

JOYFUL KEYS LIVING: 'WILD BRAINSTORMING' AMONG FRIENDS LEADS TO IDEA FOR COMMUNITY CENTER IN UPPER KEYS

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By Emily Steele

A group of friends gathered around Denise Downing's kitchen table discussing recent experiences volunteering in the Upper Keys in 2017. They quickly came to the conclusion that the community was lacking needed resources for older adults.

What followed was an evening of "wild" brainstorming, which spread from the needs of seniors to the idea of creating a vibrant community center that would serve the needs of all citizens. Immersed in the moment, they asked themselves, "Why is this important?"

The answers that surfaced were surprisingly similar for all ages: relieving isolation; building strength, balance, and endurance; improving memory and retention; providing life-long learning opportunities; a safe place to gather and developing community contacts, to name a few.

From that first meeting sprang community meetings, held in various locations, to discuss the idea of a vibrant community center to serve multiple age groups. The first public meeting was held at the existing senior center; monthly meetings were held in the conference room at the sheriff's office; the last at the Key Largo Library. The meetings were well attended, with the majority agreeing that the Upper Keys would

benefit greatly from the creation of a community center. An advisory board was formed from volunteers who came forward.



The new advisory board received funding from two major donors, Mimi Geek and Susan Ruck, to implement a pilot program and applied for incorporation as Just Older Youth (JOY) Inc. The pilot program ran from January through April 2018 at the Pearl House of Worship on Pearl Street in Tavernier. The full day pilot was open on Wednesdays and offered courses.



JOY community

For instance, a yoga class would be going on in one room and technology class in another. The venue included speakers, live performances and movies. Publix provided pastries for a continental breakfast and Key Largo's Starbucks donated coffee and donuts. Programs were decided by suggestions from the public forums, participant choices and feedback. The programs were led by volunteers, artists, historians, scientists and other citizens with a skill to teach others.

The pilot was a success, affirming the benefit of the program for participants. The organization was incorporated as Just Older Youth (JOY) Inc. and became a registered nonprofit in Florida on May 5, 2018. Now the grassroots movement was starting to take on a more solid form and could apply for public grants.



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With the help of dedicated volunteer board members, instructors and generous donors, Just Older Youth Inc. has maintained JOY Center programs for four years.

They survived Hurricane Irma, multiple moves and COVID-19, while simultaneously canvassing community leaders and applying for grants to acquire a place and funds to create a thriving community center that could relieve burdened health services, increase job performance, and retain residents through promoting wellness, happiness, and contentment. At this time, they feel they are on the verge of achieving their goal.

The JOY Center offers vibrant programs and lifelong learning experiences for people over 50 every Wednesday, both virtual and on-site. This bi-weekly column will feature the many dedicated people who are working to achieve this goal.

For further information contact Justolderyouthinc@gmail.com.



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