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News

Children's Trust leader comes full circle in role



Taryn Ashby Dec 29, 2022 10:48 pm





Children's Trust of Alachua County executive director Marsha Kiner. (Photo by Taryn Ashby)

Marsha Kiner was first asked to speak for the children of Alachua County as a high school student when she was picked for the Envisioning Alachua 2000.

"It was a big deal," Kiner said. "There were county commissioners, city commissioners, school board, folks, community leaders, and then my voice representing what I considered at the time to be a valuable piece of our community: the youth voice."

Now she is continuing to advocate for the children of Alachua County—this time in her new role as the new head of the Children's Trust of Alachua County (CTAC).

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"It's kind of been a full circle moment for me bringing me back to my roots in more ways than one," Kiner said.

Born and raised in Alachua County, Kiner attended Alachua Elementary, Williams Elementary, Lincoln Middle School, and graduated from Buchholz High School. She also received a degree in journalism from the University of Florida.

"I genuinely believe I am the person I am today because of this village in Gainesville and Alachua County," Kiner said. "The people who poured into me helped me become a leader."

Her parents were educators in Alachua County for over 40 years, when her father was a dean and coach at Santa Fe High School and Buchholz High School.

As she has traveled around the county talking with stakeholders, Kiner said people have often approached her to tell her stories about her father and how much her parents meant to them.

"That's the beauty of being in your hometown," Kiner said. "They go out of their way to share those stories with you. I have a family legacy here. And now I get to make and create in my own right, so that's a beautiful thing."

CTAC's goal is to ensure that all children in the county thrive. The Trust abides by four core pillars—health, education, support and safety—when creating new programs and initiatives for the county, Kiner said.

Funding for the Trust was approved in a voter referendum in November 2018 with 61% of voters approving the measure.

It is funded by tax dollars and receives an estimated annual revenue of over \$8 million.

The previous former executive director Colin Murphy was dismissed in early 2022, following an investigation that found he **communicated inappropriately and unprofessionally with CTAC staff**.

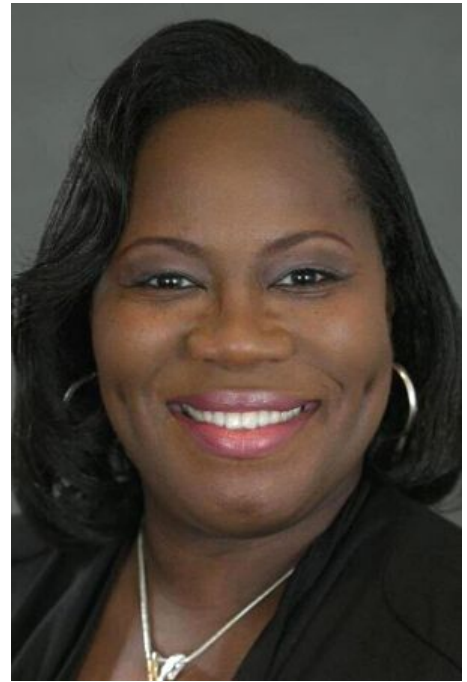
Kiner was **hired as the new executive director in July**, and started her new role in October.

Before her new role with CTAC, Kiner worked as the executive director and CEO of the Association of Florida Colleges (AFC).

"Everything I did in my civic and social life revolved around volunteering," she said. "It all still connected to young people to make a difference. I am extremely happy to be back here at home working for this organization. It doesn't even touch the surface of how I feel about it."

Kiner sat down with *Mainstreet Daily News* on Monday to discuss her first few months in the job and her plans for her new role.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.



Courtesy of Children's Trust of Alachua County
Marsha Kiner

Taryn Ashby: Coming back to your hometown, what was your first step in your new role?

Marsha Kiner: We kicked off a strategic planning listening tour in early October. The Marsha listening tour is coinciding with the entity with the organization's listening tour. And because I'm coming from outside, I can see things that will marry well with our end product.

Coming here, one of the first things I did was get out in the community and say: "Tell me what it is we need here in the county. Tell me what's working, what's not? What do you see missing? And then tell me, what role do you think the Trust should have?"

I didn't want to come here to tell anybody what I thought was best for the community. I wanted to come and hear what the community thought was best.

TA: How has your experience at AFC assisted you with your new role at CTAC?

MK: I was at AFC for 16 years. I became the executive director and CEO during COVID, so that was a great training ground for finding new innovative ways to get the job done. When you lead in the midst of a crisis... everything's thrown at you, and you have to figure it out.

The one thing I already knew from working at AFC was the listening component. We did everything that we did with member input. You can't have a thriving membership organization without the members, without our volunteers.

TA: How has your transition into the new role been going?

MK: It has been interesting, exciting, and overwhelming—a real full-circle moment. We just finished our community meetings, where we are trying to hear from the community about how we move forward. How do we fund programs moving forward? Are the four pillars enough? Do we need to change them?

We are looking to the community to help determine where we go from here with the Trust. I've told the staff and community folks that I feel we were birthed. And now we're about to become a toddler.

During the pandemic, we learned to crawl a little bit, and now we are about to begin to stand. And as we start standing, what do we want to look like? Where do we want to go? And that's where we are with the Trust.





TA: Your predecessor, Colin Murphy, was fired. How challenging has that been for you and the staff?

MK: I have not found any issues. I would expect it to be challenging for my coworkers prior to me getting here. But I have a dream team that is fully committed to the mission. I came in and met with the staff. To a person, they're committed. They're mission driven, which resonates with me.

I shared with them my philosophy of leadership, which is ever an open door. We're going to talk about everything. We're going to put it all on the table. And if there are problems, we'll iron them out. But we'll do it together. That's my leadership style. That's been my leadership style everywhere I've ever worked.

TA: What changes or actions have taken since starting October?

MK: I am a firm believer that when you are new to something, you don't have all the answers. You come in, you observe, you listen and you learn. That's what I've been doing for the last two months with staff as well as the community.

I think if there has been a change, I think it's just that there is now an executive director who believes in communicating with the community and listening to the community.

TA: What does Trust money fund?

MK: The money funds all the programming. To name a few [organizations that receive

funding]: Boys and Girls Club, Aces in Motion, YMCA, Summer Camps, Teens Work Alachua, and many more.

I remember when there weren't a lot of programs. I was blessed because my parents were teachers, so I was exposed to a lot because my parents wanted to expose me to a lot. But I had friends who didn't come from that background, so they weren't sure what to do after high school.

Coming back today, visiting our providers, seeing the great work these programs have done ... makes me so proud of this community because we really are impacting the lives of our children.

TA: What are the goals for the Trust heading into 2023?

MK: Our focus certainly is to continue what we've been doing. It is to ensure that this community understands that the Trust values its voice. I never want our community to feel like we're over here in a bubble. I want to finalize our listening project and our strategic plan.

And even though we are in the middle of the listening project and talking with people in the community, I want all our outlying areas or rural communities to know they won't be forgotten. I'm committed to ensuring they are part of our strategic plan and funding moving forward.

Also, we are working on our annual report, which shows that we have served over 18,000 children and families.

I don't know that we've really told the story of the 18,000 children and families that we've touched. We're going to be doing a better job of telling our story and letting people know that the Trust is here, and we've been busy. The money we're getting from the citizens is really being put right back into the community.

TA: After being at CTAC for the past few months, what is your favorite part of the job?

MK: I love this community and am amazed and proud of the work in Gainesville. I get to reconnect with people, not to mention the fantastic programs we have for kids. We are really impacting the lives of our children.

We have great programs with people who put their hearts into ensuring our children in this county are exposed to every possible educational and cultural opportunity. We're talking about the county at large, not just the city of Gainesville.



A child in Archer is just as important as a child in southwest Gainesville, and I don't want any child to be forgotten. That's important to the Trust and important to me. It is all just amazing.

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Taryn Ashby

Taryn Ashby is a Mainstreet Daily News reporter based in Gainesville. She earned a bachelor's degree in communications, specializing in journalism, and a graduate certificate in new media and journalism from Villanova University. Taryn loves participating in sports and outdoor activities, especially going to the beach.

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