

Michelle Mitchell



She's CoreSRQ's inaugural Chief Executive Officer who came on board in April after a long career with newspapers including the Sarasota Herald-Tribune and the Tampa Bay Times.

It's her first foray into the nonprofit sector, but having grown up in Sarasota, her business, marketing and people skills will go far to keep CoreSRQ on solid footing.

CoreSRQ and its various, previous iterations has been in Sarasota for more than 70 years, first as the Sarasota YMCA then as Save our Y, Our Y, and now as the phoenixed CoreSRQ.

Most fitness centers, gyms, etc., are typically all business — you get in, puff away at your preferred equipment or classes, mop your brow and head to your car.

CoreSRQ, formerly known as the Sarasota YMCA, has always been much more than that. Regulars greet each other, many stay for coffee and conversation, some play cards together. Generations have seen their kids and later grandkids take swimming lessons, gymnastics or basketball classes.

So when the then-Y was in danger of shutting down due to costs and waning memberships, members were upset not just that they were going to possibly lose their favorite workout place, but also lose a part of their social life — even their history.

This past spring, CoreSRQ hired its first ever CEO who knows a lot about Sarasota and especially how to promote, market and create business plans. Michelle has had a long career in newspapers back when they were called just that and not media groups. She grew up in Sarasota, lives here and went to the University of South Florida, earning a Business degree.

Only a few months into the job, Michelle says it's still about listening to staff and members as we walk the spacious CoreSRQ campus on Bahia Vista at Euclid Avenue (CoreSRQ also owns and operates the Palmer Ranch location in south Sarasota County).

It's a busy Monday morning (the busiest time there, she explains) with classes going on in their largest classroom, the equipment and weights area are filling up, the pool is full of kids, racquetball courts are mostly full and there's a steady stream of people coming in and out of the entrance.

It's a far cry from a few years ago when members like myself were told the facility would be closing. Michelle heard about the CEO position from a friend who spotted it on the Poynter Institute website and forwarded it to her.

In addition to listening, Michelle has been reaching out to other nonprofits to seek possible synergies while also promoting CoreSRQ since many may not know about the name change. Michelle's skillset is solid in marketing having led advertising sales in the media industry for over 30 years, starting her career with the Herald Tribune Media Group (Sarasota Herald-Tribune) in 1991.

She recalls the early '90s and how hard it was to find a job during the recession that was taking place then. Her family on her dad's side had been in the newspaper business and her grandmother even owned a weekly here. Work was hard to find, but her dad, a veteran newspaper man, told her, "newspapers are always hiring."

So Michelle went to the Herald-Tribune's offices (where the Publix south of Sarasota Ford now stands) and found a job in the classified dept. She successfully rose through the advertising ranks at the HT then went to work for the The Tampa Bay Times (then the St. Petersburg Times) in a senior leadership role for over 10 years and then returned to the Sarasota Herald-Tribune five years ago to become a Regional VP of Advertising & Sales.

Michelle calls this position her "second

act" and says that even if she hadn't gotten the job, she'd have helped CoreSRQ in some capacity. After all, her children played basketball and gymnastics at the former Y. Michelle was a member and played racquetball there, swam there — she even trained for a marathon there.

Michelle has two children, a daughter who graduated from Sarasota High School and Florida State University; and a son, a graduate of Pine View who is now attending University of South Florida in Tampa.

Rehashing things briefly, The Sarasota Family YMCA closed its two fitness centers, Evalyn Sadlier Jones Branch at Potter Park Drive and the Frank G. Berlin Sr. Branch on South Euclid Avenue on Sept. 13, 2019 due to financial issues. Before that reality had a chance to sink in, a grassroots effort called "Save our Y" was underway. Michelle notes that 400 people showed up on a rainy night to gather and formulate a plan for keeping the Y open.

Two large donations came in from individuals who contributed a half million each and over a million more came in from individuals in varying amounts to total \$2.2 million. CoreSRQ owns their land and their buildings. The name was chosen in part because "cor" means heart in Latin as one supporter noted, and CoreSRQ is adorned with heart artwork throughout the building including Michelle's office.

Since Michelle's arrival, CoreSRQ raised over \$10,000 during the 2022 Giving Challenge, pushing them to over \$100,000 in donations this year. (You can support CoreSRQ via The Louis & Gloria Flanzer Philanthropic Trust which is continuing their 1:1 matching challenge in 2022 to benefit local nonprofits. All donations between \$5 and \$500 will be 100% matched).

CoreSRQ has partnered with The Bay Park Conservancy (BPC) to provide park visitors with a series of free, outdoor health and wellness classes taught by CoreSRQ's certified trainers. Classes are offered every weekday morning at The Bay (near the Van Wezel) for all ages and experience levels. (There's an article also in this issue that lists the fitness classes that are being offered.) Michelle did the Boot Camp and is planning on taking the Tai Chi.

Michelle says her meet and greets "have allowed me to hear so many wonderful stories, positive feedback and identify opportunities for us to continue to be the Best Health Club in Sarasota and continue to give back to our community." Giving back is done through scholarships and subsidized memberships for those "who want to engage with our community, but are means-constrained." Michelle is taking CoreSRQ back to its roots as a community place, but adding a business model the will make the nonprofit stay on solid footing.

And another thing that differentiates CoreSRQ from other fitness centers is that they offer educational seminars on topics like stress reduction as well as babysitting and lifeguard training, CPR certification, child watch — even a safety class for realtors. Pickleball is extremely popular as are Tai Chi, Yoga, Zumba Dancetrance to name a few. No wonder their hashtag is "more than a gym."

Given the unique provenance of CoreSRQ and its long history, Michelle calls CoreSRQ "a startup with a long legacy." Michelle encourages the community to come in for a visit and a tour and adds, "The future looks bright." 🌟

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