

# west coast woman 2/17

## Ashley Brown

President and CEO of the unified Women's Resource Center.

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For many decades women have had a resource center to rely on for a variety of services and programs in both Sarasota and Manatee counties. On January 1 these two centers with similar goals, missions, and programs became one united Women's Resource Center with the centers in Bradenton, Sarasota, and Venice now under one umbrella.

The merger did not occur in a vacuum. All stakeholders were asked for input during hundreds of hours of community involvement leading up to the unanimous vote by each center's Board to implement the merger.

The merger and the appointment of the Women's Resource Center of Manatee's Executive Director Ashley Brown as President and CEO of the unified Women's Resource Center occurred at an opportune time for many reasons. (The Sarasota WRC didn't have an Executive Director at the time of the merger discussion.)

"In February 2015, the boards of both organizations saw the opportunity to create regional programming. There had been discussion over the years about merging, but the timing was never right. The thoughtful and deliberate process that led to the merger of both organizations occurred over a period of months. The overarching excitement is the opportunity to take the best of each centers' programs across the region. The merger brought together the Sarasota and Venice sites of the Women's Resource Center of Sarasota County and the Women's Resource Center of Manatee site," Ashley says.

Ashley describes the Women's Resource Center as her avocation that melds well with her passion and belief in everyone developing a strong sense of self. She feels people are on a scale from surviving to thriving and the Women's Resource Center helps people wherever they are on the scale. She sees people move from overwhelmed and hopeless to optimistic and actively engaged in their lives.

The Center offers the Challenge program for women who are in a transition phase of their life, career development classes including employability skills and resume building, enrichment classes such as health and wellness workshops and yoga, and empowerment programs that includes peer resource advising and support groups. The extensive calendar of events is available on the website and in print at the centers and in the community.

In 2016 the Women's Resource Center (all sites) served 5,500 clients with 2,000 participating directly in programs, referred 3,500 clients to community resources, and tracked 20,000 hours of volunteer assistance. Diverse funding sources include donors, foundations, corporations, Florida Department of Economic Opportunity grant, the Manatee resale store, and the Renaissance Legacy luncheons on March 21 in Sarasota and on May 5 in Bradenton. The percentage of funding that goes directly to client services is 90 per cent.

Describing herself as impatient, Ashley is excited about the opportunities, but also laments the challenge of finding time to establish new processes and procedures and to communicate the impact of the Women's Resource Center. Her desire is to respect the rich history in both counties and the women who laid the foundations for both organizations.

While the merged organization—the Women's Resource Center—has one Board of Directors and staffing in place, the task ahead is to brand the organization and review programming. The first task includes a new website (both websites are still operational), logo, social media, and messaging.

The second task is to review programs at all three sites. A consultant partially funded through a grant from the I3 (Invest in Incredible Program) of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation is assisting in three separate categories: employability skills training, emotional well being and empowerment, and peer advising. The goal is to standardize programming at all three sites. Ashley says she would like to grow the mental health programs in Sarasota that have been strong at the Manatee center and expand peer advising in Manatee that has been strong at the Sarasota center. She also strives for more community outreach by working with other non-profits on case management, support and empowerment groups.

Amanda Horne, a previous employee of Women's Resource Center of Manatee and host of several of the center's events, says, "Ashley sees the possibility of improvement in everything and is not afraid to take on the challenge. Ashley's vision and empathetic understanding of the issues facing women and families in our community encompasses far more than just the Women's Resource Center. She takes this into all aspects of her life... when one of her friends gets THE call for lunch we immediately wonder what kind of intervention she is planning on us. She is a visionary leader with a huge heart."

After college Ashley worked for Westinghouse in the power transformer remanufacturing business until Ohio Transformer in Palmetto recruited her to be planning manager. She recalls, "I had a challenging job and I spent the first two years in Manatee County working—a lot. When the company was sold, I was fired. I volunteered at the Women's Resource Center in Bradenton teaching computer classes and eventually became a board member. I left the board to become the development officer in 2003 and became the executive director in 2004 with only one other staff person."

Ashley believes that non-profit organizations must collaborate and work together to serve the community more efficiently and effectively. Her short-term goal is to build Women's Resource Center's cohesive brand across the region and to provide access to women through relevant programming. Ashley's long-term goal is to build a stronger collaboration and network with the five Florida resource centers serving women in Tampa, Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Titusville, and Naples and to establish a national network of centers.

Born in Carrollton, Georgia, Ashley grew up in the South—Georgia, West Virginia, and South Carolina. She earned a Bachelor's degree in political science from the College of Charleston. Her mother resides in South Carolina, her father lives in Louisiana, and her brothers live in South Carolina and Mississippi. Her husband Jim is a consulting electrical engineer and she has two step-daughters, one in Chicago and one in Milwaukee. In her leisure time she reads fiction and historical fiction, travels, enjoys a rare date night with her husband, and attends silly movies with her girlfriends. Her latest reading is *The Last Days of Light* by Graham Moore.

Ashley's life's lesson to all of us is to not take ourselves too seriously. She says if you make choices based on good information and you have good intentions, you can't go wrong. When you have missteps along the way, just keep moving forward. Ashley has provided opportunities to many people over the years and we look forward to a successful merged organization under her able leadership. STORY: Carol Darling IMAGE: Evelyn England

Caption l-r: Front row: Amanda Horne, Linda Mickelberg, Ashley Brown, Jaymie Carter, Suzanne Fugate (WRC Board Chair), Cheryl Herbold

Next row: Leslie Tilton, Mandy Quinones (WRC board member), Kaylea Schule, Nancy Wollin Cook, Michelle Firth-Szabo and Brenda Parker (WRC board member)