

GUEST COMMENTARY

# A View from the Immokalee Shelter

**By Norma H. Rodriguez**  
Special to the Immokalee Bulletin

Over the past 30 years, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children has transformed the lives of thousands of Immokalee families through its outreach services and more recently, its new emergency shelter.

Despite this presence, many people may be unfamiliar with what we do and who we serve. I'd like to start with a little history.

In 1991, The Shelter opened its Immokalee Outreach Office, offering part-time counseling services. Seven years later, the Immokalee program became a national model for serving immigrant and migrant battered women. In 2000, Immokalee Outreach Manager Lucy Ortiz testified before a Congressional hearing in Washington on domestic violence in rural communities.

By the mid-2000s, the Immokalee office staff had expanded to four advocates who provided counseling and prevention programs in local schools. In 2016, following a needs study, Shelter leadership launched a capital campaign to build a 21,500 square foot, 60-bed emergency shelter in Immokalee. The building is named for long-time supporter Shelly Stayer, who provided the lead gift of \$3 million.

Designed by Naples architect David Corban, the facility features separate wings for victims of human trafficking and survivors of domestic abuse, as well as office and outreach space. The project broke ground in May 2019 and opened one year later amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Immokalee is a small and close-knit community. We are counting on you to help us help your community. If you know

of or suspect someone is in need of our services, please reach out and tell them about The Shelter. All of our services are provided free of charge and are available to all, regardless of citizenship status.

We provide safe shelter, where survivors can secure counseling, legal and immigration assistance, court advocacy, financial education, and many other services that help them heal and become self-sufficient. Life inside The Shelter is empowerment based. A pantry and individual kitchens allow participants to prepare their own food for themselves and their families on their own schedule. Laundry facilities, child care, and after school care are also provided. The average stay is around 37 days and advocates are available to assist you on your way to a life free of violence and abuse.

Future columns will provide more details

on The Shelter's many programs and services. We are so grateful to the Immokalee Bulletin Editor Dale Conyers for providing this column space to raise community awareness.

It is my firm belief that every human being deserves to live a life free from violence and abuse. This is the reality we seek every day at The Shelter as we work to prevent, protect and prevail over domestic violence and human trafficking. It is a reality we seek for all residents in Immokalee because violence in the home does not stop at the front door - it infects our schools, businesses, places of worship and social gatherings. It impacts all of us.

*If you or someone you know is impacted by domestic violence, call or text The Shelter Crisis Line at 239-775-1101. More info is available at [naplesshelter.org](http://naplesshelter.org)*

## Matching gift challenge is a million-dollar success for The Immokalee Foundation

Special to the Immokalee Bulletin

NAPLES – A \$500,000 matching gift challenge by Naples philanthropists Don Fites and his wife, Joyce Hagen, to support The Immokalee Foundation has been met. The \$1 million raised commemorates the 10th anniversary of the Heavy Equipment Service Technician (HEST) program at Immokalee Technical College (ITECH), which helps to ensure another decade of success for The Immokalee Foundation's students who enroll in the specialized program.

Fites, the retired chairman and CEO of Caterpillar Inc., played an instrumental role in guiding the HEST program's creation in 2010. HEST graduates learn how to service heavy-duty, high-performance vehicles specially designed for executing earthwork operations and other large construction tasks that are essential in Southwest Florida.

Launched in January, the \$500,000 matching gift challenge reached its goal in just three months and supports a program that Fites is passionate about.

"It's heavy equipment that delivers our water, power and food – all the things we take for granted require heavy equipment to deliver and produce them and make it possible for the lifestyle we enjoy here in

Southwest Florida," said Fites. "Florida, and our region in particular, is also in a significant building boom. People want to live here, and all the housing that you see would be impossible without heavy equipment."

Since the HEST program's inception, more than 100 of its graduates have been hired by more than two dozen companies. Through this match, Fites and Hagen invited the community to help the next 100 young men and women seeking the specialized technical training that leads to a well-paying career. This initiative has been supported by Caterpillar Foundation, Kelly Tractor Foundation, Everglades Farm Equipment and many others.

"Don has been a champion of the HEST program from the very beginning, and he has helped make a huge impact on the lives of many of our students," said The Immokalee Foundation President and CEO Noemi Y. Perez. "We are so grateful for the support of Don and Joyce, who share the foundation's commitment to helping our students achieve professional careers through postsecondary education, whether college or a technical program."

Through Fites' leadership, a public-private



Courtesy photo

**Don Fites and first female HEST student Bethany Clay.**

sector collaboration raised money to create the HEST program. That partnership included The Caterpillar Foundation, Fites Family Charitable Trust, Kelly Foundation Inc., Kelly Tractor, and the Collier County Public Schools.

The Immokalee Foundation covers the cost of tuition, training tools, and equipment, and provides a counselor to guide students successfully through the HEST program. The two-year curriculum, administered at ITECH, creates a foundation of technical skills that prepares students to

maintain, diagnose and repair heavy equipment systems.

After the first year of HEST, students participate in paid summer internships, often leading to full-time employment at the company for which they interned when the students' second year is complete. HEST students work toward earning the ASE certification, which provides a pathway to well-paying technician jobs. HEST alumni are prepared to enter the workforce without needing to go through a formal dealer apprentice program. Because of their training and experience, the HEST program graduates often receive seniority within the companies they join.

For 30 years, The Immokalee Foundation provides a range of education programs that focus on building pathways to professional careers through support, mentoring and tutoring, and life skills development leading to economic independence. To learn more about The Immokalee Foundation, becoming a mentor, its signature events, volunteering as a career panel speaker or host, making a donation, including the foundation in your estate plans, or for additional info, call 239-430-9122 or visit <https://immokaleefoundation.org>.



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