

FLORIDA'S HEROES RECEPTION



The Governor's Residence
April 26, 2024

FLORIDA'S HEROES



Lieutenant Benjamin Wootson, III

Off-duty Orlando firefighter Lieutenant Ben Wootson witnessed a Seminole County Sheriff's Deputy crash his vehicle into an overpass bridge, causing the car to catch fire. Lieutenant Wootson bravely rescued the officer.



Dr. Sylvia Iriondo

Cuban-American Activist and Miami Real Estate Agent Sylvia Iriondo was born in Havana and fled the island with her family shortly after Castro came to power. Sylvia began helping Cuban refugees in need in Miami and helped establish the organization Mothers and Women Against Repression in Cuba in 1994. Once, while on a humanitarian aid flight near Cuba, her plane was nearly shot down. Sylvia now helps bring awareness about books espousing communist ideas in schools in Florida.



Fernando Safdie, MD

Mount Sinai Medical Center Associate Director of Thoracic Surgery Dr. Fernando Safdie went on a mission trip to Israel to provide emotional, financial, and physical support following the October 7 Hamas attack. Not only did he cook for soldiers and first responders, work with orphaned children, and visit border military bases, but he also helped raise \$1 million in relief funds.



Scott Neil

American Freedom Distillery Co-Founder Scott Neil is a former Green Beret and advisor to Special Forces. His Tampa-based craft distillery honors service members and veterans. Scott was one of the first Green Berets to go into Afghanistan following 9/11 and, in 2003, one of the first to be sent into Iraq. He then returned to Afghanistan as an advisor to General David Petraeus, then spent two years as the Director of Development for the Green Beret Foundation where he developed The Next Ridge Line, a transition program for Green Berets leaving the military.



Adrienne Bunn

Marion County-based athlete Adrienne Bunn made history in 2023 when she won first place in her division in the World IRONMAN Championship in Kona, Hawaii, becoming the youngest person with autism to complete the race. Adrienne also competed in the 2022 Special Olympics USA Games where she medaled. In 2023, she was chosen as the Special Olympics Female Athlete of the Year by the Big 12 Conference.



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Marlynn Stutzman

Pasco County-based athlete Marlynn Stutzman became the first person with autism to complete an IRONMAN and run the Boston Marathon. Marlynn was named a Community Hero by the Tampa Bay Lightning for her achievements. Additionally, she competed in the 2022 Special Olympics USA Games where she medaled.

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Delanie Dennis

Delanie Dennis, an inspiring 11-year-old from Tampa, is proving that small actions can make a massive impact. Since 2019, she has been the driving force behind a lemonade stand that has raised over \$100,000 for local animal rescues in Tampa Bay. Delanie's unwavering dedication to the well-being of furry friends has turned her into a local celebrity as she continues to raise more than \$30,000 for local animal shelters and rescues. Her sunny disposition and relentless goodwill stem from her deep love for animals.



Dr. Orlando Gutiérrez-Boronat

Assembly of the Cuban Resistance member Dr. Orlando Gutiérrez-Boronat was born in Havana in 1965 and moved with his family to the United States in 1971 seeking freedom. In 2005, he launched Radio República, a radio station offering uncensored news and information that transmits every day to Cubans on the island. Orlando has published five books and has spoken around the world about Cuba's struggle for human rights and democracy.

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Captain Chris Wittman



Captain Daniel Andrews

Captains for Clean Water was one of the first organizations to assist Floridians in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. Executive Director Captain Daniel Andrews and Captain Chris Wittman organized Captains for Clean Water to provide boats to transport Floridians to and from Pine Island and brought coolers and ice to those without power. Their assistance in disaster recovery efforts and continued dedication to preserving Florida's fisheries and waterways is truly commendable.

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Marvin "Merv" Mattair

Boyz to Kings President and Founder Marvin "Merv" Mattair has logged thousands of hours mentoring young men within the Madison County area and surrounding counties. He is passionate about mentoring and is an advocate for fatherhood and family development.



Kay Roussos-Ross, MD

Dr. Kay Roussos-Ross and her team have developed the UF Gator MOMitor phone app in partnership with the Florida Department of Health, which allows for daily assessment of risk factors and health conditions such as postpartum depression, hypertension, post-surgical infection, and diabetes. Since its implementation, 2,000 women have been assessed through the app and received medical care as needed.



Synthia Fairman

Guardian ad Litem CHAMPIONS program participant Synthia Fairman is a former Florida foster child who is sharing her experience in the Florida foster care system to better inform child advocacy practices. During Hurricane Ian, her family home was destroyed, yet she volunteered to assist others at an evacuation shelter, starting a food and supply drive and bringing in many donations to the area. Recently, Synthia stayed with a foster care baby at the hospital to make sure someone was always present to advocate for the child.



Zuly Bovbjerg

Timber Creek High School Staffing Specialist Zuly Bovbjerg is dedicated to upholding educational standards in the school district where she works and her children are students. Zuly spoke out when her 14-year-old daughter was assigned to read the book *Shut Up* by Marilyn Reynolds which explicitly depicts graphic imagery. The teacher had been using the book for eight years, but with pressure from Zuly, the school administration eventually made the teacher remove the book from her curriculum.



TJ McCoy, Jr.

Master Care-Givers Founder TJ McCoy started the organization in 2019 after graduating from the University of Florida, where he played football and volunteered for special needs organizations. Master Care-Givers seeks to help every child and adult with special needs find his or her inner athlete by providing recreational programs such as open gym sessions and adaptive sports classes.



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Julie Gebhards

Hillsborough County mom of six Julie Gebhards is a passionate advocate for making sure books in school libraries are age-appropriate for students. She has attended dozens of school board meetings to stand up for the protection of Florida students and showcase inappropriate materials.



Kasie Windfelder

Navarre High School Principal Kasie Windfelder designed a choral class for students with special needs and programs including a Teacher Academy. She also created an engineering pathway for students, began a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program, and established the Extra Degree Award. Principal Windfelder was named the Florida Innovative Principal of the Year and was a finalist for the 2023 Florida Principal of the Year.



Nichole Venegas



Just Help Out Foundation Founder Nichole Venegas is committed to defending the rights of the vulnerable. The tragic loss of her only sibling, Joey, to suicide fueled Nichole's determination to create a compassionate resource for those experiencing hopelessness, leading to the establishment of The Just Help Out Foundation. She is a mental health professional, devoted wife to a Tampa firefighter, and loving mother to two wonderful boys.



Sergeant Dave Musgrove

Charlotte County Sheriff's Deputy Dave Musgrove responded to a crash between a motorcycle and a passenger vehicle. The driver of the car pleaded with Sergeant Musgrove to save her children in the back seat, one of whom was an infant who was unconscious. Sergeant Musgrove, along with the help of civilians, extracted the baby from the wreck and began chest compressions until the baby started breathing again, saving the infant's life.



Jeremy Horn



Florida Department of Law Enforcement Special Agent Jeremy Horn serves on the Pensacola Cyber Squad and relentlessly pursues those who prey on children online. Special Agent Horn has arrested numerous individuals on state and federal charges for various criminal violations related to Internet Crimes Against Children, including one case involving an individual who was extradited back to the United States from Nigeria.

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Aleta Jefferson

As a Colonel in the United States Air Force Aleta Jefferson served three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan where she oversaw the care of soldiers injured in battle. Aleta has also served as a nurse at several domestic military hospitals while fighting and winning a battle against cancer and raising a family alongside her husband, who was also in the United States Air Force. Now retired from the military, she continues to serve her fellow Floridians in the medical field and through volunteering.



Wynne McFarlin

Special Olympics Florida Triathlon Program Competition Director Wynne McFarlin was the driving force behind the launch of the program in Central Florida in 2017. She continues to guide the program, ensuring athletes have the necessary training and the opportunity to compete in races throughout the region. She also tirelessly promotes the sport to Special Olympics Florida athletes in other parts of the state, develops programs in their areas, and identifies community partners who support with in-kind donations for items such as uniforms and race entries.



Crystal and Kathleen Horrocks



While enjoying a day at the pool, Crystal Horrocks' daughter Kathleen told her mother that a fellow swimmer had struggled to swim and had not come up for air. Diving into the water, Crystal pulled the 33-year-old man from the bottom of the pool and began CPR to revive him. Thanks to both of their vigilance and persistence, the man survived.



Detective Paul Osborn and K9 JonJon

Tallahassee Police Department Detective Paul Osborn and K9 Jon Jon responded to a call from the Franklin County Sheriff's Office about a missing four-year-old child with autism. They located the child a quarter of a mile into swampy woods standing knee-deep in water. Detective Osborn and K9 Jon Jon were recognized and awarded by FDLE during the 2023 Florida's Missing Children's Day remembrance ceremony.



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Sloan Holloman



Foster parent Sloan Holloman has been fostering and adopting vulnerable youth for two decades, including the adoption of four medically complex children. Now that her children are mostly grown, Sloan's home is again open for medically complex foster children including a 2-week old and 3-week old who were in need of intensive care due to being exposed to in utero substances, as well as a 2-month old that required 24-hour close monitoring and treatments due to multiple intensive health diagnoses. She cares deeply for the families of children in her care and is thrilled when she sees a parent engaged in learning how to take care of his or her child's medical needs.



Lieutenant Michael Bellflower

DeSoto County Sheriff's Office Lieutenant Michael Bellflower was driving to work when he saw an erratically driving tractor trailer. When he pulled up alongside, he saw that the driver was clearly experiencing a medical emergency. Lieutenant Bellflower jumped onto the moving semi truck, held onto the side mirror with one hand, and broke the window to gain access to the locked cab. Lieutenant Bellflower brought the truck to a stop before it crossed into oncoming traffic and called EMS to assist the driver, saving countless lives.



Detective Janine Knight



Holmes Correctional Institution Detective Janine Knight witnessed two visitors dropping contraband packages near the facility's entrance. She immediately notified the Sheriff's Office, and the packages were seized due to her prompt response. One of these packages contained 53 grams of fentanyl, equivalent to nearly 26,500 lethal doses of this dangerous drug, along with other narcotics. Her actions saved the lives of those who may have been poisoned by these drugs.



Angela Holloman

For over two decades, Angela has been an extraordinary medical foster care parent, adopting two of the children placed in her care and treating them all as her own. A poignant example of her dedication is seen in her work with an infant who, despite initial predictions from a cerebral palsy diagnosis, now walks with assistance and is learning to talk.



Lauree Simmons



Lauree Simmons is the president and founder of Big Dog Ranch Rescue, the largest no-kill animal shelter in the United States. Through Big Dog Ranch Rescue, she has spearheaded multiple missions to the Texas border to rescue, feed, and care for dogs abandoned by illegal immigrants.

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Christina Martin



Chris Martin

Gunner Martin Foundation Co-Founders Christina and Chris Martin started their organization after the tragic drowning of their son Gunner to provide education to families about non-swim-time drowning and to provide barriers for protection. The foundation partners with agencies in Seminole County to provide door alarms, education on water safety, and funding for swim lessons for children from families in financial need. The Martins are very active with the Central Florida Water Safety Task Force, and Chris now serves as a Seminole County firefighter to help others and give back to the community.



Charlie Lott

Florida Capitol Building janitor Charlie Lott has dedicated the past four decades to keeping the state's seat of government clean and well-maintained, and in the process he has forged personal connections with numerous governors and legislators who have walked its halls. Despite suffering a traumatic brain injury over 30 years ago which left him legally blind and unable to drive, Charlie has shown unparalleled dedication and walks to work every single day. His unforgettable laugh and good humor have been a constant source of positivity and kindness in the Capitol.



Bailey Hughes



The Hands and Feet Executive Director and Co-Founder Bailey Hughes is a former foster mom who has fostered over 23 children in five years and adopted 4 of those children. She created the organization as an immediate resource for foster families, relative and non-relative caregivers, biological parents, aged-out youth, and children entering or at-risk of out-of-home care. Her organization delivers tangible necessities directly to the doorstep of those in need within 48 hours.



Officer Kelsey Dalton

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Officer Kelsey Dalton saved a man from a submerged vehicle in Sarasota County. While on patrol near the Albee Bridge, Officer Dalton was alerted by a bystander about a car in the water below. Together they swam out to the vehicle in turbulent conditions, smashed the windows of the sinking car, and rescued the occupant. Officer Dalton sustained abrasions and lacerations from the broken glass, but she and the driver of the vehicle have made full recoveries.



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Zayn Ahmed

Emergency Medical Technician and Hope Navigator Zayn Ahmed was off-duty when he witnessed a vehicle crash into a tree. Zayn quickly jumped into action, assisting responding law enforcement officers with CPR and utilizing their AED to provide further treatment until EMS arrived on scene.



Jeanne Albaugh

Founder of Showering Love Jeanne Albaugh works to ensure the homeless have a way to shower and wash their clothes through her organization's tractor-trailer equipped with a food pantry, washing machines, and showers. Jeanne experienced homelessness firsthand, which led her to appreciate the need for hygiene services for those without a home, and since returning to self-sufficiency she has found a renewed sense of purpose by offering a solution to this problem for others.



Officer Jonathan Thomas

Washington County Sheriff's Office K-9 Officer Jonathan Thomas and his K-9 Hannibal reunited a nine-year-old boy with his family after he had wandered off during a hike through the forest with his father. Hannibal is two years old and recently arrived at the Washington County Sheriff's Office. Hannibal's training in tracking, in addition to narcotics and apprehension, allowed Officer Thomas to locate the missing child and save the day.



Nicholas Boutwell

Florida Department of Law Enforcement Inspector Nicholas Boutwell and his colleague were alerted about a Florida Highway Patrol traffic stop that resulted in the arrest of a previously deported foreign national who was using a false identification. Their investigation revealed the subject was a member of a Mexican drug cartel and conspired with others in the smuggling of undocumented aliens and drugs into the United States via the southwest border. Two federal indictments have been secured thus far. Additional indictments are anticipated.



Sergeant Lionel Conyers

Clewiston Police Department officer Lionel Conyers responded to the scene of a would-be murder-suicide where an ex-boyfriend was holding hostage at gunpoint his ex-girlfriend, her mother, and a baby. Without hesitation, Sergeant Conyers entered the residence and demanded that the man drop his weapon. He complied and was arrested by Sergeant Conyers, whose heroic action and quick thinking undoubtedly saved three innocent lives.



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Stuart Dame

Florida Department of Law Enforcement Special Agent Trainee Stuart Dame volunteered to deploy to the Florida Keys for Operation Vigilant Sentry and three deployments to Texas for Operation Lone Star. Stuart is a senior master sergeant in the U.S. Air Force Reserves and serves as an associate pastor with his local church in Pensacola.



Tammy Romanczuk

Bit of Faith Ranch Founder Tammy Romanczuk decided to serve children and adults with disabilities through equine therapy after she saw the impact it had on her non-verbal son with autism, who after riding horses on their property began to speak. Today, Bit of Faith offers adaptive horse riding and grooming sessions for individuals impacted by autism and related disabilities. Through building a skillset, bonding with the horses, and being around peers and mentors, Tammy's goal is that participants will experience joy and a sense of belonging.



Debra Harris

The Making Miracles Group Founder Debra Harris entered the foster care system with her four siblings at the age of eight years old. Following early struggles, she went to school to be a medical assistant, got a job at her local hospital, and then became a foster parent herself. Her organization helps moms and their children get on their feet. She also works with a women's pregnancy center which is in the process of opening a second location.



Ginger Faulk

Ginger Faulk, a single mother of two, sought out support from Hope Florida to accomplish her dream of becoming a physical therapy assistant. While Ginger had not finished high school nor obtained a GED, she worked with a Hope Navigator to obtain short-term rental and utility assistance from a local nonprofit which allowed her to focus on educational achievement. Encouraged by her Hope Navigator, Ginger passed her GED exam, enrolled in a CareerSource healthcare training program, and graduated college. Ginger ultimately achieved her goal of becoming a licensed physical therapy assistant to support her family.



Inspector Carlton Milton Inspector Christopher Register

Florida Department of Corrections Inspectors Carlton Milton and Christopher Register witnessed a toddler who was running in and out of heavy traffic on State Route 121. They acted swiftly to save the child's life.

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Wilma David

Ninety-six-year-old resident of Penney Farms, Florida, Wilma David is an unwavering advocate, counselor, and educator dedicated to aging, Alzheimer's, and related dementias awareness. For over four decades, Wilma has led caregiver support groups and generously volunteers her time with residents at the assisted living facility on Penney Farms' campus.



Amy Derick, MD

University of Miami Miller School of Medicine benefactors Amy and Michael Derick have provided the funding to establish The Dr. Amy and Mr. Michael Derick Endowed Speaker Series in the Miller School's renowned Dr. Phillip Frost Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery. The annual series will feature experts who will focus on business and health care advocacy in the field of dermatology.



Dawn Witherspoon



For Paul Foundation Founder Dawn Witherspoon established the organization in honor of her husband, 36-year-old Critical Care Flight Paramedic Paul Besaw, who was killed in the line of duty on June 1, 2017. During Paul's 18 years in EMS, he not only saved lives and administered emergency medical services, but he also made a difference through teaching and training. The foundation offers scholarships for individuals wishing to become EMTs, paramedics, or firefighters and supports families that have suffered from losing a loved one in the line of duty.



David Stevens

Fire Union 3856 President David Stevens fights for the safety and well-being of the men and women in his fire department, working to acquire safer uniforms, mending relationships to encourage collaboration with surrounding fire departments, and engaging with the County Commission to expand mental health resources for his team and their families. David also works with state legislators to advocate for resources for those with long-term illnesses caused by exposure in the line of duty.



Kennedy Armstrong



Jacksonville local hero Kennedy Armstrong arrived at Chubby's Wings and saw a girl being stabbed outside the restaurant. He dove into action and saved the girl by knocking the assailant off of her, suffering a laceration on his arm that required surgery. Thanks to his heroism, an innocent teenage girl is alive today.

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Joe Taylor

Franklin's Promise Executive Director Joe Taylor coordinated assistance to many communities in Apalachicola, St. George Island, Port St. Joe, and Mexico Beach during Hurricane Michael. He assisted over 30 homeowners whose homes were destroyed by fire earlier in the year, tirelessly making sure they were fed, clothed, showered, and laughing. Joe is a true steward of the community and teaches youth and young adults by example.



Rusty Burke

Fernandina Beach Fire Department Engineer Rusty Burke is a 10-year veteran of the department. He has mentored many young firefighters, volunteers for many events that benefit local non-profit organizations, and organizes beach cleanups that benefit the community as a whole. Last year, Rusty was recognized for his bravery when he responded to a distress call involving a truck fully engulfed in fire with a man trapped inside. Engineer Burke bravely approached the vehicle, found the driver, and with the assistance of other firefighters managed to extinguish the fire and rescue the occupant.



Miami-Dade Police Officers Emanuel Walton III, Junior Clervil, Julian Reyes, Michael Montesino, and Edward Webster saved a three-year-old boy who was trapped in a sinking car that was driven into a canal. Officer Walton dove into the water and pulled the unconscious boy out of the vehicle and Officer Clervil began CPR, giving the young boy another chance at life.



Detective Junior Clervil



Officer Michael Montesino



Officer Emanuel Walton III



Officer Julian Reyes



Sergeant Edward Webster

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Deployed from Florida under Governor DeSantis' executive order to assist with Biden's Border Crisis, a team of Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Officers were conducting a water patrol along the U.S. southern border on the Rio Grande during Operation Lone Star when they observed approximately 200 men, women, and children trying to cross the river under perilous conditions. Faced with the swift current, deep water, and congestion, the officers saved multiple individuals from drowning, one of whom was a 4-year-old child.



Investigator Jon Arnold



Investigator John Booth



Officer Alexander Bruder



Officer Brandon Catalano



Captain Jose Escabi



Officer Benjamin Norbrothen



Lieutenant Anthony Padilla



Officer Shelby Sellers



Investigator Rebecca Teems



Officer Emily Whitty



Officer Robert Dziewiatkowski

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Scott VanDuzer



VanDuzer Foundation Founder Scott VanDuzer is a lifelong pizza maker whose organization hosts pizza parties to benefit local individuals and families facing difficulties because of a tragedy or critical health issue or other unforeseen circumstances. At each of these benefits, 100 percent of all sales are donated to the family for whom the event was designed to assist. Through its events, the foundation has donated 7,500 pints of blood, 1.5 million pounds of food, and thousands of dollars to benefit those in need.

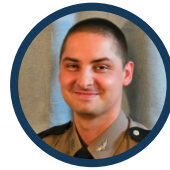


Graci McGillicuddy

The All Star Children's Foundation Chairwoman and Co-Founder Graci McGillicuddy has been a committed child advocate since 1986 when she read an article about a 20-month-old baby who died from parental abuse. Ending child abuse became Graci's life's calling, and in 2009 she spearheaded the Child Protection Center's \$6 million-dollar capital campaign to build a state-of-the-art Child Advocacy Center. She was also instrumental in building The All Star Children's Foundation's Trauma-Informed Campus of Hope and Healing, which is the culmination of her three decades of incredible advocacy.



Trooper Jeffery Scott Ryan



Trooper Josh Allen

Florida Highway Patrol Troopers Jeffery Ryan and Josh Allen were deployed to Eagle Pass, Texas, to help secure the southern border when they saw a mother and two young girls walking down the banks of the Rio Grande River toward their location. One of the children was seven years old and in medical distress, limp, pale, and unresponsive. Thanks to Trooper Ryan and Trooper Allen's efforts, the small child was rushed to the hospital where she was treated for heatstroke.



William Clay Sorrell



Brice Williamson

Duck hunters Clay Sorrell and Brice Williamson headed out on an early morning duck hunt when they were approached by a man whose friends were stranded in the Apalachicola River after their boat turned over. Despite the rough water and near freezing temperatures, Williamson and Sorrell acted quickly to rescue the two men, anchor their boat, and salvage the men's belongings that had fallen into the water.

