

Councils of Excellence

Honoring super SCs across Florida

By Risa G. Merl, senior editorial assistant

From east coast to west, many Student Councils across Florida are making marks on their schools, communities, and states. Along with Lake Placid, these four schools grabbed *Florida Leader's* attention with their creative thinking, state involvement, and dedication.

What's a True Leader?

At **West Orange High School** in Winter Garden, the SC can tell you what a leader is through its motto: "A true leader is someone who's a servant of all." SC's main purpose is to serve and support West Orange and the community. Students Morgan Blakeslee and Shannon Power serve as state co-treasurers in the Florida Association of Student Councils. Through this position, they host the state convention in April. Over the past few years, West Orange's SC officers have held the district positions of president and secretary.

According to SC Advisor Wendy Cartwright, the group's main goal this year is to increase communication and participation at both the district and state levels. West Orange has already made progress by inviting schools to the FASC District Three meeting they hosted in September. SC leaders sent out invitations and made follow-up calls to every school in their district, whether or not the school was a FASC member. These efforts increased attendance at the meeting by 30 percent.

West Orange's SC has a flair for unique food drives, such as the community service project where they collect holiday items to donate to local migrant families. "We give the families Christmas trees with decorations, a turkey dinner with all the trimmings, and clothes and toys from a wish list that the families complete," says Peter Abatiello, SC co-advisor. SC also does "Trick-or-Treat for the Hungry." "Our big kids trick-or-treat for canned goods," says Cartwright. "Through activities like these, we encourage our students to become better citizens." Another SC favorite is hosting the American Cancer Society charity event, "Relay for Life."

After finishing any activity or project, SC leaders evaluate themselves, analyzing what they did well and what they need to improve on. "We feel that we can learn something every time we participate in a project," Abatiello says.

By surveying students to get their opinions on school issues, West Orange's

SC has formed a very close working relationship with the administration. "The administration looks to the SC to be the voice of the student body," Cartwright says. "We're very lucky to have an administration that supports our council and helps us reach our goals."

President's Project

This year, SC members Hector Maestre and Jose Pagan at **Colonial High School** in Orlando serve as FASC co-presidents. In designing a community service project for every school in the state to participate in, Pagan and Maestre wanted to implement a project that hadn't been done before, one that students could become passionate about. The project they created is "Save All of Florida's Animals" (SAFA). "From helping protect manatees to collecting supplies for animal shelters, no matter what part of the state you're in, every school can do something to help the animals," says Cindy Andrews, SC advisor. Manatees, Florida panthers, the Everglades, and coral reefs can all benefit. Colonial contributed by hosting a pep-rally where all proceeds were donated to a local no-kill animal shelter.

Being a part of FASC's executive board is nothing new for Colonial. Over the past years, Colonial students have served as FASC vice president and treasurer and held the district president position four times. "I think it's the SC's experience that's earned them the position of president," Andrews says. "We've obtained a lot of experience at both the local and state level, and this is how it pays off." Colonial's SC is active at the national level as well. Maestre is part of the National Youth Leadership Council, which sponsored "Freedom's Answer," a program designed to raise voter turnout on Election Day 2002.

Colonial's SC participates in 100 activities each year, some annually repeated and many new projects. "The largest and most successful activity we hold is our annual Thanksgiving Assembly," Maestre says. The event is a school-wide food drive that benefits less-fortunate community members. When the program first began over 20 years ago, Colonial collected food for 15 families; now, they collect enough to feed 350 families.

"One thing that makes our council stand out from others is that we endeavor to be as well-balanced as possible," Andrews says. "FASC suggests nine categories, and we participate in three activities from each category every nine weeks." How does Colonial's SC constantly come up with new ideas to satisfy each category? "We have become more organized this year by assigning committee groups," Maestre says. "We've succeeded in increasing our member involvement and increasing the total number of projects we're completing." Each nine-week period, the SC divides into committees representing an FASC category, which then brainstorm project ideas. "They're



Vero Beach High Student Government members Stephanie Springer and Sara Bell work in the Freedom Garden, one of SG's many projects.

encouraged to look to TV shows, books, and hobbies—anything that'll be a source of inspiration," Andrew says.

Communication is the Key

A major goal of many SCs this year is to improve communication. **Vero Beach High School's** Student Government goes a step further by basing its campaign promises on its slogan for both district and state elections: "The key to success is communication." This year, Vero Beach students Kat Boss and Hollie Billero are serving the office of District Five president. "We're working to improve communication between students, and students and the administration," says Millie Del

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Grosso, SG advisor. They're also emphasizing stronger communication between schools in the district.

This group worked hard to improve the classic homecoming festivities this year. Most schools do the typical dance and parade, but Vero Beach's SG wanted homecoming to stand out. Interestingly enough, a new tradition they implemented recognized the old. "We started 'oldest living alumni' recognition," Del Grosso says. "During half-time of the game, we honored 1920s alumni by name and 1930s alumni in person." Homecoming

is a major fundraiser for any school, but Vero Beach also hosts fundraisers that show off more than the football talent, such as an annual car show, a talent show, and a battle-of-the-bands competition where SG encourages new talent.

Besides improving communication and homecoming, Vero Beach's SG members have endeavored to improve themselves. "We've gone from being a very school-based, insular organization to being very active, especially in the community," Del Grosso says. SG has increased participation in the annual Habitat for Humanity project and implemented a unique "senior citizens prom" for low-income housing developments in the area.

They also created new projects to better the atmosphere at the high school. Those who have changed schools know how difficult it can be to get used to a new one, and SG leaders try to eliminate some of this initial stress with their "ambassador program." Ambassadors show new students around school to help them get acclimated, and introduce them to others in class and at lunch.

SG also improved its relations with the administration. "We have a new principal who's very supportive of students and



West Orange High SC President Bray McMillan (left) and SC Advisor Wendy Cartwright lay low to finish decorations for the community Christmas parade float.

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Student Government," Del Grosso says. At the beginning of the year, the outgoing and incoming SG members sat down with administrators and went through the student handbook page by page, which let the students suggest policy changes for the following year. "The administration actively seeks input from the students on a variety of issues," Del Grosso says.

Show Your Spirit

Not to be outdone, the Student Council of **Winter Park High School** also has improved its relationship with the administration this year. "In the past, the administration at our school was very traditional and didn't let our council try new things to improve our school," says Brian Prokes, District Three vice president. "However, this year was a pleasant surprise when the administrative team was more lenient to trying new things."

Many new projects implemented this year are improving school spirit. SC hosted the "Welcome Back Wildcats" dance and nearly doubled attendance compared to last year. Making the pep rallies free so everyone could come and cheer for the school was an easy way to

boost school spirit. Winter Park's SC hosted a "blackout game" that got students pumped up by encouraging them to wear black, the school color, to intimidate their opponent. To improve school spirit on a daily basis, the group has had the cheerleaders, band, or ROTC perform at lunch and has a raffle or contest to get students excited. This year, at SC's behest, the administration agreed to play music on the intercom between classes every Friday.

The SC fulfilled one goal of holding a district office by having Prokes serve as District

Three vice president. In January, Winter Park will host a district-wide meeting. Another goal they've worked hard to achieve was to be even more active through community service projects. Many community organizations ask Winter Park's SC to take part in their projects. "We try to never be routine with our projects," Prokes says. "We're always happy to take part in new endeavors and to work with our community." But the SC doesn't try to hog all the good will. "If we know that there is another group that is better for the job, we always point them in the right direction."

Winter Park's SC didn't build a good relationship with the administration overnight, but instead they've proven themselves as a hardworking and trustworthy group that'll get the job done. This SC has earned the respect of their administration and now have what they call "a great working relationship." "They're the most dedicated group of hard workers I've seen," says Marissa Detar, SC advisor. 🐾

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Taking Home the Gold

How Student Councils compete statewide

The Florida Association of Student Councils holds the Medallion Council competition to select the best in the state, and Student Councils in good standing with FASC compete for bronze, silver, or gold positions. They're judged on many factors, including how many and what projects they participate in. SCs also can earn extra points for hosting conferences or by being a FASC officer school.

Lake Placid High School's Student Government Association has held the status of "Gold Medallion" for the past 10 years. "We do over 87 projects a year, and that qualifies us for Gold

Medallion status," says Jennifer Jernigan, SGA vice president. SGA thinks up unique projects in categories required by FASC to earn Gold Medallion year after year. Categories include community service, environment, and faculty/staff relations. Working with these categories challenges SGA's projects to go beyond school-related issues.

But what do SCs get out of earning Medallion Council membership? Vero Beach High School SC members asked this question when their advisor, Millie Del Grosso, encouraged them to try for it. "Someone asked me what the council would get out of it. When I said recognition at the convention, they wondered why they should work that much harder just for that," Del Grosso says. She opted for a

different approach and took SC members to a district convention where schools were being recognized for unique projects and for being outstanding councils. When one student asked why their council wasn't being recognized, Del Grosso brought up her suggestion to earn Medallion Council membership and told him that the councils were receiving their "recognition." Group members rethought their decision and submitted projects at the state convention. They not only won awards for three projects, but they also took home Gold Medallion last year. "The students had to decide that they were willing to work for that recognition," Del Grosso says.

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