

Christine Johnson

President
of the
Conservation
Foundation
of the Gulf Coast

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The breathtaking scenery—beaches, parks, islands, and preserves—draws people to the west coast of Florida. But conflicts arise between developers who view certain pieces of land as opportunities for residential or commercial use and preservationists who view that same land as a legacy to be cherished and protected. In 2003 ardent residents saw the writing on the wall and formed the now titled Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast to preserve delicate land parcels that primarily border bodies of water. Today, the mission is as strong as it was in 2003. As only the second President of the organization, Christine P. Johnson, a fifth-generation Floridian, is adamant about her role. She saves land. Forever. Over 8,600 acres in 33 properties—about 13 square miles of land—have been preserved since the Foundation, a nationally accredited land trust, was established.

“I save land that the community holds in high regard,” says Christine. “An 18-month research project asked community members what they wanted to preserve. The results showed that first and foremost they wanted land adjacent to fresh and salt water saved. The community did not want to lose access to what they considered the most valuable conservation property. Second, they wanted preservation of rare and endangered habitats for plants and animals. We also acquire ‘donut holes’ where a piece of land is surrounded by preserved land. The decision to allow public access is determined by the uniqueness of the land and what activities could be available at the site.”

Jon Thaxton, Senior Vice President for Community Investment at the Gulf Coast Community Foundation and former Sarasota County Commissioner, has received awards for his advocacy for the environment and conservation of fragile lands. Jon, a fourth-generation Floridian, says, “The Conservation Foundation of Sarasota (now the Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast) founded by Albert and Pauline Joerger was able to engage donors who had never before contributed to environmental conservation causes. Christine has worked tirelessly to expand this outreach to include government partners, philanthropists, and most importantly children and families. The diverse Conservation Foundation membership is now uniquely qualified to carry on the multi-generational Sarasota heritage of preserving natural areas and parklands for generations to come.”

When Albert Joerger retired, a national search was conducted for his successor and Christine was hired in 2011. Christine says, “The mission makes my heart sing. It is about the exciting legacy of saving land forever. This has a significant impact on the community. I had a barefooted childhood. I want the same for my children and generations of children to come. I want them to be outside and enjoy the environment. Children understand the science of how land and water work together.”

The Foundation’s major acquisitions are Bay Preserve in Osprey on Little Sarasota Bay and the Robinson Preserve in Manatee County. The Bay Preserve property consisting of the 1931 Burrows-Matson House and carriage house listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Sarasota County Historic Register was purchased with a Florida Forever \$6.6 million grant and serves as the Foundation’s headquarters. Robinson Preserve, a 600-acre coastal preserve, is expanding to include an education center and other recreational amenities. The controversial purchase of the 5,700-acre

Orange Hammock Ranch, the largest piece of property that is still privately owned, is a current priority. Sheps Island and Murphy Marsh are in line for purchase in the near future.

Acquiring sensitive property is akin to putting a puzzle together. The pieces must fit to have a completed puzzle that looks like the photo on the front of the box. Sarasota, Manatee, Charlotte, and Lee counties are one piece of the puzzle. Add in the numerous cities in these counties, two Water Districts, 33 different agencies, non-profits, for-profit corporations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State and Federal EPA’s, and other agencies and the task of putting the pieces together becomes a monumental undertaking. Once the pieces look like they are going to fit, funding from local, State and Federal governments must be secured.

Alan Maio, Chairman of the Sarasota County Commission, says, “Christine is good friend that I always seek for technical expertise. We have worked together preserving land that is unique to Sarasota County. She manages the affairs of the Foundation with poise, develops positive relationships with people, and possesses an abundance of technical knowledge in her field. I rely on her ability to think issues through and I have never been disappointed.”

Christine talks about the tendency of people to pigeon-hole other people. Christine knows that some people pigeon-hole conservationists as tree huggers. Holding an MBA and having worked for Arthur Andersen Business in every state except six, she believes working for a non-profit that conserves land is a noble undertaking. Preserving land improves the surrounding area and increases the value of property. Not only enriching the community aesthetically, land preservation also produces increased taxes.

“I want to do things that are fun. If it isn’t fun, I don’t do it. There is a learning curve at all times but I like a challenge such as acquiring land raising operating funds from individuals and family foundations. The reward is seeing children outside interacting with nature and learning about math and biology and art. For adults we sponsor art lectures, author talks, and art exhibits,” says Christine.

Christine is a member of the boards of Visit Sarasota County and the Science and Environment Council and is a member of the current Leadership Florida class. She is on the Executive Council for the Gulf Coast Partnership for Land Conservation and the Land Trust Leadership Council for the national Land Trust Alliance. She earned a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration at the College of Charleston and an MBA from the University of Florida.

She worked for Fortune 100 and 500 companies before entering the non-profit organization world where she led major fundraising initiatives for Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida and Ringing College of Art and Design. Christine met her husband Bill, owner of Brilliant Harvest Solar, in graduate school at the University of Florida where they were surprised to learn that they both hailed from the same part of the state. She attended Palmetto High School and he attended Pine View School. Their 15-year old daughter Grace and 13-year old son Tommy both attend Pine View School. It is not surprising that she and the family enjoy outdoor activities such as biking, sailing, and hiking. 🍷

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