Understanding Gov. Desantis's Anti-Protest Bill

BY BRYAN ELLIS, PSL
MANATEE/SARASOTA

Governor Ron Desantis is pushing a bill in Tallahassee that would crack down on free speech and Black Lives Matter protesters. One provision would even make it easier for people to run over protesters with their vehicles.

Here are a few things the bill would do—Make blocking traffic a felony; Prosecute groups that organize or fund so-called “disorderly” protests; Penalize cities that seek to reduce excessive police budgets; Eliminate the right to bail for protesters; Create a 6-month mandatory minimum jail sentence for some protesters and new, harsher sentences for others; Terminate public benefits for protesters and make them ineligible for employment by state and local government; Allow drivers who fear for their safety to cause death or injury to protesters with their vehicles.

In other words, the law would make protesting too risky for most Floridians, and severely harm the lives of many who continue to protest.

A statewide coalition of groups is organizing against the bill. Everyone should join the movement against this bill. We'll be educating the public, pressuring legislators in meetings and committees, and protesting.

But most importantly, we need to understand that the issue at hand is far bigger than Desantis or this bill. There will always be another DeSantis or anti-democracy law, until we get to the root of the matter. The real issue has been raging for over a century—it's the battle between socialism and a decaying understanding of Gov. Desantis's Anti-Protest Bill.

NCF’s Black History Month Going Vir(tu)al

BY BECCA HADWEN

Last March, the COVID-19 pandemic sent us into lockdown before I finished writing thank-you cards to everyone who pitched in for the Black History Month programming at the New College of Florida. Over nine months later, I’m in Zoom meetings with the planning committee, and we’re preparing exclusively virtual programming. In response to the pandemic, event planners have either cancelled or gotten creative. The Black History Month planning committee, we’ve chosen the latter.

On Friday, February 5th, the Sur La Bay Music Festival will bring artist performances and workshops into your living room. Our usual Black Literature Read-In will become a listen-in that floats to you over WSLR’s airwaves. Critical Times Intern and New College student Danielle Campbell is working on a segment on Black music, literature, poetry, and businesses. Professor Hugo Viera-Vargas will discuss Latin American music shaped by the African diaspora.

This year’s symposium will center on the theme “Black Lives Still Matter!” To honor the realities of screen fatigue, we will space the events out over two days. As always, our symposium will connect artists, academics, and activists for deep conversation. The symposium will feature a Continuing on pg. 10

Covid Testing

State–Run Testing Sites Open Every Day

Drive-Thru Testing available
Sarasota Kennel Club
5600 Bradenton Road
Open 9am–5pm

Walk-Up Testing available
Robert L. Taylor Community Complex
1845 34th St
Open 8am – 4pm

Testing also available at
Bradenton Area Convention Center
1 Haben Boulevard
Palmetto, FL 34221
Open 8am – 4pm

Mobile App Available
The Healthy Together app offers test results directly through the app for any Florida resident who takes a COVID-19 test from any State provider. If the test is positive, the app offers a self-serve contact tracing interview, which includes questions about your exposure history. Also, the app provides real-time public health announcements, serving as a notification center for state-wide updates and alerts from Florida Public Health, including SMS alerts and automated notifications. Available for Apple or Android phones.

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Janaka Lewis

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The Party for Socialism and Liberation has been instrumental in organizing protests for Racial Justice.
Celery Fields Microforest

BY GENE JONES, FLORIDA VETERANS FOR COMMON SENSE

Florida Veterans for Common Sense Fund Inc. (FLVCS FUND) in cooperation with the Rotary Club of Sarasota Bay, Solutions to Avoid Red Tide (START), and Sarasota County’s Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team (NEST), have worked together to plant a demonstration microforest at the Celery Fields, a popular ecological site and recreational amenity in Sarasota County.

Japanese Botanist Akira Miyawaki pioneered the technique to grow a microforest in 20-30 years that can have the attributes of a forest 200-300 years old. Using the Miyawaki technique, native species are planted close together to compete for sunlight so they grow upward instead of sideways. As a result, the forest grows denser and as much as ten times faster. As a bonus, in three short years the microforest should be nearly maintenance-free.

The team worked with the Serenoa Chapter of the Florida Native Plant Society and the Sarasota Audubon Society to find the best mix of native plants for an approximately 1/3-acre footprint chosen for the microforest. The team planted more than fifteen tree and shrub species including canopy trees such as bald cypress and live oak and understory species such as Dahoon Holly and Sugar Berry. In addition, the team added a ground layer of native shrubs and plants like coontie and beauty berry.

The site chosen for the forest was an open field covered with grass. In order to suppress the grass, provide nutrients for the forest’s fast growth, and store moisture in the soil, volunteers covered the site with a layer of cardboard and covered that material with wood chips.

The benefits from the microforest concept are so apparent that the team envisions many more will be apparent that the team envisions many more will be

The ecological benefits of the microforest are numerous. A primary consequence will be an increase in biodiversity. Much of the Celery Fields is currently open grassland and pond habitat. While the Celery Fields is already a birding hotspot, the microforest will make it better. It will introduce a forest habitat that is missing from the Celery Fields; this increase in biodiversity will attract more species of birds, particularly migratory songbirds, as well as other animals. The diverse tree and plant species will provide food and shelter for creatures like butterflies, amphibians, and mammals.

A tremendous benefit of the project is outstanding community cooperation. Michael Saunders Foundation, The Rotary Club of Sarasota Bay Foundation, Florida Veterans for Common Sense Inc., START and several private individuals provided funding. Several different businesses donated material and expertise. The Serenoa Chapter, Native Plant Society and Sarasota Audubon provided technical expertise and logistical support. And most importantly, the project succeeded due to the hard work of many volunteers and their efforts are ongoing.

The primary goal for the forest is to sequester carbon to combat climate change as the microforest will be an effective carbon sink. Forest ecologists estimate that plants and soil in a natural forest can store 40 times more carbon than a monoculture forest. The team estimates that the Celery Fields microforest will sequester approximately 600 tons of carbon in 30 years. Another major benefit will be to intercept and filter rainwater that would otherwise leave the site to transport pollutants that foster red tide and, during intense rain events, cause downstream flooding. It’s estimated that over 3,865,000 gallons of water will be intercepted and over 850,000 gallons of runoff will be avoided in 30 years.

The forest will provide many other benefits as well. An immediate consequence will be an increase in biodiversity. Much of the Celery Fields is currently open grassland and pond habitat. While the Celery Fields is already a birding hotspot, the microforest will make it better. It will introduce a forest habitat that is missing from the Celery Fields; this increase in biodiversity will attract more species of birds, particularly migratory songbirds, as well as other animals. The diverse tree and plant species will provide food and shelter for creatures like butterflies, amphibians, and mammals.

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WSLR+Fogartyville is a center for creative expression and community engagement that amplifies the voices of our diverse community and promotes peace, sustainability, democracy and economic and social justice.

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As the state enters its 2021 legislative session, a unique challenge will present itself: how to balance normal business while continuing to guard against COVID-19. The issues of the session--pace of the economy, climate change, and sea level rise—are all realities of the present crisis.

The state has placed on the economy by emergency ordinance. The state will be looking for ways to plug the budget hole created by COVID-19 cases and deaths in Florida. Both chambers are scheduled to speak before the committee at least two days House members will be in Tallahassee. People who are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19, who are in quarantine or who were recently COVID-19 testing. Both Sprowls and Simpson are requiring legislators to undergo COVID-19 testing. The willingness of the Speaker and President to address environmental issues like sea level rise may be higher than of GOP leaders in the past, but it remains to be seen how, and to what extent, these will be addressed. New coastal building codes, insurance requirements and coastal protection measures could all be a part of a comprehensive plan discussed in the 2021 legislative session.

Covid Protocols for the Legislature

New legislative protocols, which come as COVID-19 cases and deaths in Florida continue to climb, will encourage lawmakers to limit face-to-face interactions with the public during the 2021 Legislative Session. In December state legislators released contrasting COVID-19 protocols for upcoming committee meetings. Under Senate President Wilton Simpson’s plan, the members of the public will have to watch and testify remotely from a civic center a few blocks from the Florida Capitol, unless they are invited to the meetings by committee chairmen. In the House, Speaker Chris Sprowls put in place a “first-come, first-served basis,” Sprowls added. The House will use an online registration system for people who want to provide “substantive testimony” and for the press. Seating in committee rooms will be available on a “first-come, first-served basis.”

In December, Manatee County Commissioners voted to make dealing with the contaminated water threat at Piney Point their number one legislative priority with the state legislature for 2021. The issue, which has consistently been described as a ticking time bomb, involves hundreds of millions of gallons of remaining toxic process water in two ponds, along with the gypsum stacks, which are surrounded by two unintentional pools of high-chloride seawater, and a large seepage collection ditch where spoiled water from the saturated gypsum stacks can be corralled as it slowly leaks.

The state has pushed deep-well injection as a solution. He added that his preference was for any future state of emergency orders. The willingness of the Speaker and President to address environmental issues like sea level rise may be higher than of GOP leaders in the past, but it remains to be seen how, and to what extent, these will be addressed. New coastal building codes, insurance requirements and coastal protection measures could all be a part of a comprehensive plan discussed in the 2021 legislative session.

Climate Change, Land Conservation, and Sea Level Rise: The willingness of the Speaker and President to address environmental issues like sea level rise may be higher than of GOP leaders in the past, but it remains to be seen how, and to what extent, these will be addressed. New coastal building codes, insurance requirements and coastal protection measures could all be a part of a comprehensive plan discussed in the 2021 legislative session.
MAKING CITIZEN-LED INITIATIVES MORE DIFFICULT?

After soundly rejecting a proposed amendment requiring ballot measures be adopted twice to be encoded into the Florida Constitution last month, voters may be asked again to make it more difficult for citizen-led initiatives to be successful.

Rep. Rick Roth, R-West Palm Beach, has filed a joint resolution that asks voters to approve an amendment requiring proposed amendments be adopted by a 66.67% majority instead of the 60% margin that’s been required since 2006. Roth’s House Joint Resolution 61 is similar to his 2018 proposal, which was withdrawn before its first committee hearing, and indicates Florida’s Republican-controlled Legislature will continue its attempt to make the state’s constitution more difficult to change during the 2021 legislative session.

**Florida League of Cities 2021 Priorities:**

- **THE UNITED VOICE FOR FLORIDA’S MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS FOR MORE THAN 90 YEARS,**
  
  - Support automatic voter registration (opt-out system), same-day voter registration, improve online voter registration, and make vote-by-mail a permanent status.
  - Extend deadlines for signature cures and recounts, and allow 10 days for postmark delays.
  - Support home rule for counties and municipalities and oppose any preemption legislation to counter home rule.
  - Continue to support voting rights restoration (includes efforts surrounding 2018’s Amendment 4).
  
  **Natural Resources**
  
  - Support FULL funding of the *Florida Forever Amendment* to protect and monitor our drinking water, prevent saltwater intrusion and work on Everglades Restoration.
  - Support a statewide ban on fracking.
  - Financially support lower income and minority communities who are disproportionately impacted by proximity to industrial pollution and poor air quality.
  - Support legislation that would promote the use of solar, wind power and electric vehicles.

**Florida League of Women Voters 2021 Legislative Priorities**

- **Government - Election Law**
  
  1. Support expansion of Medicaid to all poor working families, to augment operational expenses associated with Covid 19.
  2. Oppose any public dollars for private school vouchers.
  3. Oppose any effort to arm teachers, or anyone who is not a law enforcement officer.

**1000 FRIENDS OF FLORIDA’S 2021 Priorities:**

- ✓ Restore citizens’ planning rights while preventing frivolous lawsuits
- ✓ Protect Florida’s environment, agricultural lands, budget and Metropolitan Planning Organization transportation priorities from the M-CORES toll road proposal
- ✓ Expand the supply of workforce housing
- ✓ Enact stronger measures to protect Florida natural lands, waterways and drinking water
- ✓ Uphold the authority of local governments and their citizens to make local decisions
- ✓ Oppose efforts to saddle taxpayers and local governments with the costs of growth

**Florida Forever Amendment**

A controversial proposal to allow guns to be carried on public college and university campuses in Florida is back. The measure has failed several times in the past but sponsor Rep. Anthony Sabatini (R-Clermont) believes it’ll have a shot this year since Republicans gained seats in the Florida legislature. Florida is one of 16 states that doesn’t allow guns to be carried on the campuses of its public colleges and universities. One of the proposals’ biggest opponents has been Florida State University President John Thrasher. The former state Senator, House Speaker, and GOP Chairman doubled-down on his stance against allowing guns on campus during his State of the University address.

“I want to make the pledge to you one more time that I’ve made every year. That I will continue to fight any kind of campus carry legislation,” said Thrasher.

“We’ve all experienced enough heartache to know that more guns on campus do not make us safer.” During Thrasher’s tenure as President, the campus has had several run-ins with gun violence. In 2014 an FSU grad and attorney shot and wounded three people at Strozier Library, and in 2018 a faculty member and student were killed in a shooting at a local yoga studio.
**HOW TO CONTACT YOUR REPRESENTATIVES**

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<th>NAME</th>
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**Things to Watch**

1. **The budget**
   Florida’s tourism-dependent budget survived the pandemic’s first nine months thanks to a $5.8 billion federal relief package – 6.2% of the current $93 billion spending plan. Although the economy has rebounded somewhat, tax collection was $2 billion less than what was expected before the coronavirus first began to spread in Florida in March, possibly foreshadowing Great Recession-like spending reductions going forward.

2. **Republicans are emboldened**
   Florida Republicans see the election as an endorsement of their policies and governing style. Despite coronavirus angst and record-breaking unemployment, they won the state on election day.

3. **The coronavirus**
   The House created the Pandemics & Public Emergencies Committee, to be chaired by state Rep. Tom Leek, R-Ormond Beach, to explore issues related to COVID-19 and to plan for future emergencies.

4. **The $15 minimum wage implementing bill**
   Voters threw politicians a curveball by approving a constitutional amendment that eventually creates a $15 minimum wage. Now, lawmakers have to write a law to schedule a series of increases to raise the minimum from the current $8.65 per hour to $15 by September 2026. The amendment should be self-executing, with little the legislature can do to muck it up – but that’s what they said about Amendment 4 in 2018 too.
If the conclusion of the 2020 presidential race has shown us anything, it’s that people are engaged as never before. Racial justice, public policy and COVID-19 have brought Americans seeking reform and change into the streets and online. Protest, however, is not new. To start out the new year, WSLR will screen the award-winning documentary *WBCN and The American Revolution*. It is part of a nationwide campaign to promote and support community radio.

The documentary shares the untold story of the underground radio station WBCN, set against the profound social, political, and cultural changes that took place in Boston and nationally during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The burgeoning music and countercultural scenes, militant anti-war activism, civil rights struggles, and the emerging women’s and LGBTQIA movements are all part of WBCN and its heyday. As we experience social and political tensions bubbling today, how subcultures and ideas pollinate others and spark growth has many common bonds from this period. The film demonstrates how an underground rock radio station built a powerful community with its listeners and helped redirect the course of American history during the tumultuous times.

The film will be available to screen from – January 16-26 for a $10 rental fee. If you screen the film, you will be invited to attend a free online discussion with film director Bill Lichtenstein and WSLR founders Arlene Sweeting and David Beaton on Tuesday, January 26 at 7pm. Visit [www.WSLR.org](http://www.wslr.org) for full details.

### Live & Virtual Concert Series

**Starts in February**

The Bridge Jazz Concert series is a collaborative project with the Jazz Club of Sarasota & WSLR+Fogartyville to bridge the void of excellent jazz performances created by the pandemic. Our goal is to provide an opportunity for local jazz artists to PLAY and reconnect with their audiences while we stay connected to our Jazz Club and WSLR+Fogartyville communities.

- **Thursday February 11**
  - ARIELLE
  - THE JOHNNIE BARKER PROJECT
- **Thursday March 11**
  - HOT CLUB SRQ
  - JEFF SACK DUO
- **Thursday April 15**
  - MICHAEL ROSS TRIO w/FRED JOHNSON
  - SYNIA CARROLL
- **Thursday May 20**
  - GUMBI ORTIZ & NEW GROOVE CITY
  - TBD

**Tickets Available Soon**

This four evening series will feature 2 sets of incredible music each show starting in February, running through May. This live-streamed event will also allow for a very limited live audience to allow for safe and responsible social distancing. Tickets can be purchased for individual nights or the entire series with discounts for Jazz Club and Fogartyville members.

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7pm **Tuesday, January 26**

**RADIO & SOCIAL CHANGE**

The incredible true story of how a radio station, politics, and rock and roll changed everything.

8pm **Saturday, March 6**

The epitome of the singing, songwriting, storytelling bluesman troubadour.
January Radio Schedule Changes

The Radio Program Committee and the Management Team of WSLR-Fogartyville are grateful for the feedback that we receive from our community of listeners. This feedback guides our decisions for the Radio Program Schedule, and we have some changes in the New Year. Democracy Now!, one of the leading U.S.-based independent daily news broadcasts, is moving to 10am, Monday through Friday, shifting our World Music Programs to air from 11am to 1pm. Thom Hartmann’s live hour remains at 1pm, weekdays. If you’re looking for Ishmael Katz’ Eclectivity, it’s moved to alternating Wednesday evenings, 7-9pm.

It’s a difficult time to bring new programmers into the studio, but two new programmers will join us with pre-recorded shows. Paul Junior will bring us Soul Kitchen - a unique blend of rhythm & blues, funk, fusion, and soul music that celebrates the extraordinary African American contribution to our culture - alternating Saturdays, 9-11pm, and Ruth Beltran will host The Ruthless Truth - a show about social issues affecting disenfranchised communities with emphasis on how we can engage and work to transform our communities and society into the world we desire - alternating Saturdays, 9-10am.

We welcome back Beth Hammer with Velvet Hammer Blues, Sundays, 3-5pm, and as we look forward to the return of Dirty Ice Cream Truck and Open A.L.R. on Friday evenings, we’ll keep Dark Side of the Tune followed by And You Don’t Stop in the line up. While we wait to find a local programmer, HipRap Nation - featuring an eclectic soundtrack of Alternative, Electronic, Dance, Neo Soul, and Rap music from around the world - will fill in on Tuesdays, 7-9am.

You can listen to these shows + more on the radio, online, ask your smart assistant, through our apps, and our archive, with more information about all of our shows available at www.WSLR.org
What To Do With All Our Plastic ....

BY CAT DILLARD AND JANA HOEFLING

On the Federal level, the Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act (H.R. 5845 & S. 3263) is based on proposed legislation and existing statutes from various states combined for the first time to create a comprehensive bill to address plastic pollution and packaging waste in the United States. Introduced in 2020 by Senator Tom Udall from New Mexico and Representative Alan Lowenthal of California, the bill phases out unnecessary single-use plastic products, requires producers of packaging, containers and food service products to design, manage and finance waste and recycling programs (known as EPR – Extended Producer Responsibility), sets up a nationwide beverage container refund program, requires post-consumer recycled content in new products, requires accurate labels for recycling and composting, prohibits the export of plastic waste to developing countries, and pauses the build-out of new plastic producing facilities until regulations are updated. Currently stuck in committee, it’s unlikely that this bill will pass in this session but hope remains that it will be re-introduced in the 117th Congress, which assembles in 2021. For now, the sponsoring members have submitted the detailed and proposed language to each state, urging them to consider its contents at the state level. But... what are we to do when 17 of our 50 states have some sort of pre-emption on the regulation of single-use plastic and polystyrene within its own towns and cities?

No matter how you look at it, we are in the middle of a plastic crisis – soon to be accelerated. Many of us have heard the projections – “There will be more plastic in the ocean than fish, by 2050”. That was last year. Now that oil and natural gas prices are so low and the abundance (especially of the latter) are plenty, there is money to be made and that means production of plastic is easy, cost effective and the demand is overwhelming. The recent and ongoing construction of the Shell plant in Pennsylvania is only one of more than a dozen plants that are being built or have been proposed around the world by petrochemical companies like Exxon Mobil and Dow. The addition of new plants in many Ohio and West Virginia and on the Gulf Coast. After decades of seeing American industrial jobs head overseas, this is a problem with developing countries.

And the obvious problem of detrimental emissions and faulty pollution control if not properly operated and regulated. This is a problem with developing countries who do not have the environmental laws or strict enforcement. What about incineration, gasification and pyrolysis? We ask? These technologies have been around for some time, mostly currently in Europe, which currently burns almost 42 percent of its waste. The US burns about 12.5 percent. Burning waste and converting it to energy seems like a perfect solution but is costly to set up and operate, and comes with the obvious problem of detrimental emissions and faulty pollution control if not properly operated and regulated. This is a problem with developing countries who do not have the environmental laws or strict enforcement, and may try to save money by skirting the hurdles that attempt to make these processes safe.

To avoid a massive build-up of plastic in the environment, coordinated global action is urgently needed to reduce plastic consumption, increase rates of reuse, waste collection, and recycling, expand safe disposal systems and accelerate innovation in the plastic value chain. Other than personal accountability by refusing to engage with single-use plastic on a daily level and with your purchasing power, it is difficult to hold one’s own against those that continue to produce this substance for the sole object of monetary enrichment. It is essential that we continue the fight against single-use plastics personally, in our outreach to others by example and suggestion, and to continue to educate ourselves and to let those that lead this country know how important this problem and finding a solution is, to their constituents.

All resources and more for this article can be found on the Resources tab at www.rethinkingplastic.org.

Join Rethinking Plastic for a Zoom conversation with knowledgeble panelists to learn about EPR and the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act in the early part of 2021. Check out our website (above) and join our mailing list to get updates or check the WSLR Activist Calendar.
Food Scraps for Social Good in 2021

BY TRACIE TROXLER, SUNSHINE COMMUNITY COMPOST

Moving into a new year is a great time to set intentions about what new actions or habits can be brought into the upcoming year. For 2021, the team at Sunshine Community Compost encourages everyone to include composting in your profile of community action and use food scraps for social good. The year 2020 shined a bright light on the fact that a whole lot more than just food scraps need to be composted and put through a deconstructive, transformative, regeneration process. But composting food scraps is a good reinforcing strategy while we also work to “compost” systems, procedures, and ways to recover produce for a record breaking food donation year!

With the help of our community Transition Sarasota donated 6.8 Asian Elephants OR (if you don’t count in elephants…) that’s over 60,000 pounds of produce in 2020. In our 10 years of existence this is the most produce we’ve ever donated in a year’s time. Thank you. To everyone who masked up, showed up, and everyone who worked the front lines and those that decided to stay safer at home. Thank you for helping us feed this community, our home.

Check it out: The United States has BIG goals to reduce food waste by 50% by the year 2030. In 2015 the USDA & EPA joined forces for this goal. As we’re now a third of the way into it, you’re going to see and hear a lot of progress towards awareness and action to achieve this goal.

Feeling inspired? There’s still plenty of ways to pitch in—How you can help:

- 43% of food waste happens in our homes, we’re literally throwing away over $2,000 a year in food we don’t eat.
- Start small to make it stick! Reducing waste doesn’t mean going cold turkey. It simply means getting a little more creative, a little more conscious about what you’re buying, using and throwing away. Pick one thing that feels manageable and then grow to add another when it’s habit. Plan your meals, create a “use first” shelf, or be better about eating those leftovers!

Get Connected! Visit www.transitionsrq.org to learn about ways to donate your time or resources to help Transition Sarasota fight waste, and feed the community.

Save the Date! March 14-21, for Virtual Eat Local Week 2021 (https://www.transitionsrq.org/eatlocalweek), “Dare to Grow”. Get inspired to grow food, knowledge, and your mind as we explore our local food system and how it intersects with the world around us.

Transition Sarasota is committed to a vision of a sustainable, just, and thriving local food system.
Editorial: Revamp Special Education in Florida and Locally

BY CAROL LERNER, FOUNDER, PROTECT OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Most of you have either heard, or read, about the saga of DJ, a Sarasota County student who in third grade was moved into the Access Points program and given an academic program geared to children with severe cognitive disabilities or traumatic brain injury—a program reserved for just 1 percent of students who have the most severe cognitive impairments. DJ, at the time of this transfer, had been diagnosed with a specific learning disability and ADHD and was said to be reading near grade level.

Six years later DJ, and allegedly 122 other students who had experienced a similar transfer to Access Points (according to special education advocates), were suddenly transferred back to a regular academic program under pressure from the federal government. DJ was in high school at that time and quickly became academically lost. Despite being a straight-A student on the Access Points simplified curriculum, DJ couldn’t do the work and was failing. He became deeply depressed and suicidal shortly after the transition.

No tutoring or mental health counseling was offered by the district. His mother became concerned and, at that point, learned what had happened to her son.

DJ’s mother took legal action to cover the costs of the compensatory education costs. In October 2019, an administrative law judge ruled that the Sarasota district falsified records and acted with “willful indifference” towards DJ, denying him of a “free and appropriate public education.” The judge believed the district’s motivations were due to wanting to remove DJ from state testing to avoid his likely low score from bringing down his school’s grade. On December 8 of this year, the district settled with his family for $250,000 and will cover the costs of tuition for DJ, now 18, at a private school for four years.

In December Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran issued a scathing letter to the Sarasota district that placed significant new sanctions on the district, with the threat of losing special education funding for non-compliance. In a sample study of the files of 66 students in Access Points, the Department of Education investigators found that 27 of the students—or 41%—were either improperly placed or lacked the necessary documentation to show that the student belonged in the program.

Education advocates in Manatee County are also charging that students are placed inappropriately in programs or, even more often, are deprived of needed special education services. This is particularly true in more common disabilities, like specific learning disabilities or ADHD, because, in the tiered system, they are poorly funded or to make the disability classification more extreme because severe or multiple disabilities receive a higher rate. In addition, in-class supports are usually sorely lacking. So a child with a behavioral problem that might easily be corrected if behavioral specialists develop a good behavioral plan and work with both the student and the teacher, is often simply shuffled off to an alternative school (which also gets funded at a higher rate). This is one way the school to prison pipeline is created.

Florida schools are under-resourced and have insufficient guidance counselors and confidential therapists. Very few schools have school nurses. A recent study by the Florida ACLU, The Cost of School Policing found that Florida schools have half the number of school counselors as best-practices recommend and only one-tenth of the number of social workers needed.

The poor or inadequate services sometimes drive parents out of the public system and into voucherized services and programs, most of which are grievously inadequate and in many cases offer no services. Parents that move their children to these programs that are heavily promoted by state leaders and legislators, often do not realize that their children give up all of their rights under IDEA.

In Sarasota, Superintendent Asplen has a chance to reshape the exceptional student education services and programs for the better. Yes, he will still be hampered by inadequate funding and lousy state rules and regulations but there is a lot that can be done to drastically improve the situation. Perhaps, a task force of special education staff, parents, experts, advocates and others can look at the ESE program as a whole and determine what would constitute a high quality and responsive system that meets students, parents and staff needs. Like its success in so many areas, Sarasota County Public Schools could become a model of what special education programs and services could and should be. Let’s get to work so that there will be no more DJ-like stories.

North Port Special Election

North Port residents will pick a new District 1 city commissioner in a special election March 9. David Iannotti, elected to the Commission in November 2020, resigned on December 1st due to health concerns. For quality candidates had to file paperwork between Dec. 28 and 31 and must have lived in the district for at least a year before the Dec. 31 date.

Three candidates have filed to run for the seat: Walter Grzesnikowski, Joseph Garren and Alice White. Grzesnikowski has served previously on the Planning and Zoning Advisory Board. White was unsuccessful for the District 5 Commission seat. Garren is a quality engineer.

A change to the North Port city charter eliminated the need for a runoff in special elections, so the top vote-getter in March – will be named the winner. The last day to register to vote in the election is February 8th.

Understanding Gov. Desantis's Anti-Protest Bill

capitalism, what’s known as fascism.

Fascism is a form of far-right, authoritarian ultranationalism which emerged in early 20th-century Europe during a deepening crisis of capitalism. It came into being as capitalists sought to maintain power over the working class and the socialist movement. Fascism sought to divide working people where socialism sought to unite them—as across boundaries of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.

Around the world today, as capitalism’s latest crises deepen, far-right and fascist movements are gaining strength. Ron Desantis’s attempt to criminalize protests for racial justice is part of this ominous historical trend.

Since February, hundreds of thousands of Americans have been sacrificed to the virus so that the capitalist class could get richer. Fifty million Americans are hungry, forty million families are facing eviction, millions have lost health care benefits, and more than a million health care workers have lost their jobs in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. All of this, along with state violence, has fallen hardest on working people of color, strengthening the nationwide uprising against racism.

Because they have no solutions to the crisis, politicians like Desantis have only one option: quell the resistance. That’s why they build up the police state, clamp down on dissent, and fan the flames of nationalism, bigotry and racism.

If you are interested in learning more, you can contact the Emergency Campaign for Free Speech in Florida (Facebook, Twitter, IG) or email: Emergencycampaignfreetreespeech@gmail.com.
By Diane Deensen

I had decided several years ago that the ACA (Obamacare) health insurance plans available to me made no sense financially. Even letting my imagination run wildly negative, my wallet ended up better off if I didn’t buy into any of those plans. This conclusion went against every prudent, commonsensical bone in my body.

So I started asking around. Amongst my friends and acquaintances in Florida who were:
- not covered by an employer-sponsored plan,
- not old enough to qualify for Medicare,
- not young enough to have more reasonable health insurance premiums,
- and not impoverished enough to qualify for ACA subsidies.

What were they doing about health insurance? I was hoping for new options and perhaps an uplifting story or two. It was a disheartening survey among friends, but it did yield one glimmer of hope: health care sharing ministries.

A health care sharing ministry is a faith-based program built upon the principle of people sharing each other’s medical burdens. Although this is similar to the risk-pooling nature of health insurance, there is no legally binding contract that protects members. Everything is voluntary and based on trust. Does that set off red alerts for you? It certainly did for me.

Nationwide, there were only a handful of ministries, and they varied considerably. I signed up with Liberty Healthshare, because, unlike the others, they did not require me to be Christian. Their prices and benefits were similar to health insurance in the old days - back in the 1970s and 1980s. My share amount (similar to a monthly premium) would be $199/month and my Annual Unshared Amount (the AUA is similar to a deductible) would be $500. This was a fraction of what any of the ACA plans would cost me. Of course, the devil is in the details, so I analyzed the whole package. In the end, I decided to give it a go.

The road has been bumpy, but all things considered, I am happy enough to continue with Liberty Healthshare. I share my experience, so that others may see an up-close and personal view.

First off, membership isn’t a given. Liberty Healthshare would have been within their rights to deny me membership. Once a member, for the first year, you don’t share expenses until you deem a pre-existing condition. I didn’t expect to meet my AUA (~deductible) the first year, because I only had one health care expense - a quick visit to my doctor and asked if they knew how to get a reasonable price for lab work. There was good news from that corner. Evidently, many doctors negotiate favorable rates with a nearby lab. If I paid my doctor up front for the tests, I could take advantage of my doctor’s rates. A couple of years later I discovered several discount labs online, if you are not using insurance. Now I can select the desired tests, prepay for them, and go to the corresponding lab.

Admittedly all this took a lot of time to figure out. Add to that the time I already spend finding reasonable prices on prescription drugs, and I’m thinking that I deserve a raise. Many years ago, I discovered that there were instances when I found better prices for prescription drugs than what I paid through my insurance. The GoodRx.com website has been my friend in tracking down the best prices nearby for prescriptions. Between shrinking formularies, increasing co-pays, larger co-insurance percentages, exponential growth in the price of drugs, and large drug deductibles, many insurance companies don’t end up covering much in the way of prescription drugs. As a result of this sad state of affairs, the fact that Liberty Healthshare does not cover maintenance medications has not been as big a blow for me as it might otherwise be. However, if I needed any pricey prescription drugs, this would be a serious limitation.

I was reimbursed for my first doctor’s visit four months later. I thought that was a ridiculously long time, but then it only got worse. For two years, I called every two or three months to advise them of their processing mistakes and to find out what the holdup was, only to be told that they would resubmit my expenses. Reimbursement took anywhere from 6 months to 1 1/2 years. Liberty Healthshare acknowledged to their members that they had a severe problem and overhauled their system. They also jacked up their monthly share amount (~premium) after having already doubled their AUA (~deductible). With such price hikes, I hope these problems are behind them. Of more importance, in the end, all of my expenses beyond the AUA have been reimbursed.

Being part of a health care sharing ministry includes sharing biblical principles. At the outset, this sounded too vague to be meaningful. One of those principles is a commitment to healthy living. That makes sense in the context of medical care. But it does go deeper than this. After Hurricane Irma devastated a portion of Southwest Florida, I got a call from Liberty Healthshare, asking me if I was okay. The person on the other end wanted to know if they could do anything to help. It was that sweet and that simple.

If you experienced sticker shock with your last health insurance renewal, or if you have been kicked off your employer’s health plan recently, a health care sharing ministry may be something to consider. I don’t know anybody else who is a member of a health care sharing ministry, but I’m glad I didn’t reject the concept out of hand. These ministries have been around for decades, and there are now over a million members. Part of the reason they are less expensive than conventional health insurance is that they cover fewer things. They all have quirks, and one of those quirks may be especially important to you. Do you use tobacco? If so, you may not be eligible. Some programs may require agreement with a statement of faith and verification of your church attendance. Are you a rock climber? If so, Liberty Healthshare may not be for you, as they don’t cover injuries resulting from hazardous activities, which, by their definition, includes rock climbing. These ministries probably won’t cover health-related costs they deem unbiblical, such as abortion and injuries related to alcohol or drugs. My plan has a maximum sharing limit for any given year, so higher costs have lower limits. This just scratches the surface of the fine print. Look at all the details carefully.

It would be awesome if the medical industry in the United States were comprehensively reformed so as to provide all citizens with the health care they need. Until then, you might consider whether a health care sharing ministry would work for you. Read their guidelines in excruciating detail before signing up!

My Experience with a Health Sharing Ministry

As part of our community service events, the SA/UJCE Office will work with Valerie Buchand on a conversation and an activity related to the Newtown Nation. Archaeology professor Uzi Baram will also share his Looking For Angola Project, which explores a 19th-century Maroon community off the Manatee River.

These events will be the last piece of our programming. Make sure to check out the website at www.ncf.edu/black-history-month as we update it with more information.

NCF’s Black History Month Going Vir(tu)al

keynote address, two panels, and a creative writing workshop. One panel will focus on the local movements against police brutality, and the other on school discipline.

Dr. Janaka Bowman-Lewis from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte will join us for one of our conversations on race and ethnicity. She will discuss Black women’s narratives of freedom. At UNC Charlotte, Dr. Bowman-Lewis teaches English, African American Studies, and Gender Studies.
BY GERI CHAFFEE
PRESIDENT, PDO.ORG

Parental engagement has long been recognized as a foundational pillar to students’ academic success. However, in schools serving socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, numerous cultural, linguistic and time constraints present barriers. Although the will may be there to reach out to parents, the existential realities of both the school system and the families often get in the way. In many cases, biases are developed on both sides that often become insurmountable to connectivity and inclusion.

When the education system closed in March, state DOE’s mandated that districts find every student and ensure that they were ready for distance learning until further notice. Families not in the district’s communication platforms or email lists were the most difficult to find. For the first time ever, individual schools had to rely on whatever data they had gathered at the beginning of the year to connect with parents. Anyone who has worked in schools that serve vulnerable communities is aware of the constant flux children experience as they cope with poverty and all the social issues associated with unstable living conditions.

The pandemic has given our public education system a tremendous opportunity to build on the mandated effort to connect with all our students where they are, which according to a national survey was very well received by parents, especially African American and Hispanic families. In fact, a majority of racially diverse parents stated that they were “more likely to get a better understanding of what my child is expected to learn at this/her new grade level”; “find more time to talk to my children about their everyday assignments”; and “develop a stronger relationship with my child’s teacher than I have in the past.” Learning Heroes Survey 2020

By now, most of us in education advocacy are painfully aware of the inequities in the system that have grown over the years, but it took a global pandemic to stop kicking the can down the road. A review of Florida’s demographic data reveals that over 50% of people of child-bearing and rearing age are racially and culturally diverse. Also, Florida 2019 DOE data states that 61% of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged. This correlates with the fact that so many of our public schools have become what education professionals call majority minority schools. Nearly 70 years after Brown, our schools are rapidly becoming more segregated, not less. Many students are actually experiencing triple segregation: by race, by income and more recently, by language (GAO Diversity Study 2016).

A renewed opportunity to understand the underlying sociological drivers and familiarize ourselves with the research and best practices will help address academic disparities in racially and culturally diverse student populations. Other districts have successfully adapted professional development and instructional models in an attempt to create inclusive climates that celebrate students and build on the multiple assets their families bring to school communities. When parents are viewed as essential partners in the education of children, education equity and academic achievement are more readily attained.

In this work, the first step is access. Early last summer, as reopening mandates were handed down from Tallahassee, Manatee County School District leaders realized that two-way communication would play a critical role, especially with Spanish-speaking families. Hispanic students now constitute 35% of district enrollment. An aggressive outreach campaign was developed, with most tactics considered and implemented for the first time. With help from Hispanic community leaders and the Manatee Community Foundation, the campaign included print advertising in Spanish media, local radio spots on Spanish radio, a new Spanish FaceBook page @SDMCSpainol, a dedicated easy to remember (909-1999) hotline staffed with Spanish-speaking personnel, and all information and videos on the district website produced in both English and Spanish. These efforts have since provided an enormous amount of data that is driving ongoing and future communication campaigns.

As the Manatee Superintendent Cynthia Saunders was just recognized with a top state award for her leadership during these difficult times, we hope other Florida districts can realize that efforts to engage parents and improve access and equity for all students are a small investment that will reap tremendous benefits as we educate our future generations into productive lives of service and leadership.

Florida Veterans for Common Sense continues to blaze the trail explored by Thomas Paine, the author of “Common Sense”, a pamphlet that outlined our form of government. Paine also served as citizen soldier during the American Revolutionary War. Paine struggled advancing the promise of America. He was one of the first abolitionists, the father of Social Security, an advocate for efficient and peaceful government. He loathed war profiteers and unnecessary war.

As Veterans of the American military, our mission is to inspire Americans of today with the spirit of Thomas Paine.