

Toward the FINAL BELL

By KAREN FELDMAN

Photography by
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Shot on location at
Collier County Public Schools, Naples



Kamela Patton has wrapped up her long-time career as superintendent for Collier County Public Schools, but school's not out for this lifelong learner and adventure seeker who has exciting plans ahead

It was a job as a personal assistant to the Bee Gees that lured Kamela Patton to Florida.

She eventually made her way into the field of education, rising to the job of Collier County superintendent of schools, a position she held for nearly 12 years. Patton considers her recent departure from the school system akin to a graduation—much like that of the class of 2023 students who entered first grade in 2011 when she took the job and who will move on this spring. Patton does not call this retirement, however.

"I don't use the word retirement," she says.

"That means you're not doing anything. Like Serena Williams, I'm going to pursue other things."

She said a surprising number of "other things" have presented themselves. Patton understands that interesting opportunities—like the job with the famed Gibbs brothers, which involved extensive travel and led to a lifelong friendship with the singers—present themselves to those open to them.

"It's about not being in too much of a hurry," Patton says. But, she looks forward to helping and supporting other leaders and school dis-

KAMELA PATTON'S MEMORABLE TENURE AS COLLIER COUNTY'S SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS RESULTED IN NUMEROUS VICTORIES, INCLUDING A GRADUATION RATE OF 92.2 PERCENT.

tricts across the nation in some capacity.

She says unequivocally that she also plans to remain in Naples.

"I came for the job, but I'm staying by choice," she says. "It's hard not to fall in love with Naples and Collier [County] and the people. I've made so many lifetime friends here."

Patton's years leading the county's school system included challenges like hurricanes Irma and Ian, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the security concerns prompted by the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland.

"Somebody gets something like this once in their career, but all of that in five years on top of the state of education in America today, and the shortage of teachers," Patton says, that's an immense load for one leader to handle.

Nonetheless, she's racked up a long list of successes.

The one of which she is most proud? The dramatic rise in the county's graduation rate. When she arrived, it was 72.5 percent. Today, that number stands at 92.7 percent.

"We're an economic driver," she says. "We're having more kids graduate so they can go on to technical colleges, go to colleges and universities because they have that fundamental diploma."

She says that is especially impressive when you consider the county's 48,000 students speak 107 languages and, for 54 percent, English is not the first language spoken in these students' homes.

"The improved graduation rate affects people's lives," Patton says. "Especially among our migrant population, it's breaking cycles of generations of poverty. Now the next younger sibling knows that their brother did it and they can do it, too. When we collectively have had that kind of an impact, to me that's phenomenal."

Dave Stump, a lifelong Naples resident who attended school here, became a teacher and eventually a principal at several Naples schools. Just as he planned to retire, Patton



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HERE ARE A FEW OF KAMELA PATTON'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS COLLIER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENT

- ▶ Building the first new high school in 19 years (scheduled to open in August), paying cash for the school, and saving taxpayers \$41 million in interest
- ▶ Establishing a school system set to be debt-free in fewer than five years
- ▶ Ensuring debate, band, chorus, orchestra, and theater opportunities exist in all county middle and high schools
- ▶ Earning the 2021 *Naples Daily News* Outstanding Citizen of the Year honor



talked him into becoming her deputy superintendent for a year. That ultimately became six years.

"It's amazing," Stump notes, "all the things she did," starting off by visiting every school in the county and holding 164 evening events with a wide range of community groups."

"It was a very long year, but she's very good at communicating with people—so upbeat—and I kept telling her and myself it would pay off. And it did," he says.

That tireless pace continued throughout her years as superintendent.

"She doesn't slow down. She has that ability to make connections," Stump says. "She's an excellent leader. You may not always agree with her, but the end results speak for themselves. The school system has made great strides."

Another high point was being named Superintendent of the Year by the Florida Association of District School Superintendents and being one of four finalists for National Superintendent of the Year for AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

"It shines a light on all of the community partners, on all of our outstanding teachers, our great kids, our employers, our parents," she says. "You don't do this alone."

She treasures those victories and experiences she's been fortunate enough to have as a result, including the district's appearance on the *Today* show and other national news outlets, marching in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and in the presidential inaugural parade with Collier County band students, and playing the flute in the Naples Philharmonic Pro-Am Concert alongside professional musicians.

"I got to do a lot of fun things—the first day of school, riding on a school bus, being a crossing guard with the sheriff," Patton says. "Everybody doesn't get to do those things."

What will she miss most?



PATTON LOOKS FORWARD TO MYRIAD EXPERIENCES IN HER NEXT CHAPTER, AMONG THEM PAINTING AND COOKING CLASSES, PICKLEBALL, AND TRAVEL.



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"By far the kids," she says. "You get to directly impact the kids. But also the teachers, the school leadership teams, the district staff, our cabinet. They all make it happen."

Nonetheless, Patton looks forward to enjoying the area, the things that attracted her to Collier County from her previous job in the Miami-Dade school system.

She plans to enjoy some of the attractions and cultural treasures the region boasts but she hasn't gotten her fill of because her schedule was filled with official commitments. Among the to-dos on her list: painting and cooking classes, golf, trying pickleball, fishing, movies, plays, art shows, and events at Artis-Naples.

"The arts in this town are just phenomenal," she says.

She expects to attend events she has been to in a working capacity. "I've served at Empty Bowls and Farm City BBQ but never attended them," she says.

"I love to travel. I love to take pictures. I have 70,000 pictures on my phone, and that doesn't count the zillion old-fashioned ones I'm working on getting digitized. On my tombstone I already know what I want:

'A quality life is made of quality memories.' That's what pictures do. You can't replicate those."

Stump expects his former boss to continue to be adventurous, something he says, "shows she's willing to take a little risk to get great results down the road."

He recalls cautioning her repeatedly to take care of herself when she would head off on adventures that included skydiving, swimming with stingrays, hot-air ballooning, sand surfing in Abu Dhabi, ziplining in Costa Rica, and braving Hemingway Days in Key West.

A huge fan of the British royals, she's attended the Royal Ascot several times and saw Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, and then-Prince Charles. She's wandered the state in an RV seeking out spots from the book *Weird Florida*.

A self-described techie, she loves the latest gadgets and will likely add to those she has in her already well-equipped smart house, which even has lights that change colors on command.

Odds are excellent she will be adding to those photos—and memories—in no time. <<