women, not only in The Junior League but in the community as well. Without JLT and HGM, I certainly would not be where I am today. I have met some of my most loyal and amazing clients through them and I consider myself so lucky.”

The success of this year's Holiday Gift Market would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of the Holiday Gift Market Committee and support from the Executive Board and entire JLT community.

“This was our highest-grossing Holiday Gift Market ever,” said Treasurer Danielle Tinsley. “The proceeds from this year's Holiday Gift Market will contribute to supporting various community initiatives such as Love Bundles, MILO, the Diaper Bank, and Kids Connect.”





THE
JUNIOR LEAGUE OF TAMPA

GASPARILLA INVASION PARTY

A Booming
Good Time!



by LAUREN KERR

The Florida sun shines bright over thousands of boats waving colorful flags and tossing beads to landlubbers. The massive pirate ship fires its cannons again and again as it prowls through the smokey gunpowder toward downtown. What else could it be but Tampa's annual Gasparilla Invasion!

Just as the costumes, boats and parades have been part of the tradition since 1904, so has The Junior League of Tampa's waterfront Gasparilla Invasion Party, since 2013.

The four-hour long festivity hosts over 500 attendees each year. The Junior League of Tampa's unique location offers a front-row seat for viewing of the Gasparilla Flotilla as it cruises down the Seddon Channel toward downtown Tampa. Attendees also enjoy a feast fit for a pirate captain. The Gasparilla Invasion Party offers unlimited beverages, a catered breakfast and a premium lunch buffet.

Favorite memories from the Gasparilla Invasion Party include live embroidery, face painters, a 360 Photo Booth, pirate garb for attendees, live parrots, cigar lounge and refreshed decor.

The Gasparilla Committee members often joke that they are pirates with purpose. While the Invasion Party does provide a jolly good time to attendees, it also raises vital funds for JLT's mission-based projects and programs. The 2024 pirate extravaganza was the highest grossing Gasparilla event on record, all to support Tampa's women, children and families.

You can stay apprised of information about the Gasparilla Invasion Party at JLTampa.org/gasparilla. And while you wait for next year, you can enjoy The Junior League of Tampa's special Gasparilla cookbook all year long!

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2024 MEETING CALENDAR

11:30 AM – 1:00 PM

Friday, September 13

Friday, October 11

We will have summer pop-ups so contact us for info!

Exceptional Professionals is a group of Junior League women who gather monthly over lunch to share ideas and support one another as we navigate work, family, and life in general. We look forward to meeting in person for lunch, to discuss a variety of topics and speakers. Please join us.

Contact Krista Allred at **813.766.3313**, or Ashley Watters at **615-476-2246** and we will send you more details.

Krista Allred

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Renee H. Dabbs

Consultant
Change Management and Productivity
Clifton Strengths Facilitator
renee@dabbsllc.com
813.382.5378



Jan Cornelius, DDS

Cornelius Property Holdings
Dental Consulting and Private, Equity Real Estate Investments
CorneliusPropertyHoldings@gmail.com
813.382.4630



Ashley Watters

The Bank of Tampa
Commercial/ Small Business Banking
awatters@bankoftampa.com
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Leland Baldwin

The Law office of Leland Toman Baldwin
Criminal Defense / Family Law, Focus on Collaborative
115 South Albany Avenue
Tampa, FL. 33606
Ltbaldwinlaw@gmail.com
813.773.5298



Jennie Smith

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Jenny Spencer

Smith & Associates Real Estate
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Amy Tamargo

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Commercial Account Manager
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C: 727.212.1202
hannah@bmscat.com
24-HOUR EMERGENCY RESPONSE: 877.730.1948



Linda Clark, PA

Family & Dependency Law, Child Advocacy and Adoptions
Linda@lindaclarklaw
O: 813.935.7755
C: 813.695.0626



Laura Woodard

Zelen Communications
Partner
Measurable Marketing & Advertising
Laura@ZelenComm.com
813-205-5058



Joanne Sullivan, CFRE

USF Health Development
Asst Vice President of Community Engagement
joannesullivan@usf.edu
813.732.7949



Casey Taylor, JD

Rodan + Fields Consultant
863-445-1606
Casey.Taylor.RodanandFields@gmail.com



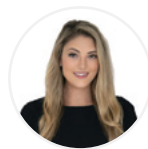
Marissa Moss Hyman

Marissa Moss Photography
Family | Baby | Wedding
Marissa@Marissa-Moss.com
813.317.6467



Amber Lewis

REALTOR®
Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Florida Properties Group
Amber@AmberLewisGroup.com
813-553-4663



Shirin Rustomji, Esq.

Shirin Rustomji, P.A.
Family Law, Immigration & Personal Injury
www.shirinlaw.com
813-288-0100



PUSHING PAST BARRIERS

Human Trafficking Awareness



by MORGAN RINALDO

The Junior League of Tampa's Human Trafficking Awareness Committee gained major traction and local awareness this League year. The committee held multiple initiatives including a fundraiser luncheon at the Carrollwood Country Club, a documentary screening at the Tampa Theatre and a training event at the League Headquarters.

"This year, our committee has experienced profound fulfillment in our ongoing mission to raise awareness in our community," said Frankie Reitz, 2023-2024 Human Trafficking Awareness Chair. "With steadfast support from our dedicated JLT members and strategic partnerships, we're committed to educating and empowering individuals to combat the horrific injustices of human trafficking occurring right here in our own backyard of Tampa Bay."

The Human Trafficking Awareness Committee sponsored a luncheon and partnered with SOS (Speak Out on Slavery), a local group dedicated to stopping human trafficking in the Tampa Bay area. SOS' mission is to provide education and create a greater awareness of the evils of human trafficking. It also supports local agencies that care and provide safe houses for rescued survivors. At the luncheon, the Human Trafficking Awareness Committee gifted Secret Santa items to more than 35 families.

In addition, the Human Trafficking Awareness Committee held a training event at Headquarters, partnering with Stop the Movement, a nonprofit organization that exists to eradicate human trafficking in Tampa Bay, through education awareness and community. The session trained League members to recognize signs of trafficking and become advocates of sex trafficking survivors.

The Human Trafficking Awareness Committee also hosted a screening of *Blind Eyes Opened*, a locally-made documentary that dives deep into the sex trafficking industry in the U.S. The screening was followed by a panel discussion with the film producer Geoff Rogers and Redefining Refuge's Executive Director Natasha Nascimento. Rogers and Nascimento shared their experience fighting human trafficking and how community members can get involved. Free film screenings like this have become an annual part of the Human Trafficking Awareness Committee's advocacy programming, providing education about the issue of human trafficking in an accessible format.

Chair Frankie Reitz and Chair-Elect Amber Kessler continue to make local connections necessary to push the Human Trafficking Awareness Committee to its next level of advocacy.



Collaboration in Action:

How JLT's Community Action Committee Supports Tampa's Nonprofits

by KATIE CROWE

The Junior League of Tampa's community projects are built on partnerships. Members are familiar with long-term partner organizations, such as Metropolitan Ministries, Clothes To Kids, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office and Children's Home Network. What members might be surprised to learn is that three of our community project committees—Community Action Committee (CAC), Enabling Fund and Volunteers at Large—work year-round to seek and meet emerging needs in our communities and to establish relationships with organizations that address our core areas of service.

While Enabling Fund and Volunteers at Large provide monetary and volunteer support respectively, CAC provides grants and support for Done-in-a-Day projects. To be selected, nonprofits submit an application, detailing their proposed project, which is reviewed by a panel and the Executive Board. By providing funding and facilitating Done-in-a-Day projects, CAC functions as an incubator and enables The Junior League to

evaluate organizations for long-term partnership.

One such CAC partner is Grow Into You, a local nonprofit focused on serving at-risk youth.

"Grow Into You Foundation exists to provide coaching, mentoring, support and resources to individuals experiencing hardship, particularly those aging out of the foster care system," said Erin NeSmith, Grow Into You's Founder and Lead Coach. "These services will shift perspectives, restore power and plant hope in those that need it most."

Grow Into You's work aligns with the League's mission and vision. Erin's passion and heart for the young adults her program serves was immediately evident. Her CAC application was approved within a month and The Junior League of Tampa provided support for Grow Into You's milestone celebration events. The Executive Board, acknowledging the partnership potential, also expanded how JLT supports Grow Into You, partnering it with Ready to Achieve.



This year, CAC Chair Tiffany Hilton and her team continued pursuing organizations that are paving the way in Tampa. Through an effective marketing strategy and direct outreach, her team procured nearly 30 applications in the first round of grant outreach. The approved projects provided nearly 100 unique volunteer opportunities for members this spring. The opportunities ranged from packing food items, to organization and space improvement, to direct event support. In addition, the committee awarded approximately \$15,000 in direct funding to support associated projects.

This combination of funding and volunteer support is a game changer for local nonprofits like ECHO of Brandon, Inc., which focuses on providing life-stabilizing resources in eastern Hillsborough County. ECHO bridges the gap between crisis and stability, assisting residents of Eastern Hillsborough County with emergency food, clothing, and access to life-stabilizing programs and resources.

“ECHO is so thankful for The Junior League of Tampa’s support in making sure our neighbors in need are taken care of with the basic need of toiletries,” said Savanna Thompson, ECHO’s Director of Emergency Services. “At ECHO, we are not only giving away food, clothing and hygiene

items, but really trying to work with those in need to get them to a place of long-term self-sufficiency. ECHO comes side-by-side to help our neighbors fund meaningful employment, and connect with programs and resources available to them in the community. We see those in need get into housing, create abilities to provide for themselves and get access to the support they need to really thrive. This is all possible because of partnerships with groups such as The Junior League of Tampa.”

CAC’s long-running success has made an impact on many members, including Sustainers like Vivian Shedd.

“CAC holds a special place in my heart and was my favorite committee during my Active years in the League,” said Shedd. “Along with our committee, I discovered organizations throughout our city that do amazing things for underserved or underprivileged communities. From serving Thanksgiving meals to families with the Ryan Nece Foundation, painting a school house a calming blue for children with autism, or planting a sustainable butterfly garden to encourage STEM education at the Boys & Girls Club, every project follows our mission of improving communities through effective action.”



The project continues to be a favorite for Active members today, including Allison Avery who has served on the committee for several years.

“My time on the CAC has been extremely rewarding,” said Avery. “I love volunteering with many deserving nonprofits and being able to see firsthand the impact our grants are making.”

As part of the recent Governance Committee’s review of the Management Council structure, all three projects—Community Action, Enabling Fund and Volunteers at Large—will roll up under the Community Grants Committee, led next year by Co-chairs Katie Baker and Elizabeth Eby, current Chair-Elects of the Community Action Committee and the Enabling Fund Committee respectively.

The Community Action application is open twice a year on The Junior League of Tampa website. If you know or work with any deserving community-focused organizations in Hillsborough County, please encourage them to visit JLTampa.org/grants and apply for one of our Community Grants today.





1609 W Snow Cir.
Tampa, FL 33606
saltpines.com



Centennial Horizon:

A BLUEPRINT FOR THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF TAMPA'S FUTURE

by PRESIDENT-ELECT NICKI MOHR HALL

As we prepare for The Junior League of Tampa's centennial year in 2026, I am honored and excited to share my vision for the future of our organization. The upcoming milestone is not just a celebration of our history but an affirmation of the enduring legacy of the remarkable women who paved the way for us. In the spirit of our centennial, I am committed to honoring their contributions and lighting the flame of service and empowerment for generations to come. Below I will highlight my key priorities as we move into our 98th year of this incredible organization.

EMBRACING A RICH LEGACY OF SERVICE

The Junior League of Tampa's centennial serves as a testament to the diverse tapestry of service, leadership and empowerment woven by the women who preceded us. In the spirit of this milestone, it is vital to recognize and celebrate the myriad of ways our predecessors have enriched our community. Their legacy is not only a source of inspiration but also a guiding force that propels us forward, ensuring we continue making meaningful contributions for generations to come. We have been the catalysts for change, advocates for the underserved and champions of education from the beginning. It is with great pride that I step into the role of President, knowing that our organization's legacy will guide us as we continue to evolve and adapt to the ever-changing needs of our community.

FOSTERING A CULTURE OF SUPPORT AND EMPOWERMENT

One of my key priorities is to foster a culture of inclusivity within our organization. By embracing different perspectives and experiences, we will be better equipped to address the multifaceted challenges our community faces. At the heart of our centennial celebration is acknowledging that supporting and empowering one another is not a zero-sum game. Recognizing that lighting someone else's candle does not dull your flame, we aim to cultivate a culture within The Junior League of Tampa that encourages collaboration, camaraderie and shared success. Together, we can amplify our collective impact and illuminate a path toward a more vibrant, connected and compassionate community.



BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Our centennial is not merely a reflection on the past; it is a call to action for the future. Collaboration is at the heart of effective community service. I am committed to forging and strengthening partnerships with local organizations, businesses and community leaders. By working together, we can amplify our efforts, share resources, and create a more interconnected and supportive community for all.

EMPOWERING MEMBERS THROUGH EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Our journey into the future is incomplete without a dedicated focus on educating and empowering the next generation of women leaders. Members are the backbone of The Junior League of Tampa and our passion for service is unparalleled. To ensure our members are equipped and empowered, I am dedicated to providing ongoing education and development opportunities. Whether through expanded training topics, more community volunteer experiences, board readiness training or mentorship programs, we will invest in the growth and leadership potential of every member.

"By nurturing the potential within each woman in our membership, we ensure that the legacy of service and empowerment continues to thrive."

As we approach our 98th year, let us draw inspiration from almost a century of impactful service, unity, understanding and positive change that will radiate far beyond all the fun of the centennial celebration. I am honored to lead this incredible organization. I invite each of you to join me on this journey in celebrating our past, embracing our present and envisioning a future that builds on our rich legacy. Together, we can ensure that our organization remains a beacon of positive change, lighting the way for a brighter, more inclusive and compassionate community in the next 100 years.





The Evolution of Love Bundles Partnerships

by KATIE CROWE

As one of The Junior League of Tampa's oldest and most beloved community projects, Love Bundles instantly resonates with members as it directly serves and benefits children removed from dangerous or abusive situations at a moment's notice. These children are delivered to safety, often without items that could help ease the abrupt transition and provide comfort amid chaos.



We got to know Janet and her vision for WFFCS. The love Janet has for the children and families she serves was immediately evident. We also saw significant opportunities for a WFFCS-JLT partnership. The programming WFFCS prioritized was deeply aligned with the League's community impact goals. Our collaboration blossomed, covering three JLT projects: Love Bundles, Diaper Bank and the Alliance for Period Supplies. JLT's partnership journey with WFFCS is a testament to the League's success in being strategic with our partnerships in the Tampa community.

JLT partnerships work, thanks to a truly collaborative approach wherein both organizations benefit. For example, while exploring possible avenues to deepen our partnership with WFFCS, such as running direct service projects, like Girl Power! and Ready to Achieve, the League had to navigate the WFFCS's policy that requires Trauma Informed Care training for all of their direct service volunteers. Rather than seeing this as a roadblock, League leaders took the opportunity to close this gap in our volunteer training curriculum.

Recognizing this issue, the League provides Love Bundles—backpacks containing essential items such as clothing, pajamas, personal care items, and more to children and the families who receive them.

A longtime partner for this project has been the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO). Last year, however, the County decided to transfer child protective investigations to the Department of Children and Families (DCF), a statewide agency that works in tandem with HCSO, as it outsources social services for children to local, county-specific nonprofits.

In addition to DCF, Love Bundles also partners with West Florida Foster Care Services (WFFCS), an organization based in Temple Terrace. Initially onboarded as a Diaper Bank partner in 2021-2022, WFFCS quickly became a potential long-term partner when Miranda Henderson, Monica Kirkland and I toured the site and met Director of Family Advocacy Janet Rinaldi.

"We worked to provide our members with the training needed, creating a better foundation for all of our members in our direct-service volunteer opportunities," said Lindsey Dewey, 2022-2023 Training Manager. "One thing that is important as a training organization is to always be aware our members come from diverse backgrounds. Not everyone has universal lived experience with regard to face-to-face volunteer engagement. Training, like Trauma Informed Care, helps inform a bigger picture and establish a better understanding of our direct service opportunities."

The Love Bundles team has not stopped at serving DCF and WFFCS. When the committee realized they could support another partner, they began researching and sought out another organization dedicated to serving children in Hillsborough County.



After completing a review of several community partners, Community Child Welfare Manager Bri Bunch recommended a partnership with Clothes to Kids (CTK), a nonprofit that provides clothing to low-income or in-crisis children free of charge. Bunch researched and presented her findings to the Management Council and the Executive Board, who approved Clothes to Kids as an official Love Bundles community partner.

“After extensive research, we’ve discovered that vulnerable children in Hillsborough County face challenges beyond those in just the foster care system,” said Bunch. “We were able to expand the Love Bundles mission, to include supporting children affected by poverty, entering foster care, living in group homes, shelters, or benefiting from nonprofit organizations in Hillsborough County. With this broader vision, we’re committed to reaching every corner of our community and ensuring no child is overlooked. Together, we’ll make a meaningful difference in their lives, guiding them toward hope and opportunity.”

In November, Love Bundles Coordinator Rachael Rahrig led the first Clothes to Kids engagement opportunity.

“Working with Clothes to Kids has been the highlight of my year,” said Rahrig. “The League provided [CTK] funds and skilled JLT volunteers. Clothes to Kids provided a unique, hands-on experience for our membership. Their passion for their mission and care for all that they serve is evident. We are so proud to support CTK and be a small part of the important work they do.”

It is not just the successful evaluation and onboarding of partners mid-year, or maintaining critical partner relationships that sets Love Bundles apart as a cornerstone of the League’s

work in the community. It is the ever-evolving need and the ability to quickly pivot to ensure that our community’s most vulnerable and deserving members—our children—are seen, supported and cared for.

Collaborating with the Kids Connect Committee and community partner the Heart Gallery of Tampa, the League provided 47 “Forever Bags” to children this year. These bags included basic items and a shopping selection tailored for children awaiting adoption and their siblings. Not only did the “Forever Bags” offer winter clothing, but it also functioned as a take-home goodie bag.

Spend enough time in the League and you will encounter a foster parent or Guardian ad-Litem who has cared for a child who has received a JLT Love Bundle.

“Love Bundles was such an important placement in my JLT leadership journey,” said Nicki Hall, 2023-2024 President-Elect. “As the first chair role I had, I was thrust into the harsh reality of exactly how many children in our community were struggling to just have their basic needs met. The sheer impact that the committee has had over the years cannot be understated. Thousands of children who had been removed from their homes and put into the foster care system were given some of the dignity that they deserved by having something as simple as a backpack, some clean clothes and basic toiletry items to call their own.”

JUNIOR LEAGUE OF TAMPA



Purpose, Passion and Pride: The **POLL** Presidents Come to Tampa

by MADELINE MORRIS

“Our number one goal was hospitality,” said Christina Mannino, as she reflected on her work planning the POLL Presidents’ Conference held at League Headquarters on January 31st - February 2nd. “We wanted everyone to feel welcome.”

POLL, which stands for Presidents of Large Leagues, is an Affinity Group under the umbrella of the Association of Junior Leagues International (AJLI) which provides networking and collaboration among the largest Junior Leagues. Each year the group meets for a conference, connecting with their fellow Presidents and sharing best practices. This year, Tampa proudly hosted 36 Presidents over three days, sharing and highlighting the city we call home.

THE POWER OF POLL

“The POLL group has been valuable to me for advice on Centennial Celebrations, Board Readiness and a body in which we provide feedback to AJLI,” said President Meg Severino.

POLL serves as space for League Presidents to be among peers and discuss the issues they are facing. The meetings are closed-door, allowing

leaders to be candid and seek advice on everything from membership recruitment, the fundraising landscape and navigating community partnerships.

“These women are all so impressive, but they are also a lot of fun,” said Mannino.

Spending the conference with them, she was struck by what made these women so similar and how they connected. Their collaborative nature and ability to laugh made the conference a success.

The POLL Presidents were also joined by senior leaders from AJLI. Dona Ponepinto, AJLI President, and Melanie Schild, CEO of AJLI, participated in the meetings, taking notes on the most pressing issues facing Leagues.

“Weeks have passed, but I am still energized by my visit to Tampa,” said Ponepinto. “POLL Leagues play a pivotal role in furthering our Mission, and it’s empowering to hear about your work firsthand. I have no doubt the momentum generated by the conference will continue to ripple outward and inspire positive change across the Association.”



POST PRESIDENCY PLANNING

For members of The Junior League, serving as a President is no small task. Many members take years to build up their skills and resumes before pursuing the position. While there are many resources for navigating a League career, few guides discuss the unique challenge of post-presidency service.

“Membership doesn’t end with the Presidency,” said Severino. “We wanted to create a space where current League Presidents could reflect and discuss their next steps in their community and get advice from women who have already experienced this transition.”

Meg and Christina worked to assemble a dynamic panel of past Tampa Presidents to speak on this very topic. Robin DeLaVergne (1989-1990), Betsy Chambers (1998-1999), Stacy Baier (2015-2016), and Caroline Vostrejs (2022-2023) led a rousing conversation, sharing their insights and experiences.

“Be the first to clap for the incoming Presidents,” advised Caroline Vostrejs. “To have a support system of leaders keeps you sane. I would consider my year a success if my ceiling was Meg’s floor. Her success is my success.”

The focus on supporting fellow leaders was a recurring theme throughout the week. But there was a lot of discussion about being gracious with yourself.

“The League is a training organization,” said Stacy Baier. “Just because you are President doesn’t mean you have all the answers. You’ll make mistakes and that is OK. Have fun!”



Annual Awards:

WOMEN MAKING AN IMPACT

by KATIE CROWE

Each spring, as the League year draws to a close, members gather to celebrate and reflect on the impact the League made that year. This year, over 200 women gathered at the Palma Ceia Golf & Country Club to celebrate a year dotted with historic accomplishments, filled with an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude. The highlight of the evening was recognizing some of the incredible women behind these historic accomplishments, through the Annual Awards.



PROVISIONAL OF THE YEAR Rashada Timkee

Rashada Timkee embodies kindness and generosity, earning her recognition as the Provisional member who demonstrated great effort within her class. She proved herself to be an invaluable team player, always willing to lend a hand, her dedication to learning and growth evident in every interaction.

“[Rashada] is a shining example of what it means to be a dedicated member of The Junior League of Tampa,” Provisional Mentor LaLencia Matthews said. “Her enthusiasm is infectious and her positive attitude makes her a joy to be around. From volunteering at events to speaking on panels, she consistently demonstrates her commitment to making a difference both inside the League and out in the community. Her thoughtful contributions have made a significant impact on our organization and I have no doubt that she will continue to thrive throughout her League journey.”



**THE HEART OF THE LEAGUE
Carly Ritterband (TLC Chair)**

Carly Ritterband was recognized with The Heart of the League award, for her year-long effort as The League Cares (TLC) Chair. As part of President Meg Severino’s community and belonging initiatives, Leadership revitalized TLC, expanding avenues for touchpoints and connection, reminding members of the League’s support during their most crucial moments. Carly, in her placement, stayed connected with members on leaves, members going through difficult times—such as mourning the loss of a family member, and members celebrating significant milestones both within and outside the League.

“This year, Meg wanted to go a step further to meet our members wherever they are, to make them feel seen and ensure they know they serve a special purpose within The Junior League of Tampa,” said Managing Director Katie Crowe. “This effort would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of Carly Ritterband. Carly’s hard work and dedication in leading her team this year to show our members how valued they are is a testament to the culture we look to build within JLT. It is for that reason we have chosen to honor her with The Heart of the League recognition and applaud Carly for her gift of servant leadership this year.”



**ACTIVE OF THE YEAR
RuthAnn Vilela**

As Active of the Year, RuthAnn Vilela exceeded expectations in her placement as VAL (Volunteers at Large) Chair-Elect. In a role dedicated to supporting other community organizations, she distinguished herself as someone who is always ready to step up and assist others. Her reliability and dedication to voluntarism helped further the League’s Mission this year.

“Anytime that there is an opportunity to help, RuthAnn is there to lend a hand,” Manager Hannah Parker McCabe said. “A huge example of this is with GMM set up—when RuthAnn realized that the shift was short staffed, she stepped up to assist another committee and help with set up. Her creative flair has led to amazing displays at the GMMs and I feel lucky to have her support.”



**INTERNAL COMMITTEE OF THE YEAR
Gasparilla Invasion**

In recognition of its direct impact on The Junior League of Tampa and its membership, the Gasparilla Invasion Committee was awarded the Internal Committee of the Year. This close knit group of women executed one of the League’s favorite fundraising events, proving the power of pirates with a purpose.

“Sam, Ashley and the entire committee worked together collaboratively to innovate and expand the impact of their event in new and creative ways the likes of which we have never seen before,” Event Manager Kami Lucas said. “Through their teamwork, they tripled the revenue raised by this event, brought in new sponsors, and created a truly memorable event for our members and the community.”



EXTERNAL COMMITTEE OF THE YEAR Kids Connect

Awarded to a committee whose work primarily serves the community beyond Headquarters, Kids Connect Committee was recognized as the External Committee of the Year. After a year of rigorous review and the pausing of committee work due to a community partner transition, Kids Connect resumed activities this year. Committee members came up with new and meaningful ways to unite and celebrate children and teens in foster care, as they journey to find their forever families.

“Faced with the challenge of bringing back a committee, these remarkable women orchestrated an unforgettable day at the courthouse, resulting in the adoption of over 47 children,” Community Child Welfare Manager Bri Bunch said. “This dedicated committee organized match events for children in foster care, positively impacting over 50 children during each occasion through activities like shopping experiences and bowling outings, understanding and meeting the community’s needs. I am so proud of them and their hard work.”

INSPIRING LEADERS OF THE YEAR Alex Hall and Jenna Zwald, Member Meetings and Events Co-Chairs

The Inspiring Leader of the Year award is one of the highest honors given to an Active member who serves in a leadership position. It recognizes a Committee Chair who inspires and motivates her committee. This year, the Inspiring Leader of the Year award was jointly awarded to Member Meetings and Events Co-Chairs Alex Hall and Jenna Zwald. Their leadership was thoughtful and innovative, moving the League Mission forward.

“Our honorees this year truly inspired their whole committee to want to be involved,” Operations Manager Cassidy Liebler said. “They were purposeful and intentional in every aspect, particularly in the vendors they partnered with. They have completely reimaged the social aspect of League membership and every decision made came from a place of revitalizing the member experience, whether that was at a GMM or a social gathering. They never said ‘no’ and constantly supported other committees, no questions asked.”





MARTHA S. FERMAN SPIRIT AWARD Laura Warren

The Martha S. Ferman Spirit Award honors an outstanding Active member as she transitions into becoming a Sustainer. Caroline Vostrejs, 2022-2023 JLT President, announced Laura Warren as this year's Martha S. Ferman Spirit Award recipient, wrapping up this year's award winners.

"I'm honored to present an incredible member with one of our organization's most prestigious awards," Vostrejs said. "It's even more special because of my direct experience serving with this member in several capacities. Her accomplishments throughout her Active years have left a legacy of serving with kindness and dedication. I look forward to spending more time with her as she joins me as a Sustaining member. When asked, 'Who would you want on your dream team,' her name is always on my list."

Members see Laura as a quiet and focused leader, who has made an impact in the community and gracefully executed her roles, leading League fundraisers, sitting on Management Council and serving as a Governance Committee member.

"[She] quickly volunteers for a project, seeing it completely through and adjusting to every turn along the way," Leadership Director Samantha Greer said. "She never asks for anything in return. I hope the Sustainers will tap into Laura's expertise to curate experiences that will cultivate friendships, memories and the continued development of women."

Laura's dedication to her League responsibilities makes her a force for positive change. Like many other members, her career outside the League often meant she was traveling and joining meetings remotely to ensure success.

"[Laura] serves, regardless of her location, with a focus on championing the development of women and ensuring the League's success," 2022-2023 Leadership Director Jessica Hornof said. "From spearheading our internal communications efforts to executing a hybrid slate announcement so all members could participate, we are immensely grateful for her invaluable service and steadfast reliability."

Laura truly embodies the numerous tributes accorded to Martha Ferman, especially her intentionality, which is highlighted consistently. Like Martha, Laura's attention to detail is unmatched and her goal to be intentional reflects throughout her roles in the League.

"From our nights together prepping and tasting recipes for Kids in the Kitchen, serving as Chair-Elect and then Chair of some of the most innovative and successful years of HGM, tackling large shifts in our pipeline development, reorganization of the Nominating—now Governance—process, and to most importantly knowing and taking an interest in the lives of those with whom she partners; she is another shining example of the selflessness Martha modeled daily," Kitty Riggs-Forenza said. "I am honored to call this woman my friend, but most importantly my partner in crime through much of my League career."

* Please refer to **page 46** for the **SUSTAINER OF THE YEAR** recognition.

2023-2024 Provisional Class SPOTLIGHT



by HANNAH STARR

The 2023-2024 Provisional Class is a special group of women. With over 135 women in the class ranging from ages 23 to 49, this class encapsulates a rich tapestry of backgrounds, experiences and a shared enthusiasm for community service.

What is notable about this year's class is the shift in age. With the changes in League policies, this is the first year women between 40-49 can participate in the Provisional Course. Half of the cohort falls within their 30s, with an additional 15 members in their 40s. This diversity injects a unique blend of experiences and reflects the next generation of female leaders in Tampa.

While major impacts on the League are only just beginning with this class, there is a palpable sense of anticipation for the impactful contributions they are poised to make.

"The Provisional year was super educational and I'm looking forward to getting more involved, getting to know more people outside of my mentor group next year," said Karen Smerker, member of the current Provisional Class. "My biggest

regret is not getting involved with JLT sooner. This organization is made up of incredible women making a tangible difference in our community each and every day."

In terms of community engagement, the Provisional Class has actively participated in initiatives such as the Diaper Bank and Alliance for Period Supplies, showcasing their commitment to making a positive impact on the Tampa community. Family Health Day in March further underlines their dedication to hands-on community involvement.

The educational component of the Provisional Course has played a pivotal role in shaping their understanding of the League's history and impact. From insightful community committee sessions to an enlightening Provisional Bus Tour visiting Academy Prep, Mary Lee's House and Metropolitan Ministries, they have gained first-hand exposure to the League's nearly 100 years of service.

One of the most impressive callouts related to this class is the fact that over 40 percent of the



Provisional Class completed all their requirements by December. This proactive completion is just another testament to their commitment and passion for the League's mission. Their achievements have garnered recognition from Active members, solidifying their early success.

Provisional Education Chair Courtney Ryals expressed immense pride in the growth and development of the class, noting their eagerness to serve the Tampa community and take on leadership roles in the future.

"This class of Provisionals has, what I believe, all the attributes to be the future leaders of The Junior League of Tampa," Ryals said. "At PE104, we were thrilled to recognize 12 Provisionals who have accepted chair positions next year. We are excited to cheer for each Provisional throughout her League career."

The 2023-2024 Provisional Class stands as a testament to the League's commitment to cultivating a diverse, dedicated, and impactful membership. They are certainly going to accomplish big things for the Tampa Bay community and beyond.



Christen Dowels

by LAUREN GUERRERO

Christen Cowan Dowels is the youngest and only girl of four. She was born and raised in Venice, Florida to Neil and Carolyn Cowan. She has a B.Sc. in Economics from Florida State University and an Executive Master of Nonprofit Administration degree from the University of Notre Dame. Christen and her husband just celebrated their first year of marriage in January.

Part of a large extended family, she is the proud aunt to 10 nieces and nephews. Every few years for Thanksgiving, Christen and her at least 100 family members—which includes spouses, kids, kids' spouses and grandkids—gather around to test their family bonds during the UF vs FSU game.

Christen joined The Junior League in Sarasota, where she served five years on the Fundraising Committee and chaired the Training Committee. One of her favorite memories was a trolley tour of projects and organizations started by The Junior League of Sarasota League during her Provisional year. She found it inspiring to see all the League has had a hand in creating.

She transferred to The Junior League of Tampa last year and currently serves as Training Committee's Virtual Training Coordinator. One of Christen's goals is to get more involved with JLT's Fund Development Evaluation Committee (FDEC) and Project Development Evaluation Committee (PDEC).

Christen's dream jobs include either working in a fundraising role with a nonprofit organization or operating in a strategic planning role for either a nonprofit or for-profit organization. She would also jump at the opportunity to travel as a nonprofit or strategic planning consultant if given the opportunity.

She believes that the quality of a member's League experience is based on her participation and openmindedness. Investing time and energy into the League results in building lifelong friendships and phenomenal network.



“Your experience in the League is only as good as your participation. So, try everything once; find what you love, and invest your time, energy and resources. You’ll meet lifelong friends, build a phenomenal network and do some good along the way.”

— Christen Cowan Dowels

Raena Steffen

Raena Steffen was born in Massachusetts and moved to North Florida at age five. She is the oldest child, with two younger brothers. She currently lives in South Pasco County with her boyfriend and dog, Dora. She is a two-time graduate from the University of South Florida's Morsani College of Medicine, attaining her Bachelor of Science in Athletic Training and a minor in Public Health in 2009 and her Master of Science in Medical Science, with a concentration in athletic training, in 2013. She is nationally certified and holds a medical license from the State of Florida. The youngest patient she has treated was two days old and her oldest patient was 93 years old.

Raena, a third-year Active member, joined The Junior League of Tampa in 2021, at the height of COVID-19. She has served as Cookbook Chair-Elect, then rolled into serving as Cookbook Chair and currently serves as the Family Health Day Chair. Recently slated, Raena will be the Advocacy Manager in the next League year, overseeing the Human Trafficking Awareness Committee and the Public Affairs Committee.



Two initiatives that are near and dear to Raena's heart are Diaper Bank and Kids Connect.

"I have peers who are new parents as well as have a background of providing care to people who cannot afford basic supplies, such as diapers," Steffen said. "Diaper Bank is crucial to our Tampa community, and I'm so excited to see it launch into a 501(c)3! I also have close friends who have recently become foster parents, navigating the challenges within the foster system. Kids Connect is a huge support of the foster system in our area, providing resources to kids and parents and celebrating forever families."

Raena would love to see The Junior League expand across Pasco County. Although the northern county may not have enough interests to trigger the creation of a new League, she believes The Junior League must rise to meet the continued call to make a large impact in Pasco.

A piece of advice that Raena would give to Prospective and Provisional members would be to take ownership of their League journey.

"As cliché as it may sound, you truly can make your League experience your own," Steffen said. "I feel that the key to this is communication. So many problems and so much confusion could simply be avoided by asking questions and keeping others informed."

"There is **not** a certain "type" of woman that you need to be to join the League," said Steffen. "There is truly a mutual respect for one another regardless of our differences, but our diversity is also what makes us stronger and more able to relate to our community which we love to serve so much."

Kristina Merritt

Kristina Merritt has lived all over the world but has called Tampa Bay home for over 20 years, following her father's retirement from the Air Force when she was 12.

Her parents are Vietnam War refugees and both of their families immigrated to Tampa Bay. Her family celebrates Tet—the Vietnamese Lunar New Year—and other cultural holidays. Kristina loves getting in touch with her culture through cooking.

Kristina is a proud UCF Knight and a Stetson Law Hatter. She works as a legal business developer and litigation practice strategist.

"It perfectly blends my love of personal branding with my legal background and experience," said Merritt. "I feel lucky I get to help others build their personal brand as they cultivate business every day."

Kristina began her League journey in 2017 as a Provisional and served on various committees throughout her membership. She loved her time on Kids in the Kitchen, Public Affairs and Provisional Education Committees, and loves her current placement on the Governance Committee.

One of Kristina's favorite memories involves Kids in the Kitchen—witnessing the League's direct impact on the community. She would like to see a similar initiatives run in the future, wherein members help educate and increase access to fresh food in communities around Tampa.

A piece of advice Kristina would give to a new member or someone considering joining the League would be to ask questions, explore different paths and invest more in the League.



"Don't hesitate to ask questions. Explore different paths and friendships in the League. What you invest into the League will return even better investments."

— Kristina Merritt

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Life is an Adventure (above) hangs in the home of former JLT president Allison Burden.

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sustainer president's note

As our year comes to an end, I reflect on what a fun year it has been. We enjoyed many fun events and activities. A few of my favorites were our pop ups, Winter Cocktail Party, Day at the Races and Gala. I loved celebrating our 50-year members and announcing our Sustainer of the Year!

Congratulations to our newest 50-year members: Joanne Cheatham, Abigail Chlldon, Mary Dolcimascolo, Wynnette Hampton, Nan Edwards, Robin Gonzalez, Rosemary Henderson, Judith Marks, Carol Mathews Smith, Michel Poklepovic, Michael Rao, Nancy Turner and Pat Van Dyke. Their dedication and continued support of The Junior League of Tampa is truly inspiring.

And congratulations to this year's Sustainer of the Year, Nancy Crane. Nancy's accomplishments and commitment to the Tampa Bay community are truly inspiring. She is a wonderful example of a Sustainer who continues to give her time, sharing her knowledge and expertise with members and our community.

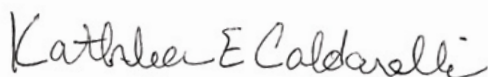
I would like to thank my dear friend Meg Severino for always being there to answer questions and provide support whenever I needed it. It has been a joy to be able to serve with you this past year.

The Sustainer Board has been instrumental this year in helping to plan some wonderful events and activities, such as mahjong. It has been my honor to spend this year with you all.

The Sustainer Committee members inspired me with their eagerness to help and their dedication to every event. I look forward to seeing all the amazing things you will accomplish during your Active years and beyond.

Thank you to Leslie White and Marysue Mathews for always sharing your knowledge, helping with all the last-minute items and providing support to all of us. And good luck to Jenny Spencer, 2024-2025 Sustainer President. I know she has so many exciting things planned for next year. Enjoy every minute, Jenny.

And finally, it was my honor to serve as your Sustainer President this year. I have enjoyed getting to know so many Sustainers and Actives. It was invigorating to be so involved with the League again. I look forward to staying engaged with all of you as we prepare for the League's centennial.



Kate Caldarelli
Sustainer President, 2023-2024
SustainerPresident@JLTampa.org



Sustainer President

Kate Caldarelli

Sustainer President-Elect

Jenny Spencer

Sustainer at Large (Executive Board)

Laura Everitt

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LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE:



Nancy Crane

2024 SUSTAINER OF THE YEAR

by MADELINE MORRIS

Nancy Buchanan Crane shines as the true embodiment of the Sustainer of the Year. Since Sustaining in 1992, she has shown outstanding volunteer service across Tampa and continues to embody the League's mission.

EARLY SERVICE

Born in Asheville, North Carolina, surrounded by the Blue Ridge mountains, Nancy attended Mars Hill College for her undergraduate and the University of Alabama for her Master of Education. At Alabama, she met her husband Steve Crane and together they moved to New York City.

Crane joined The Junior League of Tampa shortly after moving from New York City in 1976. She was eager to put down roots in their new hometown, as they raised their two sons, Matthew and Crosby.

In her first few years, Crane served on a variety of committees including the 50th Anniversary Committee, Membership Committee and Training Committee. Her work ethic and passion for the community quickly caught the attention of fellow members, who were always eager to be on her team.

"It didn't matter if she was making peanut butter sandwiches for Little Leaguers or training NFL owners, it was going to be awesome," reflected Sustainer and friend Regina Birrenkott.



A HEALTHIER TAMPA

In 1988, Crane joined the Community Research and Project Development Committee, to begin the development of a new community initiative for the League. On a trip to North Carolina, Crane had been inspired by the Health Adventure Museum in Asheville and wondered if there was an opportunity to build something similar in Tampa.

Her vision was to bring health lessons out of the textbook. She began researching opportunities and built a pilot program called “Bone Zone” to test the concept. Together with other League members, she proved the concept and the program became a community project.

Over the next three years, Crane chaired the committee which developed lessons and taught thousands of Tampa Bay children about healthy living. As the project grew in demand, the League decided to launch it, converting it into an independent nonprofit. Tampa General Hospital signed on as a founding sponsor and Crane accepted the role of Executive Director of MORE Health Inc in 1992.

As Executive Director, she scaled the program significantly during her tenure. In her first five years, she developed 22 lessons and hired over 15 teachers to go into the Hillsborough County schools. The teachers not only led lessons for students, they also worked closely with the school system to ensure classroom teachers were trained and familiar with the curriculum.

In 1998, Crane began to expand MORE Health’s work in Pinellas County. She worked alongside the Health Education Department to replicate the programming, helping more Tampa Bay children learn about healthy lifestyles.

CONTINUED IMPACT

Crane’s impact has not stopped with MORE Health. Since leaving, she has used her experience to lead the Tampa Bay Lightning Foundation, Pediatric Cancer Foundation and Quantum Leap Farm. She has also been an active board member of multiple Tampa institutions including Academy Prep, Metro YMCA and Berkeley Prep.

“Everything she learned and practiced as an Active member of The Junior League of Tampa was just the beginning of one of the most productive Sustainer careers in our League history,” said friend and fellow Sustainer Robin Gonzalez.

Crane returned to League leadership in 2016, as the Sustainer at Large on the Executive Board. She shared her experience and deep community knowledge with President Nicole Hubbard and other board members.

“The willingness to go the extra mile to commit herself is what I find so admirable,” remarked friend and Sustainer Terrell Clark. “She has really had an impact on our Tampa community in so many ways.”



“She is without a doubt the most dedicated, committed, and ‘make it happen’ person I have ever had the pleasure of calling a friend.”

– Cindy Coney



It Only Gets Better: **FUN WITH THE SUSTAINERS**

by MICHELLE AIHE

A journey with The Junior League of Tampa is one of evolution. As the seasons of life change, the League provides an outlet for service and sisterhood that fits in a member's current life pattern. The Junior League of Tampa Sustainers, a distinguished assembly of accomplished individuals, embody a legacy of empowerment and philanthropy that transcends generations.

An integral part of The Junior League, Sustainers continue to be driving forces for positive change in the Tampa Bay area. They serve in advisory and social roles, offering their experience to current League members. For Sustainers, continued involvement in the League offers an opportunity for service, social enrichment and priceless memories.

"I served as the Sustainer Advisor on the Management Council and I am currently serving on the Gala Committee," remarked Lynette Russell, Sustainer and former President. "I have given lots of historical perspectives and advice in both roles."

In keeping pace with our civic engagement tenet, Sustainers frequently gather to volunteer for League initiatives such as the Holiday Gift Market and Family Health Day and support local partners, like Girls on the Run.

The perpetual passing down of knowledge further establishes the importance of community that is central to the League. Many Sustainers consistently carve out time to meet, mentor and encourage JLT members. They draw on their many years of experience in the League to advise current Active members. Actives can reach out to the Sustainers to gain advice regarding current League activities.

"I served as the Sustainer at Large on the Executive Committee when Meghan McGuire was President," remarked former JLT President Barbara Harvery Ryals. "My greatest contribution was giving an historical perspective to any decisions that the Executive Committee was considering. I was always especially honored



when members of the Executive Committee would call me for advice.”

In addition, JLT Sustainers also socialize, attending Sustainer luncheons, happy hours and special events. Notably, the Sustainers have been hosting Mah Jongg lessons. These events serve as a time of celebration and a chance to form new connections and fortify old bonds.

JLT Sustainers stand as testament to the enduring spirit of community service and leadership.

Teneille Kuznicki

by MICHELLE AIHE

From inspiration to career connections, the League has been pivotal to Teneille Kuznicki's life. We caught up with her to learn more about her League career.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH THE LEAGUE?

It has been about 10 years. I have not looked back since. A friend of mine, Denise Schultz, introduced and sponsored my membership application. I was initially drawn to the League because I work in tech—specifically AI/ML and generative language healthtech—which at the time was incredibly male-dominated. There has been some progress made but there is still a noticeable imbalance.

It is exciting to be part of a community of women from various walks of life and professions. The Junior League is not just for homemakers; we are doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and women in tech. This aspect appealed to me, especially since I did not often meet other 'women in tech' in my daily interactions.

WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR PLACEMENTS?

A few placements stand out, such as my time as a Technology Committee member and later Chair. We spearheaded JLT's website transformation, a significant undertaking that involved closely collaborating with Digital Cheetah. Additionally, I served on the Leadership Award Committee, where Stacy Baier had a vision for the Luminaries Award. I played a key role in establishing this award and later chaired it alongside Alex Palermo. It is incredible to witness the realization of a vision and then be able to lead and host an event a few years later.





In 2018-2019, I became the *Sustainer Spur* Editor, a member of *The Sandspur* Committee. And then I transitioned to Sustainer Chair, alternating between the two roles. My writings exposed me to various organizations JLT partners with, such as the Heart Gallery of Tampa.

I became aware of the Heart Gallery's work in organizing birthday celebrations for kids who have never experienced such joy. It struck a chord with me, prompting me to become engaged with the organization.

HOW HAS THE LEAGUE EVOLVED OVER THE YEARS?

Ten or 15 years ago, there were not a lot of individuals who looked like me. This is not a criticism but merely reflective of the demographic makeup of the time. In recent years however, the League's membership mirrors more and more the changing population and societal dynamics in Tampa. It goes beyond skin color, encompassing members' origins, cultures and life experiences, all of which contribute to a richer understanding.

By embracing multiple perspectives and recognizing the varied life experiences members bring, the League becomes more well-rounded and better equipped to serve our community.

I have appreciated witnessing this positive change over the past few years, with different points of view and lenses enriching our league and fostering a more inclusive environment.

PRETEND YOU ARE HAVING COFFEE OR LUNCH WITH A PROVISIONAL. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE HER?

Challenge yourself, seek a new experience and diversify your exposure. You have already made a difference by joining the League; now, push your boundaries.

One of the challenges I embraced was co-chairing the Luminaries event. Initially, it felt nerve-racking, questioning whether anyone would listen to me or how I would manage logistics like securing a venue and sponsors. However, I realized that saying yes to opportunities is crucial; you lose 100 percent of the chances you do not take. The League's support is essential, and it is easy to forget that you do not have to navigate challenges alone. All you need to do is be vulnerable, ask questions and embrace the learning process.

For Provisionals, my advice is not to be afraid of trying something new and challenging yourself. The League is here to catch you. If you fail, remember to fail fast, and there will always be someone here to support you—someone who has been through it before.

Denise Cassidy

by MICHELLE AIHE

As a transatlantic transfer, Sustainer Denise Cassidy has unique perspective and storied history with The Junior League of Tampa. We sat down with Denise, to chat about her experience and how the League has made an impact in her life



WHAT DREW YOU TO THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF TAMPA?

I was a transfer from The Junior League in London. I joined the League because I was working as a sales trader for a Japanese investment bank, living with an Irish girl and totally losing my American identity. Nothing I was doing was American. But I knew about The Junior League through business school friends who had been members. So I reached out and joined The Junior League in London, in 1990.

WHAT COMMITTEES HAVE YOU SERVED ON?

I served as the Public Relations Chair. I realized that The Junior League of Tampa was doing a lot in the community. But many people did not know what we were doing. At the time I was pregnant with my first daughter but I decided to go out and talk to as many civic organizations as I could get a meeting with. I spoke to 37 organizations before I had my baby that November. Some days I would have breakfast, lunch and dinner meetings, all promoting The Junior League and educating the community about Enabling Fund.

I raised awareness to organizations, church groups and other nonprofits about opportunities to receive funding that can go towards addressing their needs from the League. I was also the first Fundraising Chair for The Junior League, which I thought would be hard. But Betsy Chambers who was President at the time alleviated my fears, breaking down what I needed to do.

I was also the Kid's Connection Chair. During that time, we combined packing backpacks (which became the Love Bundles project) and the Adoption Picnic (currently supported through the Kids Connect project). I managed a \$58,000 budget and oversaw the packing of about 100 backpacks each month. I actually recommended splitting them into two committees.

HOW HAVE YOU SEEN THE LEAGUE EVOLVE?

Well, I think the League is taking on bigger projects, thanks to more funding. Secondly, I find that the membership of the League has evolved and I think it is wonderful. The League is reaching out to all areas of our community and bringing together different women who are interested in the mission of The Junior League. That is definitely a win. It is a great organization and it needs to be available for everybody. When I transferred to the League, most women then were not working. Now almost every woman in the League works, which in turn changes the projects.

HOW HAS THE LEAGUE AIDED IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

When you work in finance all day, you do not want to be the Treasurer. Even though there might be a natural aptitude, you might prefer to do something else. That is a great thing about the League. You get to try different roles, beyond what you do in your professional life.

And you get to make relationships that help your career. I landed my job at Raymond James through a warm introduction from a Junior League member, who I had met at a Transfer Committee lunch.

The League is great for meeting new people. A group of us got together 27 years ago to start a small networking group that meets monthly, called Exceptional Professionals. We are business owners and leaders but most importantly friends. We advertise in *The Sandspur* also.



MY FINAL QUESTION IS, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A PROVISIONAL?

As a Provisional, the League will expose you to a lot of community opportunities. You have to take the initiative to embrace these opportunities. What you put into the League is what you are going to get out of the League. If you joined the League to give back to the community, then you will always have a very rewarding League career. There is a lot of need out there and the League gives you the chance to make a difference if you take the chance.



JLT ENDOWMENT FUND: COMMEMORATIVE GIFTS

A commemorative gift that honors a League member during a time of celebration or honors the memory of a member. All donations support The Junior League of Tampa's Endowment Fund. For more information or to make a gift, visit jltampa.org/endowment.

BEST WISHES TO

Alex Hall on her marriage to Jarrett Payne

Alex Sinadinos Alford on her marriage to Joseph Alford

Amanda Alvarez on her engagement to Benjamin Doherty

Anna Tosone on her marriage to Jeff Innis

Ansley Blackwell on her engagement to Nick Wright

Brittany McClothin on her engagement to Michael Scola

Caitlin Wild on her engagement to Matt Munro

Chelsea Butts on her engagement to Connor Grdina

Danielle Tinsley on her engagement to Chuck Laney

Dara Hoffman Abraham on her marriage to Michal Abraham

Darcy Klempner on her marriage to Brian Haynes

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Merritt Simmons Oddo on her marriage to Joey Oddo

Robin Leigh Newman on her marriage to Royal Newman

Romana Kahvedzic on her engagement to Jonathan Way

CELEBRATING

Amy Van Valkenburg on the birth of her daughter

Ashley Capitano on the birth of her son, PJ

Brittany Anderson on the birth of her son

Brittany Beals on the birth of her daughter, Ainsley Rae

Brittany Hatton on the birth of her son, Jonah Alan

Brittany Schrader on the birth of her son

Cali Smith on the birth of her son, Walker Whitacre

Cari Allen on the birth of her son

Carrie Rañon on the birth of her son, McHenry

Desiré Sheils Nelson on the birth of her daughter

Elizabeth Muller Greminger on the birth of her daughter, Isabelle Grace

Hannah Parker McCabe on the birth of her son, Parker Troy

Jenna Starkey on the birth of her son, Cooper James

Jennifer Rutemiller on the birth of her daughter

Jessica Hypes on the birth of her daughter

Katie Rubin on the birth of her baby

Kathrein Saffran on the birth of her son, Brooks

Lauren Watts on the birth of her daughter, Amelia Jane

Lauren Zahnnow on the birth of her sons

Meg Severino on the birth of her daughter, Vivian Bernadette

Megan Leibl on the birth of her son, Luke

Melissa Keel on the birth of daughter, Kora

Meredith Haley on the birth of her daughter

Morgan Laurienzo on the birth of her daughter, Luna Grace

Mychael Sumbly on the birth of her son, Charlie

Patsy Giarda on the birth of her daughter, Madison

Sarah Heller on the birth of her sons, Harrison Paul and Blake Francis

Stephanie McQueen-Arthur on the birth of her son

CONGRATULATIONS TO

Abby Bird on starting a new job

Abby Bird on her pregnancy

Alex Palermo on her new role as Senior Corporate Counsel at Masonite®

Alex Pinta on being recognized by Tampa JCCs and Federation Woman of Distinction Award representing Hillel Academy

Alex Pinta on joining CØMPASS

Alexa Cline on her 36 Under 36 Professionalism Award from the Florida Bar Association Young Lawyer Division

Alexa Cline on becoming an Assistant Statewide Prosecutor

Alexandra Barboza on buying a new house

Anna Tosone on completing the NYC Marathon

Ashley White on her promotion to manager

Aubrey Burris on buying a new house

Autumn Etheredge on joining CØMPASS

Brittany McGlothlin on buying a new house

Brooke Daplito on her pregnancy

Casey Taylor on her promotion to Vice President of Development

Cassidy Liebler on her pregnancy

Christen Cowan Dowels on her new role as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Tampa Bay's Senior Director of Development

Christina Manino on successfully hosting the POLL conference

Desiré Shelis Nelson on being honored as one of the Tampa Club's 40 under 40

Devan Pryor on buying a new house

Elizabeth Greminger on completing the Boston Marathon

Emily Degirolamo on buying a new house

Erin Regan on her new role as Citi's Controllers Interim Head of Business Execution

Frankie Reitz on her new job at Salesforce

Gracey Hickey on her promotion

Hannah Boundy on her pregnancy

Hannah Parker McCabe on her promotion

Heather Alper on buying a new house

Jacqueline Brooker on starting her new job at Casa Fresca Homes

Jaclyn Clark on her pregnancy

Jade Rice on her promotion

Janae Thomas on receiving the 2024 USF Outstanding Young Alumni Award

Jena Lamendola on buying a new house

Joanne Sullivan on receiving the Woman of Distinction for the Year by the Tampa Chamber of Commerce

Kami Lucas on starting her new job at Skinny Mixes

Karen Smreker on her appointment as Synapse Florida's 2024 Innovation Award Chair

Karen Smreker on starting her EMBA-Global degree, jointly offered by London Business School and Columbia Business School

Kate Douglass Nguyen on her pregnancy

Keebler Straz on her recognition on the TBBJ 40 under 40 award

Kelly Bailey on starting her new job at PWC

Kiana Romeo on her nomination for the TBBJ BusinessWomen of the Year award

Kimber Martin on graduating with her MBA

Kristen Madhosingh on finishing her house renovations

LaLencia Matthews on launching her new company Laurel Grace Mental Health and Wellness

Lauren Huber on starting her new job at HDR

Liz Breslin on her pregnancy

Marie Garcia on completing the Walt Disney World Marathon

Mary Mason on completing the Walt Disney World Marathon

Meg Severino on successfully hosting the POLL conference

Molly Rubin on her promotion to felony at the State Attorney's Office

Murewa Olubela on becoming a Camelback Fellow

Murewa Olubela on launching her new company Erudyte

Nicole Baldon on her nomination for the TBBJ BusinessWomen of the Year award

Rachel Oestreich on her promotion

Rafi Wagoner on passing her commercial interior design licensing exam

Rebecca LoCascio on her promotion to Shareholder at Bush Ross, PA

Romana Kahvedzic on buying a new house

Roxane Leary on landing a \$100k non-profit grant

Samantha Love on buying a new house

Stephany Musino on her pregnancy

Sterling Purdy on starting her new job

Vicki Kiser on buying a new house

Xenia Juez on buying a new house

Xenia Juez on starting her new business venture

IN MEMORY OF

Allison Conn's dog

Beth Schatzberg's mother

Brittany Erigo's grandmother

Caroline Vostrejs's father-in-law

Carrie Rañon's grandfather, Bob McHenry

Chelsea Butts's stepmother

Danielle Tinsley's father

Gabby Bigg's father

Gabby Bigg's sister, Angelica Biggs

Jamiel Maze's grandmother

Jennifer Dutkowsky's father

Jennifer Dutkowsky's grandfather

Katie Peterson's dog

LaLencia Matthews's daughter

Lauren Watt's aunt

Marysue Mathew's father

Morgan Laurienzo's brother

Samantha Love's father

Teri Castillo's grandson

Tia Smith's grandmother

Tiffany Hilton's grandmother

Whitney Prall Gatz's grandmother, Mary Lou Finnigan

THINKING OF

Allie Torrence

Amanda Jackson

Bianca Williams-Schafer

Christi Wicks

Cynthia Juez

Elizabeth Drake

India Witte

Kaitlyn Bailey Owen

Kenisha Ray

Lauren Kerr

Marie Hebbler

Raena Steffen

Rachel Jackson

Rashada Timkee

RECOGNIZERS

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
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| Alexandra Barboza | Chante Miller | Genet Stewart | Kristina Merritt | Monica Kirkland | RuthAnn Vilela |
| Alexandra Hjaerge | Christina Mannino | Hannah Boundy | Kylie Gross | Monika Staruszkiewicz | Samantha Manning |
| Alicia Belvin | Christy Coniglio | Hannah Geaumont | Lauren Huber | Murewa Olubela | Sarah Martisek |
| Allie Beth | Chrsitine Mannino | Hannah Parker McCabe | Lauren Reid | Nicki Mohr Hall | Stephany Musino |
| Allie Betti | Claire Morton | Jacqueline Brooker | Lauren Rice | Rachel Griffin | Stevlin Purdy |
| Allison Conn | Cynthia Juez | Jessica Hypes | Lindsey Dewey | Rachel Moskowitz | Supper Club Girls |
| Alyson Burbee | Danielle Scott | Jill Askren | Liz Breslin | Raena Steffen | Tia Smith |
| Alyssa Sassor | Danielle Tinsley | Julie Sabolic | Marie Hebbler | Rafiela Wagoner | Tori Litschgi |
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LIFE OF THE PARTY RECIPES

Photo by MORGAN RINALDO

As we enjoy the end of spring season and dive straight into the fun of summer, look to our Life of the Party cookbook to find perfect recipes for entertaining.

Festival Strawberry Salad

One of our members and a cookbook author, Laura York, submitted this delicious salad highlighting one of our locally grown specialties, strawberries. She was awarded the 1989 Grand Championship at the Florida Strawberry Festival for this tasty salad.

SWEET AND SOUR DRESSING

- ½ cup vegetable oil
- ¼ cup vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 10 drops of red pepper sauce
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Dash of black pepper

SALAD

- 1 head romaine, torn into bite-sized pieces
- 2 ribs celery, chopped
- 2 ½ cups strawberries, sliced
- 1 (11-ounce) can of mandarin oranges, drained

GLAZED ALMONDS

- ¼ cup sliced almonds
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon sugar

For the dressing, combine the oil, vinegar, sugar, red pepper sauce, salt and pepper in a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Secure the lid and shake vigorously to mix well.

For the salad, combine the romaine, celery, strawberries and mandarin oranges in a large salad bowl.

For the almonds, combine the almonds and sugar in a small skillet over low heat, stirring constantly until the sugar is dissolved and the almonds are well coated. Pour onto waxed paper to cool. Break the almonds into small pieces.

To serve, pour the dressing over the salad and toss to combine. Sprinkle the almonds over the top and serve immediately.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

Life of the Party, Page 61

Garden Sangria

The Garden Sangria is a refreshing and citrusy drink with all the fresh summer fruit added in.

- 1 large orange
- 1 lemon
- 1 lime
- 2 or 3 cinnamon sticks
- 1 cup vodka
- 1 cup Triple Sec or Grand Marnier
- 2 bottles of dry white wine, chilled
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 quart club soda, chilled

Thinly slice the orange, lemon and lime; remove all seeds. Place the fruit slices in a bowl with the cinnamon sticks. Pour the vodka and Triple Sec over the fruit slices. Chill, covered, for four to 12 hours.

Combine the chilled wine and sugar in a large glass pitcher. Pour the fruit mixture into the pitcher, discarding the cinnamon sticks. Add the club soda. Stir well before serving. Whole star anise makes an attractive garnish if desired.

Yield: 20 servings

Morgan's tip for the summer: *Use Topo Chico Lime in place of soda for an extra effervescent topper. Feel free to use any fruit for this; our Florida strawberries are coming in season and would be delicious in this Garden Sangria.*

Life of the Party, Page 47

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