

## Systems Are Not “People Shaped”

A few weeks ago I was at a big kickoff event for a new county-wide project to address what our communities feel are the biggest concerns we face. It definitely had its moments and I was all eyes and ears ready to absorb new info and be inspired by the power of coming together for a purpose. One of the last things that I heard that morning was to show the promise of next steps – the speaker said that basically in order to do anything meaningful – you, of course, need a building which – good news! - was forthcoming, and you need staff, which they had also secured. Nothing wrong with those bits of good news but still, it made me stop in my tracks. I felt a big “wait a minute” well up in me.

Peace4Tarpon has no building and no staff and yet...and yet, we are thriving and creating a better future for our community. Those last remarks made me think to myself – that it ain’t necessarily so. Not at all.

I think all the time about our Community Initiative – Peace4Tarpon - and what it means to be an Initiative. It’s not uncommon for folks to refer to us as a “program” at first and that’s no surprise really. A program is much easier to understand than an ‘initiative’ or the even more elusive “community initiative”. What I can say for sure is that we are an evolving model in the process of observing our own evolution.

When we first formed nearly 10 years ago, I was often asked “What does Peace4Tarpon do”? Back then, I didn’t know how to answer and wasn’t quite sure myself. Other than saying we were connectors with a vision to transform Tarpon Springs into a Trauma-Informed Community. Because we were the first, we couldn’t really say we were like anyone else because, obviously, there was no one to compare us to.

Here are a few things I have observed and experienced during our journey of nearly 10 years.

First, things tend to gravitate toward the well-worn grooves – and become yet another version of what already is rather than something entirely new. The tendency is to continue creating even more organizations and coalitions, based on existing models. We habitually go toward wanting to train and train the trainers and then gather data to review. Data helps, no doubt. It’s the powerful data within the ACE study that drew me to this work, but beyond data and training, there are so many more possibilities.

In the beginning, the idea of an unfunded volunteer-based community model seemed wildly improbable and kind of absurd. We have had the experience of established organizations offering to help us by absorbing us into their system – we declined. Recently, I heard this statement - systems are not “people shaped”. I am finding that to be true. Communities, on the other hand, are not only people shaped, they *are* people. All of us together with our varying degrees of personal trauma stories and ACE scores – that’s who we are. Our task is to give voice to every single one of us, to support each other. To learn to trust and build relationships with one another. To love each other. To be with each other, and listen without judgement. As one of our early posters says, “Listening is an act of love.”

To be a community at peace is the goal and peace comes by healing our own trauma histories as best we can (hint: it’s easier together) but also be ok if someone has no interest or is not ready for that work. We must be present for everyone no matter where they are on their personal journey.

As we work together to heal our community and strive to reduce the ACEs of our children, slowly we will become a community of peace. At least that's the hope...and I trust we will arrive at that destination one day.

I am grateful we have persevered and stayed true to who we are. Peace4Tarpon is fueled by and grows through the passionate support and dedication of all our partners, allies and friends. It's really something to behold and I am so proud to be a part of it and to offer the piece/peace I can.