

**LIVING UNITED**  
*for*



**years**

**United Way of Suwannee Valley  
celebrates 50 years of serving the people  
of North-Central Florida.**

By KAYLA LOKEINSKY | Photos courtesy of Rita Dopp

# FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS

United Way of Suwannee Valley has impacted countless lives in the North-Central Florida region. From its humble beginning it has grown into a highly-valued community organization that has given millions of dollars and thousands of man hours to ensure the well being of the Suwannee River Valley.

2018 will mark the 50th anniversary for United Way of Suwannee Valley. Originally founded by prominent Columbia County residents as a way to help raise money for community organizations, its reach now extends to include Suwannee, Lafayette and Hamilton counties and has helped more than 37,500 residents in need in the past year alone.

## Getting Started

United Way of Suwannee Valley was incorporated on Oct. 10, 1968 and was originally named Lake City-Columbia County United Fund, Inc. The founding members included 21 Columbia County community leaders, including Thomas Brown, a Lake City native and lawyer who moved back to his hometown after graduating from University of Florida Law School in 1965.

When Brown moved back to town he was approached by several agencies about getting involved. As a former Boy Scout and Eagle Scout himself, he worked with the Boy Scouts of America as well as the American Red Cross before getting together with several colleagues to figure out a way to help all the agencies in need more efficiently.

“I talked with some other lawyers and we got together and agreed that there should be some way to get all these agencies together and have



Children at Happy House, a nationally-accredited, year-round preschool offering state subsidies, free VPK and free after school programs in Lake City, sport Live United T-shirts from United Way. Below: Columbia County Senior Services is just one of the many organizations that United Way of Suwannee Valley works to support.



## United Way of Suwannee Valley Affiliated Agencies

American Red Cross of Northeast Florida

Annie Mattox Recreation Center, Inc.

Boys & Girls Club of Columbia County

Boy Scouts of America: North Florida Council

CARC - Advocates for Citizens with Disabilities

CDS Family and Behavioral Health Services, Interface N.W.

Catholic Charities Bureau & Florida Gateway Food Bank

Children's Home Society of Florida - Mid-Florida Division

Columbia County Senior Services

Early Learning Coalition of Florida's Gateway

Girl Scouts of Gateway Council

Happy House

Love INC of Suwannee County

Meridian Behavioral Healthcare

Suwannee County Police Athletic League

Suwannee River Area Health Education Center

Suwannee River Economic Council

Suwannee Valley 4Cs Head Start/Early Head Start

The Arc North Florida

Three Rivers Legal Services

Vivid Visions

Voices for Children/Guardian Ad Litem

WellFlorida Council

one fundraiser to help all of them," Brown said. "As we went along we built up the United Way concept."

United Way's first fundraising campaign began in October 1968 with a goal of \$39,742.45. Although the first campaign fell short of its goal by raising \$29,261, it succeeded in instituting a coordinated effort of fundraising in support of local agencies into the community.

"We've come a long way since we got started," Brown said.

Brown, now semi-retired from law, is still actively involved with United Way. After being involved with the organization for 50 years, he knows exactly what it takes to have a successful fundraising campaign.



"You've got to think of how you can raise money not just from one person or a few people but from the entire community," Brown said. "See what you can do in a whole community and see how you can implement that to increase the giving. We've been very fortunate to be able to do that here."

United Way has been able to bring the entire Suwannee Valley community together to raise funds for its 23 affiliated agencies. In 2015-2016 United Way agencies provided more than \$27 million in services in the Suwannee Valley.

"The fiscal impact has been tremendous," said John Burns, who has been involved with United Way of Suwannee Valley since 1989. "We only were able to help a handful of folks back then and now we're helping thousands of people every day. You can see it everywhere in the community."

Burns has seen just how much of a fiscal impact United Way has on the community after seeing it gradually increase since he began working with the organization. When he was serving as the Division Chair in 1989, United Way was

Tom Brown was one of the original founding members of United Way of Suwannee Valley. He has been actively involved with the organization for the last 50 years.



barely able to raise \$100,000. When he became the Campaign Chair two years later, it raised \$200,000 for the first time.

“It’s amazing what we’ve accomplished,” Burns said.

Burns was recognized individually for his work with United Way at the organization’s annual meeting in March 2017. He was awarded the Presidential Volunteer Service Award, a prestigious honor after being nominated by the United Way of Suwannee Valley board.

“It was quite an honor,” Burns said. “I was very humbled by it and

very happy to receive it,” Burns said.

### Fighting for the Community

United Way Worldwide’s credo says, “United Way fights for the health, education and financial stability of every person in every community.”

Utilizing volunteers on all levels, United Way of Suwannee Valley works tirelessly to uphold this creed. The organization is a community impact and fundraising organization which advances the common good by identifying unmet commu-

nity needs and seeking to alleviate those needs through United Way of Suwannee Valley initiatives and the funding of affiliated health and human service agencies.

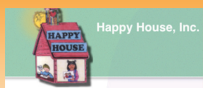
“It’s an unbelievable thing, what it does for the community,” said Chris Dampier, the current president of the United Way of Suwannee Valley Board of Directors.

Dampier got involved with United Way back in 1991 when a former employer asked him to help out with the organization. He’s been actively involved ever since.

“It’s the right thing to do, helping



United Way of Suwannee Valley celebrated the opening of its new office with a building open house and ribbon cutting on July 12, 2016. Holding the ribbon-cutting scissors are Gary Godwin, 2016-2017 president, board of directors; Rita Dopp, executive director; and Jim Moses, chair, Capital Campaign Committee.





A highlight of the annual community fundraising campaign kick-off event is the announcement of the funds already pledged through employee giving campaigns which conduct Pacesetter campaigns, completing their employee giving campaign prior to the general campaign kick off. PotashCorp-White Springs, the number one workplace campaign, annually announces its Pacesetter campaign figure at the kick off to get the campaign off to a strong start.

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**For more information on United Way of Suwannee Valley, call (386) 752-5604 or visit [www.unitedway-suwanneevalley.org](http://www.unitedway-suwanneevalley.org).**

the community,” Dampier said.

He encourages everyone in the community to come together and help out United Way of Suwannee Valley’s deserving agencies.

“Get involved,” Dampier said. “Come see what these agencies do. Once you get out and see what these agencies are all about you’d have to have a hard heart to not want to help out.”

United Way of Suwannee Valley has 23 partner agencies, including the Boys & Girls Club of Columbia County, American Red Cross of Northeast Florida and Columbia County Senior Services, just to name a few.

United Way has undertaken numerous projects to benefit the community over recent years. Since 1968 the local United Way has conducted fundraising campaigns in support of agencies providing an

array of safety net services to maintain community support systems.

In 2004 United Way of Suwannee Valley was recognized as the homeless coalition, which enables it to receive funds for projects serving homeless populations. Some other specific community projects undertaken addressed disaster preparation and weekend hunger backpack expansion. United Way also works to help children throughout the community with their reading skills through the ReadingPals initiative, a volunteer program where participants serve as ReadingPals for one hour a week to students.

Most recently, the Planning Committee elected to tackle three projects in support of the County Health Improvement Plan utilizing grant funds received by United Way. The projects are directed at impacting the infant mortality rate by pro-

moting infant safe sleep, expanding knowledge of infant and adult CPR and improving children’s oral health. These projects will be implemented in partnership with the Florida Departments of Health for Columbia, Suwannee, Lafayette and Hamilton Counties.

“Collectively, all of the agency funding and community impact projects undertaken by United Way serve to strengthen the community by providing supports and services addressing health, education and financial stability through United Way and the affiliated agencies, which also offer a variety of programs available to all residents,” United Way of Suwannee Valley Executive Director Rita Dopp said.

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