



ment,” said development director Nicole Britton, who is one of The Twig’s two full-time staff, alongside programs director Callie Cowan. In addition to those traumas, many “come into the system with nothing, just the clothes on their back.”

While meeting these children’s immediate, practical needs, The Twig achieves a deeper mission: to encourage and empower them, and to provide a sense of community. (The organization’s name stands for “The Way to Inspire and Give,” and Britton explained that the catchy acronym invokes mainstream stores like “the Gap.”) The Twig has already trained more than 200 volunteers, some of whom serve as “personal shoppers” who get to know the families on visit after visit and hang out with the children even after they’re done shopping.

“We don’t want the kiddos to feel like they’re just getting hand-me-downs,” said Britton. “We want to create a sense of community where they feel love and encouragement.” The organization will not accept donations during shopping days, in order to keep the experience centered on the children.

The environment can be magical. A pair of young siblings, who’d been separated in foster care, were reunited for an afternoon when their families unknowingly brought them to shop at the same time. “The little boy looked up at the door and said, ‘there’s my sister,’” Britton remembered.

To keep the store stocked, The Twig maintains a warehouse off-site where volunteers manage donated items. There’s an ongoing “wish list” of immediate needs on the website ([thetwigcares.com](http://thetwigcares.com)), and monetary donations go towards the purchase

of items to fill the gaps in inventory, in addition to covering rent and utilities. The Twig also manages a mobile boutique that travels to group homes, as well as sending out monthly care packages to people who’ve recently aged out of foster care.

During the pandemic, Britton and Cowan mobilized The Twig’s volunteer corps to open the store more frequently for appointment-only private shopping trips. Since March, care package requests have tripled. “It’s actually been good in a lot of ways,” said Britton. “We can be intentional and have that special connection one family at a time. We started mailing out board games when we couldn’t do anything else. Just to bring a little fun and joy to these families.”

This year, The Twig received a \$350,000 grant from the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation to open a second store in north Sarasota or Manatee County. Britton hopes it will be open by summer of 2021.

**HERE4YOUTH  
TRANSFORMING MENTAL HEALTH  
CARE FOR AREA YOUTH**

Even with Sarasota’s longstanding tradition of youth-centered community support, innovation continues to reshape the nonprofit landscape. Among the latest advancements is a far-reaching, grassroots initiative called Here4Youth, a partnership led by Jennifer Johnston of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation (GCCF) and John Annis of the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation.

“Mental health needs were the thread running through every conversation we



TOP: The Twig is a boutique-style store where kids in foster care can outfit themselves.

ABOVE: Jennifer Johnson of Gulf Coast Community Foundation co-leads Here4Youth with John Annis (not pictured) of the Charles and Margery Barancik Foundation.

had,” said Johnston, GCCF’s senior community investment officer. “Every sector is saying that there are mental health needs going unmet. Where do you begin?”

Here4Youth began with a comprehensive effort to understand the problem. In 2018, GCCF and the Barancik Foundation commissioned a research scan of children’s mental health environment throughout the whole of Sarasota County, performed by the USF College of Behavioral and Community Sciences.

As a result, a 68-page report detailed a needs assessment, a summary of challenges, a cost assessment, and a framework for improvements. It also revealed that the community loses \$86 million every year due to untreated mental illness. “We’re spending the money already,” said Johnston.

Johnston, who has a master’s degree in public health and completed a fellowship with the National Institutes of Health, led a team that spent a full year assessing the report and considering strategies for moving forward. Because most mental illness first manifests before the age of 24, they decided to focus on early interventions to help those at risk establish a better trajectory through life.

Next, they brought the community into the conversation. The team engaged more than 50 local nonprofits and community organizations, as well as young adults and families, in a series of meetings about the various ways mental health issues manifest in Southwest Florida. Connections were made.

In one meeting, a pediatrician voiced the need for a phone-in resource for information about psychiatric medications; they discovered that USF already offers that service. “There were opportunities for improvement that we didn’t realize sooner because we weren’t in the same room,” said Johnston, who notes that GCCF and the Barancik Foundation have a history of bringing people together to create measurable outcomes.

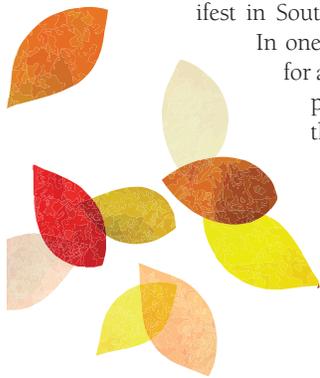
Ultimately, Here4Youth established independent work teams to tackle six barriers to

better mental health services in Sarasota: community outreach, support for staff and families, a continuum of care, access to services, prevention and wellness, and financing. Because healthcare reform takes time, the organization will be an ongoing, multi-year investment, but some programs have already begun: Here4Youth created a special family care navigator role at the National Institute of Mental Health Sarasota and Manatee, and two new staff were hired for a pilot program at Sarasota and North Port high schools, where students will learn how better to identify and manage mental health issues in themselves and their peers.

“It’s about knitting together the system and then figuring out federal and state funding sources, maximizing them, and then using philanthropic dollars to supplement,” explained Johnston. “We don’t want to use philanthropic dollars for things that other sources fund.”

The work has continued through COVID, though some federal and state funding sources are slipping away. As needs escalate and government budgets shrink, Johnston wants the community to stay excited about the incredible potential of Here4Youth.

“Here’s our chance to try new things. This is an opportunity that we’re building from the ground up,” she said. “If we could design the perfect system, now’s our chance.”



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