



Land Tours

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26

Breakfast | GCCF Philanthropy Center History & Tours Overview

LOCATION:
Gulf Coast Community Foundation
GCCF Philanthropy Center
1549 State Street, Sarasota, FL 34236

TIME: 8:45 a.m. registration
9:00 a.m. session

BUS DEPARTURE: 10:00 a.m.



John McCarthy, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

John McCarthy is the Vice President for Regional History for Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. Mr. McCarthy is passionate about Florida ecology and history and is well known for his encyclopedic knowledge of the Sarasota region, which he shares through presentations, tours and publications.



John is a native Floridian, and worked with Sarasota County Government for 32 years as an Environmental Specialist, County Historian, and Director of Parks and Recreation. John joined the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens team in 2020. John’s work in the community has been recognized in several awards including *Hero of History* (Historical Society of Sarasota County), *Partner of the Year* (Junior League of Sarasota), *Citizen of the Year* (Council of Neighborhood Associations), and *Champion of Architecture* (Gulf Coast Chapter AIA). John was nominated to join LAI in 2024.

Jon Thaxton, GCCF

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Jon Thaxton creates and implements Gulf Coast Community Foundation’s key strategies for transforming our nonprofit community while providing leadership on emerging issues. Jon joined Gulf Coast in 2012 after serving 12 years as a Sarasota County Commissioner.



At Gulf Coast, Jon works with community partners on initiatives that will transform our region and improve public policies.

Jon has provided leadership in the creation of a system of care for the homeless, a food distribution system focusing on healthy and nutritious foods, and the improvement of affordable housing policies. Jon led a multidisciplinary team of experts who created the Water Quality Playbook and is working on other transformative projects, including extensions of the Legacy Trail and creation of the Sarasota downtown bayfront park, The Bay.

Jon is also recognized as a leader for protecting the natural environment. A fifth generation Sarasotan, he was raised on a family farm near Osprey. He began his environmental advocacy at Venice High School in 1974, and in 1996 he was featured in National Geographic for his efforts to protect endangered species.

Elliott Falcione, Bradenton Area Visitors & Convention Center

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Elliott Falcione, a Pittsburgh native, brings over 37 years of experience in sports and tourism, having built his career with just two organizations: the Pittsburgh Pirates Baseball Club and the Bradenton Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, where he has been director since 2009.

Throughout his journey, Elliott has cultivated a collaborative and creative environment, working with talented teams and fostering community partnerships to deliver exceptional service and innovative approaches. Elliott's philosophy centers on seizing today’s opportunities and meeting future challenges, rather than dwelling on past successes or setbacks. As he puts it, “Let’s apply our abilities today, and not look back, or worry about tomorrow. Elliott Falcione is the Executive Director for the Bradenton Area Visitors & Convention Center.



Nathan Benderson Park, Finish Tower

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26



LOCATION:
Nathan Benderson Park, Finish Tower
5851 Nathan Benderson Circle,
Sarasota, FL 34235

TIME: 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

World-class, FISA Class, 2,000-meter rowing & training course.

Sara Kane, Sarasota County UF/IFAS Extension & Sustainability

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Sara Kane is the Sustainability and Resilience Manager for Sarasota County, in the University of Florida/IFAS Extension & Sustainability department. She oversees sustainability improvements within government operations and the efforts to create a sustainable community across the region. Her responsibilities include promoting energy efficiency, green building practices, renewable energy, electric vehicles, and waste reduction strategies to residents and businesses; ensuring sustainability improvements in county facilities; employee and community education; resilience and climate planning; and grant management.



Sara has worked in the environmental field for 21 years including positions at the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program and Mote Marine Laboratory. Sara has a Masters in Global Sustainability with a concentration in water from the University of South Florida.

Erin Duggan, Visit Sarasota

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Erin Duggan, CDME, is the President & CEO of Visit Sarasota County, where she leads the organization’s strategic marketing, sales, communications, research, and destination brand management efforts. In this role, she guides a team of tourism professionals focused on positioning Sarasota County as a premier travel destination while ensuring tourism continues to generate strong economic impact, support local businesses, sustain employment, and enhance quality of life for residents through tourism and sales tax revenues.



Erin earned a Bachelor of Science in Communications Arts from Florida Southern College in 1999. Prior to joining Visit Sarasota County, she held roles with the City of Casselberry, United Way of Manatee County, and the Economic Development Corporation of Sarasota County. She joined Visit Sarasota County in 2005 in a communications role and advanced through multiple leadership positions before being appointed President & CEO in 2023.

In 2012, Erin earned her Certified Destination Management Executive (C.D.M.E.) credential through Purdue University and Destinations International, reflecting her commitment to professional excellence in destination leadership. She is actively engaged in community and industry service, currently serving on the VISIT FLORIDA Board, Destinations Florida Board, the Lakewood Ranch Community Activities Board, and The Community Foundation of Sarasota Board. She is also a member of Leadership Florida’s Cornerstone Class 42.

Transportation & Lunch Schedule

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 26

BUS DEPARTURE TO UTC: 12:15 p.m.

UNIVERSITY TOWN CENTER (UTC) : 12:40 p.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Sarasota’s shopping and dining destination with 150+ stores and restaurants. The Mall at University Town Center (UTC) is a premier destination for shopping and entertainment on Florida’s Suncoast.



LUNCH: 12:40 p.m. - 2:00 p.m. | Selection of Restaurants | UTC
Please make lunch reservations prior to arrival at UTC.

UTC Dining Destinations

BUS DEPARTURE: 2:00 p.m.

The Celery Fields, Sarasota Audubon Society

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25

LOCATION:

Celery Fields
6799 Palmer Blvd,
Sarasota, FL 34240

TIME: 2:30 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.



The Celery Fields – an ideal location for wildlife watching and passive recreational use. The 400+ acre site is also the County’s primary storm water collection zone, allowing it to serve a dual purpose of public safety and recreation. This park features several boardwalks with observation decks, is part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, and houses the Sarasota Audubon Nature Center.

SPEAKER: John McCarthy

BUS DEPARTURE TO DOWNTOWN: 4:30 p.m.

Sara Reisinger, Sarasota Audubon Society

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Sara moved to West Bradenton in 1987 and has lived in the Manasota area most of her life. She currently resides about a mile from the Sarasota Audubon Nature Center with her husband, two daughters and their two dogs. After working almost 20 years in the retail industry as a buyer, traveling the world and designing products for national brands, she left her career to focus on raising her children and assisting her husband’s law firm. She has a passion for conservation and wants to be able to preserve the wild Florida she experienced as a child kayaking in Palma Sola Bay and visiting Myakka River State Park for future generations to enjoy.



Christine Johnson, Big Waters Land Trust

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Christine P. Johnson is a fifth generation Floridian who shares the Big Waters’ vision for the human and natural words of Southwest Florida to flourish together. After earning a BS in Business Administration from the College of Charleston and an MBA from the University of Florida, Christine worked in management and consulted with Fortune 500 companies in fields ranging from manufacturing to media. Her Florida roots run deep though and this Manatee County native couldn’t stay away for long.



Christine has worked in our region’s nonprofit sector since 2004. She successfully completed the Girl Scouts of Gulfcoast Florida’s \$7M capital campaign to build a regional headquarters and then served as Director of Development for Ringling College of Art and Design overseeing their largest fundraising campaign, leading a team of five to raise over \$100M. In October of 2011, she was named President of Big Waters where she works to save land, ensure good land conservation public policy, and that all have access to natural places. She is past chair of the Science and Environment Council, past chair of Visit Sarasota County, board member of Crowley Museum & Nature Center, past chair of the Partnership for Gulf Coast Land Conservation, vice chair of the Florida Alliance of Land Trusts, on the national Land Trust Alliance Leadership Council, and a member of the International Women’s Forum. Nature is where Christine’s family spends their time together. Her husband, Bill, and their college-aged children, Grace and Tommy, enjoy hiking, camping, backpacking, and being anywhere there is water to swim, fish, sail, or scuba.

Jeanne Dubi, Sarasota Audubon Society

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Before moving to Florida in 1997, Dubi lived and worked in New York City. Her last position in New York was as VP/General Manager of Harper’s Magazine. Dubi received her MBA from Iona College in New Rochelle in 1986.

For the past 28 years, Dubi has devoted much of her time to birding and to conservation of habitat in Sarasota County. In January 1997, she began a survey of the birds of the Celery Fields, a 440-acre storm water retention site east of I-75. By the end of that year, she had tallied 132 species. With that information, she approached the Sarasota Audubon Society with a proposal to protect the Fields from intense public use. With the full support of Sarasota County, the Fields have been designated as an area of passive use, and the bird species count now stands at 259 species. The Celery Fields is a site on the Great Florida Birding Trail.

In October 2015, Sarasota Audubon opened their Nature Center and native plant gardens at the Celery Fields. It is open from 9am – noon daily from October 15 through May 15 each year with extended weekend hours January through April.

As well as teaching birding classes, Dubi has given numerous presentations to schools, children’s groups, adult centers, and local community organizations. She is on the board of directors of the Sarasota Audubon Society.

Dubi’s many awards include:

Charles H. Callison Award – National Audubon Society Volunteer of the Year, 2021. Voice of Sarasota Award – Sarasota County Tourism & Hospitality, 2019.

Sandy Gilbert, Solutions to Avoid Red Tide

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHY

Sandy is a retired publishing executive from TIME and Smithsonian Magazines who is the Chairman/CEO of START (Solution To Avoid Red Tide). In his fifteen-year tenure at START, he has overseen the Shuck ‘N Save Oyster Program in Manatee County that has restored local oyster reefs. He also helped sponsor the clam seeding program with the Sarasota Bay Watch that has seeded over 2 million clams in the Bay and administered the Healthy Pond Collaborative’s stormwater pond enhancement program that has planted over 60 miles of new pond shoreline in Sarasota and Manatee Counties.



BUS DEPARTURE: 4:30 p.m.

RETURN TO DOWNTOWN & HOTEL AREA: 5:00 p.m.

Thank You For Your Support

OUR PARTNERS

