

Learning Together

Community Foundation's 2Gen Philosophy for Parents & Students

By Christy Pessemier

When Sarasota resident Keely Ramsdell first considered going back to school as a single mom, it felt like an impossible dream. At the time, she was working a 50-hour a week job while caring for two young sons. But she wanted a better life for herself and her children.

Then, "almost like fate," Ramsdell met Mary Tucker, the Parent Education Navigator who works out of Alta Vista Elementary School, where her son Oliver attends. Supported by the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Tucker is a social worker whose primary role is to support parents at four Title 1 Schools that have goals of pursuing post-secondary opportunities. She connects them with the financial resources and critical services to empower parents to change the trajectory for themselves and for their families.

"I vividly remember thinking that going back to school was something I'd love to do, but by no means was it even possible," Ramsdell said. But after talking with Tucker about her goals and discussing what going back to school might look like—Ramsdell began to entertain the idea.

After some self-reflection and encouragement from a family member, she made the decision to return to

State College of Florida (SCF)—the same college she had dropped out of ten years earlier. Tucker helped her complete her college application, FAFSA form, and scholarship applications, and connected her to financial resources.

"She wrote reference letters on my behalf and stayed on top of me with important dates and deadlines," Ramsdell said. "Mary (Tucker) and I put together a plan and budget, applied for as many scholarships as I could, and I enrolled."

Despite many bumps in the road, Ramsdell graduated with a Bachelor of Social Science degree from the University of South Florida (USF) in May of 2022.

In her graduation speech, she credits the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the 2Gen program for helping her face the many daunting tasks involved with going back to school. Ramsdell relied on support from student loans and financial assistance through the 2Gen program to pay for childcare so she could study and attend classes full-time. Throughout the process, she also kept in regular contact with Tucker, who provided ongoing help and support.

Though Ramsdell's story illustrates the enormous difficulty in committing to a postsecondary plan as a working mother, Kirsten Russell, Community Foundation of Sarasota County's Vice President of Community Impact, is proud to point out that there are a surprising number of success stories similar to hers.

"Many of the families we are working with are single-mother households," Russell said. "We're connecting them with resources to provide a stable roof over their head at a reasonable cost." In addition to support from Tucker, Keely also became a resident of Lofts on Lemon, a workforce and affordable housing option. This provides additional stability for her family through rent that is reflective of income.

"We are pouring into people who want to change their direction. They want more for their kids," Russell said. "And their potential is there. It just got snuffed out, or pushed down.

"Let's face it, life is really, really hard. And if you haven't had the right people guiding you on that path... who knows how things could turn out?" She continued. "When we work with families, we often provide support beyond scholarships. Many parents qualify for a stipend to ensure they can put food on the table. We help them navigate grants and scholarships. We focus on empowerment, and they feel a part of this incredible community."

While the Community Foundation has been around for 43 years, they adopted their 2Gen approach in 2013. Informed by Ascend at the Aspen Institute, the intentional investment in children and their parents or caregivers together has had a ripple effect across the region on families struggling to make ends meet.

The Key Components of the Aspen Institute's 2Gen approach model focus on social capital, early childhood education, postsecondary and employment pathways, health and well-being, and economic assets. The entire approach addresses all members of a family, providing comprehensive support that allows families to move out of poverty and obtain security.

"There are about 44,000 students in Sarasota County's public schools, and approximately fifty percent of them are on free and reduced lunch," Russell said. "That's not something you would expect in Sarasota. Many people living here have no idea."

From the outset, CFSC's education task force focused on the attendance zone of the four Title 1 elementary schools with the highest percentage of students on free and reduced lunch, which also had the lowest percentage of students

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A decade ago, when CFSC began implementing the 2Gen approach, Alta Vista Elementary School was the pilot school through Suncoast Technical College (STC). A full classroom was built on the Alta Vista campus, so parents could attend CNA classes at the same time and location as their kids, removing major barriers to parent postsecondary education. Since the classroom was built in 2013, 236 parents have enrolled in college, and hundreds more have been served through community partners.

Along with the schools, the Community Foundation collaborates with the Women's Resource Center, CareerSource Suncoast, the Literacy Council, UnidosNow, Harvest House, Parenting Matters, the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County, Sarasota Housing Authority, Boys & Girls Club of Sarasota and DeSoto Counties, local colleges, and more.

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reading on grade level. CFSC has found that investing in the education of parents and caregivers is directly tied to the education and well-being of their children, and as a result, the entire family. Research shows that a parent's level of education is the single strongest correlate of a child's success in school.

"When we started this work, the core of what we were trying to accomplish was to help students read at grade level to become more proficient, confident learners," Russell said. "It's so much more than that now. We've embraced parents. It's taken us time to collect the results, to see the economic impact of working with those parents so they can work with their students. That's where we see the greatest success—with the whole family."

By embedding a social worker in these schools, CFSC has had "boots on the ground," a person to communicate and work directly with parents, nurturing supportive relationships.

"We always start by building trust," Russell said. "You have to build trust to treat trauma. Anyone living in poverty has experienced some form of trauma. We do that by simultaneously working with a social worker and providing mental health support through a platform that is easily accessible."

Tucker has been at Alta Vista for seven years. Despite changes in administration and teachers, she's been a constant and reliable source of encouragement, help, and support.

"How do you strengthen a community? You strengthen it by supporting the individuals in that community—by meeting them exactly where they are," Russell said.

Russell is quick to emphasize that financial planning is a key component of that support, pointing out that even middle-class families are just one emergency away from financial instability. A flexible emergency fund program is available to parents who have hit a roadblock while progressing toward their post-secondary education goals. The fund was created as a solution to minor emergencies that commonly contribute to dropping out of college.

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—KIRSTEN RUSSELL

Other contributing factors to dropping out are lack of support and guidance. But with Tucker’s help, as well as community partnerships—these parents find the strength and support they need to move forward. Ultimately, they accomplish goals many had given up on, like completing school, earning credentials, and finding more lucrative and mobile employment. This all contributes to providing more security for their families, which in turn sets children up for success.

“We’re asking parents looking at going back to school to consider their interests,” Russell said. “But we also want them to pursue a career that is in demand. We’re helping them to be the skilled and reliable employees that employers need. One example is our partnership with SMH and connecting the countless CNAs that the 2Gen program has graduated.”

Aside from CNA programs, many earn credentials that allow them to gain employment as LPNs, RNs, EMTs, surgical technicians, medical assistants, accountants, and early childhood educators. Like Ramsdell, some earn a Bachelor’s degree.

Results show that their efforts are paying off.

The average college graduation rate of 2Gen parents is 80 percent, compared to the state of Florida’s graduation rate of 61 percent and the national rate of 63 percent. Even more exciting, the average wage increase in the first year for 2Gen graduates is \$17,500.

CFSC also has a Parent Advisory Council (PAC) composed of 2Gen student parents and graduates. The PAC plays an enormous role in providing input and feedback on

the 2Gen program, including suggesting ways it could be more effective, and serving on grant committees.

“The PAC voice is at the center of our work,” Russell said. “Five years ago, we weren’t at that point.”

After graduating, an exciting highlight for Ramsdell was participating in Selby Gardens’ 2022 Lights in Bloom Family Togetherness Night, a program designed to connect families with the arts and cultural experiences in our community. Along with her two boys, Oliver and Xavier, Ramsdell had the opportunity to usher in the holiday season with Russell and Selby Gardens President and CEO, Jennifer Rominiecki.

“Keely’s son flipped the switch, illuminating over two million lights,” Russell said. “And to see his face—he was so excited.”

That excitement is contagious. Russell said she is excited about how far these parents have come, knowing the program is making a real impact. Not only does the 2Gen approach benefit local families, but it also strengthens the community-at-large. This impact is evident through key economic indicators, including increased local GDP and economic growth, higher labor participation rates, decreased reliance on public benefits programs, and a narrowing of regional skills gaps.

“So many families are one emergency away from a crisis,” Russell said. “What we are doing is providing support to help families make their way through ups and downs so that they have an opportunity to reimagine their hopes and dreams. It’s exciting to see people empowered and writing whole new chapters of their lives.”