

# GULF SHORE LIFE

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## FORCES OF PHILANTHROPY

WOMEN OF ACTION

+ SOCIAL REGISTER 2022-2023



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*FORCES*

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*PHILANTHROPY*



Who runs the world? In Southwest Florida's nonprofit scene, it's women. And they're changing how we approach fundraising, advocacy and giving.

By Jaynie Bartley   Photography by Omar Cruz   Styled by Anna Ruiz

“WHEN YOU LOOK AT [ARTIS—NAPLES] AND THIS COMMUNITY,  
THERE HAS BEEN CELEBRATED MATRIARCHY.”

— *Kathleen van Bergen* —

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or the first time in our fourth-annual “Forces of Philanthropy” feature, we turn the lens from the philanthropic givers to the doers working behind the scenes to make it all happen. These leaders propel the philanthropic community into the future through mentorship, collaboration and camaraderie. And as it turns out, many of them are women. While working on our 2022-2023 nonprofit listings, we found that 122 of 207 organizations featured are led by women, from Jackie Stephens at Children’s Advocacy Center of Collier County to Sarah Baeckler at Humane Society Naples to Heidi Taulman at SWFL Children’s Charities—it just goes on and on. “Down here, it really appears that women run nonprofits,” Kristen Coury, Gulfshore Playhouse’s founder and producing artistic director, says.

When we gathered eight of them at Hayes Hall at Artis—Naples for the cover shoot, they greeted each other like old friends (which many of them are); chatting about plans for partnerships, sharing best practices for hiring, promoting and nurturing their teams; and joking about their collective switch from business-casual to *Vogue*-glam for the day. The room buzzed with their enthusiasm and dedication to their causes.





For the past century, Southwest Florida has attracted plenty of philanthropic residents, and there's been a long line of influential women who have left their legacies in the region, paving the way for a female-forward future and inspiring many of today's leaders. Their names grace endowment funds, schools, art centers and street signs throughout the region, like the late second-generation Naples philanthropist Lavern Gaynor's eponymous elementary school in Golden Gate and Myra Janco Daniels' namesake road that leads to Artis—Naples' campus. In the '80s, Myra, who passed away this summer at 96, retired to the area after a ceiling-shattering career in Chicago's cutthroat advertising world. She dreamt up Naples Philharmonic (now Artis—Naples) to fill the region's need for top-tier art.

Since taking over as CEO and president at Artis—Naples in 2011, Kathleen van Bergen—a classically trained violinist who has worked for several centuries-old arts organizations, including The Philadelphia Orchestra—has carried on the founder's vision while making her mark. She's grown the center's programming, partnering with other arts organizations, donors and patrons to engage the community with concerts, Broadway shows and fine art. This season at Artis—Naples, The Baker Museum, she worked with her predominantly female team to bring a slate of impressive exhibits, including a collection by postwar abstract expressionist Helen Frankenthaler. "My role is different. It's the great responsibility to carry on

*“WHEN YOUNG WOMEN SEE OTHER WOMEN RISE TO THE TOP,  
THEY SEE IT'S POSSIBLE FOR THEM, TOO.”*

*— Maria Jimenez-Lara —*



*“ALL OF THESE WOMEN ARE PEOPLE WHO REALLY BELIEVED  
IN SOMETHING AND NEVER TOOK ‘NO’ FOR AN ANSWER.”*

*— Stefanie Ink Edwards —*

the promise of a gift, the promise of growing something that past generations have started,” Kathleen says. “I love matching someone’s treasure with an idea.”

When Linda Oberhaus, CEO of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, and her team identified a need in Immokalee, four female philanthropists stepped up to fund the Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence—which has served more than 400 survivors since opening in 2020. Linda took the helm at The Shelter in 2007, when the organization relied heavily on images of battered women to spread awareness. She quickly recognized that focusing on success stories could be more effective in inspiring donors and volunteers, and switched her team to a “happy, healthy, whole” motto, focusing on the positive outcomes rather than the trauma. She’s also introduced programs to support the LGBTQ+ community, and notably influenced Naples Pride president Cori Craciun’s decision to start her own nonprofit through years of support. Years back, Cori volunteered with The Shelter, passing out the nonprofit’s LGBTQ+ pamphlets long before she opened Naples Pride Center in 2020.

Baton-passing from woman to woman has been big in recent years. In the arts sphere, film festival organizer Molly Deckart took over at Alliance for the Arts following Lydia Black’s 13-year reign. And last year, when longtime volunteer and CEO Tracey Galloway retired from her position at Community Cooperative





(Fort Myers' nearly 40-year-old, hunger-based nonprofit), she passed the torch to her mentee Stefanie Ink Edwards. Unlike many of her predecessors—among the first generation of women to make it to leadership positions—Stefanie had strong female role models. Although she began her career in marketing and finance, one of her mothers, Theresa Ink, the founder of spay-and-neuter clinic PAWS of Lee County, inspired her to branch out into the nonprofit world.

But even today, some of these women are starting new ventures with no formal mentors to follow. Take Megan Rose, who is making waves in the family sector with Better Together, an organization dedicated to keeping kids out of foster care and helping parents get back on their feet. Likewise, Sarah Owen leads Fort Myers' forward-thinking Collaboratory on its mission to establish a socially and economically sustainable region by 2040, when today's newborns reach adulthood. Sarah sees her team members as future CEOs: She encouraged Collaboratory's director of social innovation and sustainability, Tessa LeSage, to launch FutureMakers in 2015 when Tessa saw a need to address the community's graduation and college acceptance rates. Now, Tessa oversees FutureMakers' programs to keep young professionals in the region. Sarah also champions budding business owners and new nonprofit founders, like Patricia DeVost, who recently created Patty's Place to address mental health issues in Lee County. Collier Community Foundation's

*“IN OTHER AREAS, FOUNDATIONS HAVE EXISTED FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, AND WERE HISTORICALLY LED BY MEN. HERE, THE PHILANTHROPIC SCENE IS YOUNGER, CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN TO LEAD.”*

*— Sarah Owen —*

*“THERE ARE A LOT OF STRONG WOMEN WHO ARE IN  
THIS COMMUNITY AT THE SAME TIME.”*

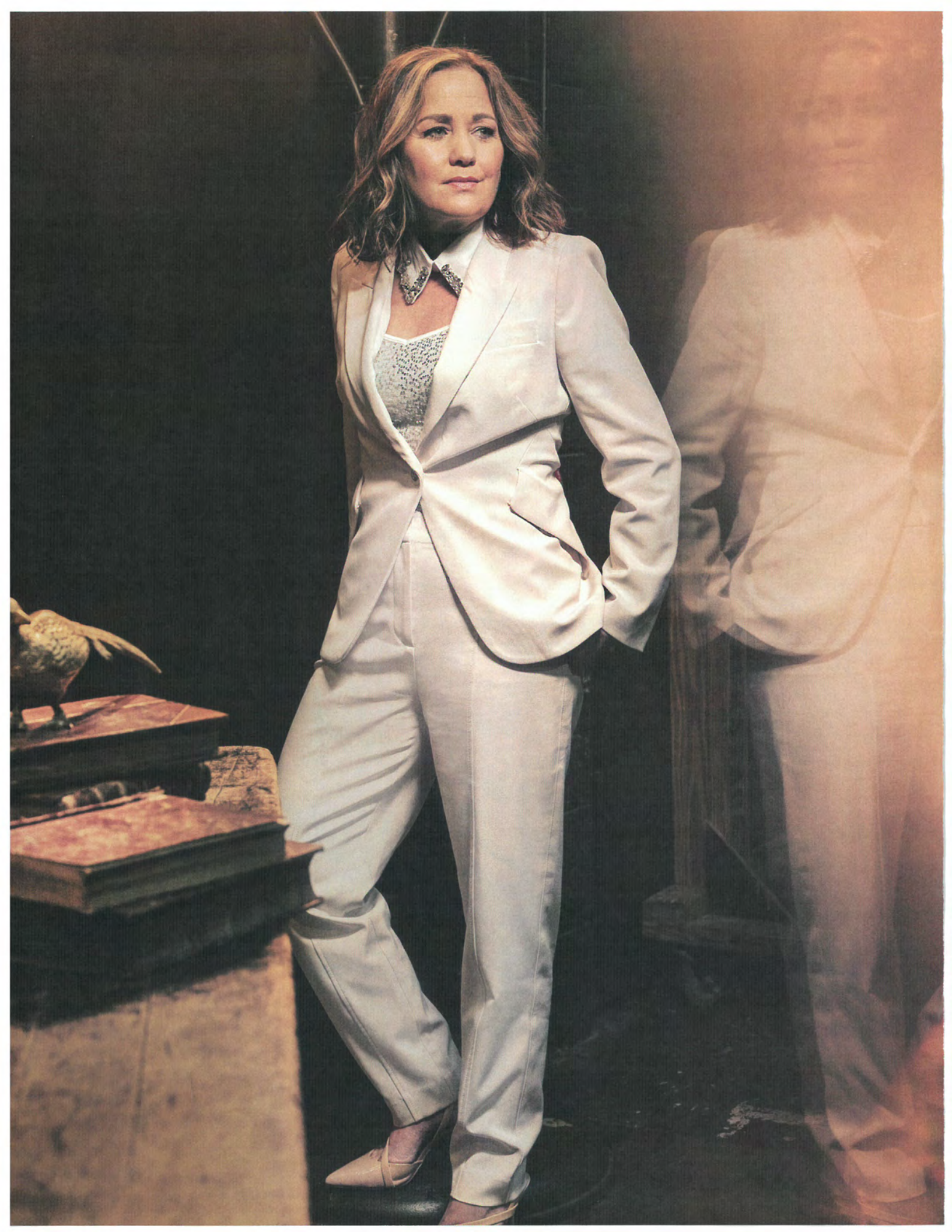
*— Eileen Connolly-Keesler —*

president and CEO Eileen Connolly-Keesler commends Sarah's efforts: "It's about developing these women, who you want to be the best and the brightest."

Eileen has left her mark throughout the nonprofit world since she took over Collier Community Foundation and its Women's Foundation of Collier County branch almost a decade ago. This year, she led the foundation into a record year, allocating more than \$43 million in grants. And, she's the queen of collaboration. This fall, she's working with Sarah on a series of roundtable chats to assess the community's needs and come up with solutions. She's built partnerships with other area leaders, like Mary Beth Geier at Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation and Maria Jimenez-Lara at Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF). The trio is currently working on the CARES app to help smaller nonprofits structure their organizations like a small business, for maximum efficacy. "That spirit of collaboration has allowed for so many women to rise to the top and has made our community stronger in so many ways," Maria says.

Maria built her career working with underserved communities on Florida's east coast before Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) recruited her to run its Immokalee Community School. Now at NCEF, one of the area's top-earning nonprofits—and one in which 14 of the 15 team members are women—she's known to take donors and new executives on tours of local impoverished communities to assess the





region's needs. Under her direction, the organization hosts the nation's biggest charity wine auction, Naples Winter Wine Festival, which has brought in nearly \$244 million to support local kids' nonprofits.

Beyond chairing events, women step up as donors, too. The Women's Giving Circle consists of 114 local women—many of whom sit on nonprofit boards—who pool their annual \$1,000 membership fees to give directly to local groups. Fort Myers' Gail Markham, a founding member of her accounting firm and avid donor to many of her city's nonprofits, recently invited a handful of Lee County nonprofit leaders to a roundtable meeting, filling the room with powerhouse women, including Valerie's House founder, Angela Melvin, and Alicia Miller, who took over as executive director at Our Mother's Home in 2021. "I said to them, 'I'm here to bring you all together to see if you can leverage your resources,' then the room just went abuzz," Gail says. The group unanimously decided to fold Stefanie Ink Edwards into their monthly meetings and help as she steers Community Cooperative through a challenging season, hindered by inflation and the lingering effects of the pandemic.


And where many may assume there's competition, we see established partnerships. Each year, Artis—Naples' Kathleen van Bergen teams up with Gulfshore Playhouse's founder Kristen Coury to pair professional actors with Naples Philharmonic for a formal Shakespeare production in Collier high

*“EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN DEVELOPING AND  
ADVANCING WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP.”*

*— Linda Oberhaus —*







schools. Kristen started Gulfshore Playhouse as a one-woman show operating out of her house in 2004 and has grown it into a nationally recognized professional theater. “[When you’re] running a nonprofit, people don’t realize you’re running a business,” she says. “This venture was entrepreneurial at its core.” She’s currently laying the foundation for the new Baker Theatre and Education Center, which is expected to open in 2024, with hopes to connect to the Naples Design District via a walkable sculpture garden in partnership with METHOD & CONCEPT and Naples Botanical Garden.

Another influential collaborator, Donna McGinnis, president and CEO of Naples Botanical Garden, often offers the Garden’s expertise to nonprofits and eco-minded businesses. Her team’s recent plan for a Mexico-inspired season, anchored by a recreation of Frida Kahlo’s La Casa Azul, propelled a push to celebrate Hispanic heritage and culture at Collier County arts organizations throughout the season. “We want to be a garden for all, we want everyone to feel welcome here, and that means our programming, our exhibits, our tours, our experiences really need to reflect everyone in Southwest Florida,” Donna says. The initiative inspired others, like Marco Island Center for the Arts executive director Hyla Crane, to get involved too, shifting her season’s programming to honor Latin musicians and artists.

*“THERE ARE SO MANY WOMEN HERE WHO ARE RETIRED, WHO HAD THESE AMAZING CAREERS, ARE HIGHLY EDUCATED AND STILL SERVING ON BOARDS ... THERE’S A WEALTH OF INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE HERE THAT YOU DON’T GET IN OTHER AREAS.”*

*— Donna McGinnis —*

*“EACH OF US IN THE NONPROFIT CIRCLE HAS OUR GO-TO WOMEN,  
WHO WE’RE ABLE TO CALL UP FOR ADVICE OR TO HAVE LUNCH.”*

*— Kristen Coury —*

Artis—Naples’ Kathleen recalls an impactful collaboration to celebrate The Shelter’s 25th anniversary in 2011. She worked with Linda to host an intimate gallery reception of works made by survivors participating in The Shelter’s Healing Arts Program. The idea of women supporting women spans organizations and areas of focus. Linda often sends abuse survivors to Megan at Better Together for parenting and job assistance. And Maria credits philanthropist Adria Starkey for rallying many of them into the International Women’s Forum, connecting them to global leaders. Beyond brand partnerships, the women often lean on each other for what Kathleen jokingly calls “cocktails and condolences.” She’s close with Donna, who cites Kathleen as the first person she met when she moved to Naples to take over the Garden. “We have lunch together and socialize, but we also keep in touch with the big things happening in our organizations,” Donna says.

Southwest Florida philanthropy is rich with this network of incredible, inspiring women. And the convivial spirit is in full effect as the women leave the Hayes Hall stage after finishing their group cover shots for this issue. Dressed in flowing satin and chiffon, they squeeze in for a selfie; Stefanie holds out her cell phone to get the group into frame: “Is everybody in?” she asks. From what we see, they certainly are. ■

