

Spotlight: Dr. Mark S. Pritchett Sees a Strong Future for Gulf Coast Community Foundation

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Feature

By [Sarasota Scene](#) |

By Ryan G. Van Cleave | October 2022

In its 27-year existence, Gulf Coast Community Foundation has only had four leaders, but the most recent two combined for more than 22 years of leadership. After a strong career in philanthropy, Teri Hansen arrived in 2002 and stayed until 2015 when she joined the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation. Her successor, Dr. Mark S. Pritchett picked up where she left off. Pritchett created a vision and built an organization that can be led by the next generation of leaders. So, after a 55-year career—and the past seven serving as Gulf Coast’s CEO and president—Pritchett has announced his retirement for 2023.

“I’ll never forget when I was first offered the job. My gut told me this would be an unbelievable opportunity,” Pritchett says after being chosen out of more than 300 applicants that were selected by a search firm, though he admits he wasn’t quite sure what a community foundation was at first. He didn’t come from a philanthropy background, after all. Instead, he

was deeply involved in statewide projects via the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the Collins Center for Public Policy, and Enterprise Florida, Florida's economic development organization.

Pritchett quickly learned that there was more to being a community foundation than just sitting on pots of money and handing out grants. "It's more about the way you think about issues and how you approach them. My background proved to be an asset because I didn't come from philanthropy." From his previous experience and successes, he knew the path forward necessarily included creating meaningful partnerships and making Gulf Coast a catalyst for positive change in the community.

Transforming the region requires working with government leaders, civic leaders, business leaders, and grassroots organizations, and that's something Pritchett champions. Partnerships are vital for everyone. "We wanted to be a safe place where everybody feels like they can come to us, and we'll listen," he says. Part of how that safe space can exist is by taking a middle-ground approach. "It's important for institutions to model civility. We can have differences, but we can talk about those differences without looking through a partisan lens and demonizing people. That's part of our culture here—people with diverse thinking who come together to create real solutions."

Since making a difference is the goal, Gulf Coast constantly measures their impact, or what Pritchett calls "assets under influence." For example, Gulf Coast was able to help move The Legacy Trail project forward by contracting with the Trust for Public Land and financially supporting their efforts to appraise the land along the trail so the county could learn exactly how much the project would cost. "Once we had that, we helped raised money from a lot of groups and individuals to create an information campaign that would advocate for The Legacy Trail being something that we wanted in our community," he explains. "That's not a grant. That's leadership in action."

The list of all Pritchett has managed to do in his tenure is too sizable to list. From the Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways to the Arts Appreciation grant program to the STEMsmart program to the opening of a 3,000-square-foot Philanthropy Center in Sarasota, his impact on this community will resonate for decades if not generations.

For those who want to try to quantify his success, Gulf Coast added more than \$370 million in new gifts while under Pritchett's leadership, and more than \$300 million of that was used to support area nonprofits. By any measure, that's the definition of success.

He admits it'll be hard to retire because he's been working since he had a paper route at fourteen. "Financially, we've never been stronger. Staff wise, we've never been stronger. And I know that our initiatives have never been more impactful. Given that, the worst thing I can do is hang on, and then watch it fall because I didn't let go at the right time," he says, his

voice increasingly colored by emotion. “This is the right time. I’m leaving when the board wants me to stay. I’m leaving when the team wants me to stay. And that’s how I know it’s the right time to go.”

So, he’ll leave Gulf Coast in 2023 and take at least six months off to spend time in his new Colorado home with the love of his life, Gina Taylor. He’s also eager to have more time to spend with friends and family, and perhaps catch up on reading David McCullough’s books—an author he loved even prior to bumping into him in a hotel bar in Washington DC a few years back. “The bar was empty except for one other man who I realized was David freaking McCullough!” he recalls about that serendipitous evening. “I introduced myself and asked if he’d like to sit down. We had a wonderful conversation, shared pizza, and drank beer together. It was awesome.”

When Pritchett realized David was wintering in Naples with his wife, it didn’t take much to convince the bestselling author to come up to Sarasota for a community-wide luncheon and share colorful stories about past presidents and major historical events. While Pritchett’s career at Gulf Coast was full of milestones and successes, that personal one really meant a lot. “He was such a fabulous writer with a great mind for history.”

Even though Pritchett is saying goodbye, it’s not a time for sadness. He told his team that this year’s theme is that great things are still to come. “That’s the optimism I want them to feel about our future,” he says about the community he’s come to love and still plans to live in for part of each year going forward. “Together, we’ll continue to make a transformational difference.”

For more information on Gulf Coast Community Foundation, please visit www.gulfcoastcf.org or call 941.486.4600.

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