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TOPICAL

## Foundation CEO reflects on his career

Mark Pritchett to step down in 2023 from Gulf Coast Community Foundation

By BOB MUDGE Senior Writer


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Mark Pritchett, president and CEO of Gulf Coast Community Foundation, says his successor is on the job.



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GONDOLIER PHOTO BY BOB MUDGE

VENICE — If you plan to cast your ballot by mail this year, thank Mark Pritchett.

But more about election reform in Florida later. It's just one of the many things on the resume of the president and CEO of Gulf Coast Community Foundation, who has announced that he'll be retiring next year.

He's a member of the search committee for his successor. It's in the process of hiring a firm to do a national search, and the search will probably take six to eight months, he said.

Pritchett has promised to stay on through the transition to the new CEO, who will take the foundation "to the next level."

"I feel really good about where I'm leaving it," he said.

When he arrived, he said, \$5 million in new assets was considered a good year. Last year, nearly \$60 million in new assets was added — a record.

Today, the foundation is "basically a \$500 million corporation with \$60 million in revenue each year," he said.



And it's also a great place to work, according to The NonProfit Times, whose list of best nonprofits has repeated included GCCF, often as the only community foundation.

“By all measures of success, we've been a successful community foundation, one of the most successful in the nation,” Pritchett said.

He said he started thinking about retirement when COVID hit.

The foundation was in the middle of celebrating its 25th anniversary but canceled plans for an event and partnered with the Barancik Foundation, headed by former GCCF president and CEO Teri A Hansen, to create a COVID Response Initiative.

More than \$7 million was dedicated to providing assistance, from technology to support remote services to food for All Faiths Food Bank to child care for first responders and health care workers.

The pandemic forged a better working relationship among the heads of local foundations, Pritchett said.

With a strong staff and board and a new set of goals also all in place at GCCF, it's “time for the next leader to come in and achieve those goals,” he said.

‘Something good’

Pritchett joined GCCF in 2008 as vice president of Community Investment and was named president and CEO in 2015. In between, he was intimately involved with a number of its initiatives, including reform of the state's 911 system following the murder of Denise Amber Lee.



“That one meant a lot to me,” he said.

Lee, a 21-year-old wife and mother in North Port, was abducted from her home on Jan. 17, 2008. An eyewitness called 911 and followed the abductor’s vehicle but no deputy was dispatched.

Lee’s body was found two days later.

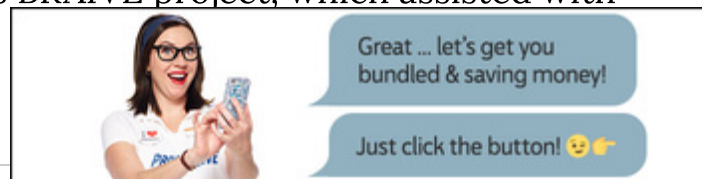
Her husband, Nathan, started a foundation through GCCF dedicated to improving training for 911 operators and dispatchers in Florida. It has since gone national.

“We took a tragedy ... and made something good,” Pritchett said. “That’s the power of a community foundation. That warms my heart a lot.”

GCCF hopes to have a similar impact on the related issues of homelessness and affordable housing, especially regarding veterans.

It’s working on a project with the city of Sarasota that would include housing and services for vets, Pritchett said.

It’s somewhat reminiscent of the foundation’s BRAIVE project, which assisted with housing and food for veterans.



Another potential housing project intended for the city of Venice has to remain under wraps, Pritchett said, because it's still in the early discussion stages.

County native Jon Thaxton, the foundation's senior vice president for Community Leadership and a former county commissioner, is heavily involved in housing efforts.

The county has set aside \$25 million for housing, and there may be county and school board land that could be used for it, Pritchett said.

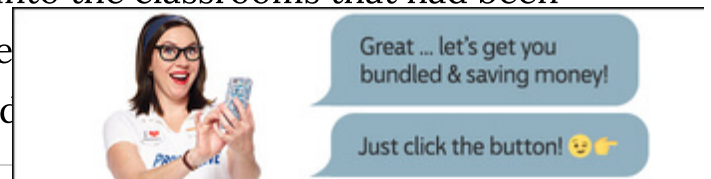
Even so, local governments are "decades behind" in meeting the need, he said.

## Transformation

Another initiative Pritchett is proud of is one that boosted middle school education in science, technology, engineering and math.

Known as STEMsmart, it began with the foundation investing \$50,000 in technology for classrooms in a few middle schools. The idea was to use tech to make learning more fun and relevant, he said.

Potential donors to the program were taken into the classrooms that had been upgraded to sell them on it. Eventually, all the county were brought into STEMsmart, he said





Mark Pritchett welcomes participants at the third annual STEMsmart Student Summit event that took place at State College of Florida Venice campus in 2014. At the time he was Gulf Coast Community Foundation senior vice president for Investment.

FILE PHOTO

“It was an amazing transformation,” he said.

The foundation has been a part of several others in the region’s physical environment, including connecting donors with the Bay Park Conservancy, which is developing a transformational park on Sarasota Bay; Venice’s Urban Forest, on the east side of the Intracoastal Waterway; its Water Quality Playbook, which “is getting attention all over the southeast right now; and the expansion of the Legacy Trail.

The Pompano Trailhead for the project, to which GCCF contributed more than \$80,000, was recently dedicated in Sarasota. Pritchett, an avid cyclist, rode his bike there to join the celebration.

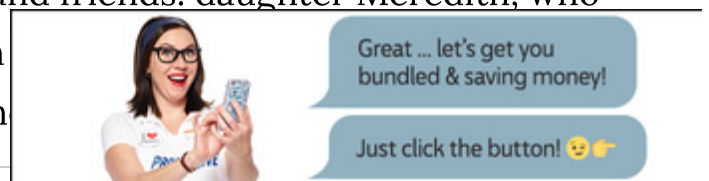
“I’m really thrilled with the Legacy Trail,” he said.

He’s also excited about retirement, though he expects an adjustment period of about six months.

It will be the first time in 55 years he hasn’t had a job, said Pritchett, who’s 68.

“Most of my runway’s behind me,” he said.

But there will be much more time for family and friends: daughter Meredith, who lives in Lexington, Kentucky, and son Matt, in grade, with whom he plans to renew his conn



“We’re like brothers from different mothers,” he said.



And for more adventures with longtime companion Gina Taylor, as well as to attack a stack of books that’s been piling up for years.

“I just want to read some David McCullough and relax,” he said.

‘Convenience ballots’

Back to Pritchett’s role in election reform.

After the 2000 Bush/Gore presidential election in which Florida became a laughingstock in many eyes, then-Gov. Jeb Bush recruited him to be the staff director of a committee of 10 Republicans, 10 Democrats and one independent to propose reforms.

Pritchett said he got the post on the recommendation of former Attorney General Jim Smith, who told Bush he could handle the task in an impartial manner.

He got the job just before Christmas ... with a February deadline.

All the problems the committee members identified  
Pritchett said: technology, laws and processes





They learned that the state had five voting systems, with local variations of each, and they didn't talk to each other.

Pritchett consulted experts at MIT and Cal Tech, who recommended a switch to optical scanning systems with precinct-based tabulators.

The committee also had to resolve a seemingly simple question: When does an election end?

“Thank goodness for Al Gore taking the high road” and conceding in 2000, Pritchett said, but that didn't address the lack of uniformity in state law about how to contest an election and when a recount could be requested.

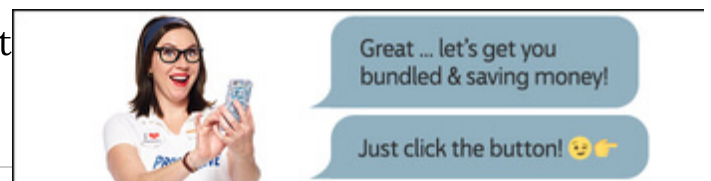
The committee settled on a mechanical recount if the margin of victory was no more than 0.5% and a hand recount at 0.25%.

“That was me, sitting with a guy, picking those numbers,” Pritchett said.

The committee also recommended the adoption of provisional ballots, so someone whose right to vote was in doubt could still have the chance, if the doubt were resolved.

And it proposed replacing absentee ballots, which required a voter to have an excuse for not voting in person, with what it called “convenience” ballots, which didn't. You now know them as vote-by-mail ballots.

All the committee members signed off on all the law with overwhelming support.



“That was a life-changing experience for me,” Pritchett said. “I felt like I made a difference.”

