

All-America County stories

Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team

NEST is a volunteer organization that raises awareness of our native habitats.

Building on a successful land protection program voted on by the citizens of Sarasota County, Sarasota neighbors started a grassroots movement to protect a piece of natural habitat in their neighborhood. The group enlisted the County, school science teams, businesses and community organizations to work together to restore the native ecosystem for the neighborhood to enjoy. NEST has expanded into other neighborhoods and built more partnerships with homeowner associations, civic groups, environmental groups and schools to educate the residents, promote community ownership and create advocates for a healthy environment.

Contact: Robert Wright, NEST coordinator, Sarasota County, 941-650-1089

rwright@scgov.net

Home Computers for Sarasota County Schools

A Sarasota County teacher noticed a “digital divide” among students whose families could afford home computers and those who could not. Computers were changing the way students learned, and many without computers were falling behind and even dropping out of school. He developed *Home Computers for Sarasota County Schools*, a community network of businesses and individuals who donate upgraded used computers. Schools identify those students in need, and today more than 400 families have received free computers loaded with software that the children use to conduct research, view educational CDs, improve keyboarding skills and keep up with their classmates. The education foundation and other partnerships propelled this program to Phase II, more than doubling the previous impact. The program continues to expand and reach out, one student at a time. Success is measured by the positive impact on students’ academic performance.

Contact: Bonita Echstenkamper, development director, the Education Foundation of Sarasota County Inc., 941-927-0965, Bonita_eschtenkamper@sarasota.k12.fl.us

Caregiver Respite

Living in one of the oldest counties in the nation, many Sarasota County residents are tending their loved ones in their final years, at home, with little or no help. Some even leave the workforce because the call to duty is 24/7. The challenge can be overwhelming. Two Sarasota County communities recognized the situation this can create for caregivers, and created adult day care “respite” programs, giving occasional relief to caregivers at a nominal cost. The programs, *A Special Time* and *Comfort Connection* are non-profit, non-denominational programs each headed by a professional registered nurse and staffed by trained volunteers from local churches. Caregivers bring their patients to *A Special Time* and *Comfort Connection* and are free to run errands, meet friends for lunch or simply have a needed break, knowing their loved ones are in excellent care. The programs enjoy support from civic organizations and local media, who recognize the importance of community-based respite services in Sarasota County.

Contacts: Wilma Ellis, R.N., director, *A Special Time*, 941-268-4976 wilmapel@msn.com; Carol Lucas, R.N. director, *Comfort Connection*, 941-255-9192