

# Jacksonville-based Community Foundation marks 50 years working to better Northeast Florida

By [Beth Reese Cravey](#) Wed, Nov 19, 2014 @ 7:22 pm | updated Thu, Nov 20, 2014 @ 7:48 am



Provided by the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida  
In May 1964, four Jacksonville businessmen — clockwise from left, J.J. Daniel, Robert R. Feagin, Thomas R. McGehee and Laurence Lee Jr. -- gather to sign documents creating what would become the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida. 1964

Former Jacksonville Sheriff Nat Glover, now president of Edward Waters College, does not consider himself someone with deep pockets.

But in 1995, when Glover was first elected sheriff after 28 years in law enforcement, he found himself with a salary as well as a pension. He did not need both, so he decided to pay forward the community support he had received over the years, which allowed him to become a police officer despite an arrest in his youth, and to go on to become sheriff and college president.

“I wanted to give back to create a break for someone else, like I got a break,” he said. “I felt so strongly about it.”

Glover used some of his pension proceeds to create an endowment at what is now the The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, which uses money from donor to make charitable gifts and grants throughout the region. His endowment was designated for scholarships to Edward Waters, where he graduated, as well as Jacksonville University and the University of

North Florida. “My fund is pretty small relative to other ones,” he said, “but it means everything to me and it means a lot to the students ... And they will pass it on.”

On May 1, 1964, four of Jacksonville’s most powerful businessmen envisioned such giving back when they created the foundation, the first of its kind in Florida.

The foundation was to be “a depository for the people of Jacksonville ... the wealthy and the moderate, to be able to give for the betterment of their fellow man,” Thomas McGehee, one of those businessmen, wrote in a May 25 letter accepting the chairmanship of the first board of governors. “We can hope that on down the road we will take our place as one of the major foundations in America.”

Fifty years later, the foundation is not only the oldest but the largest of its kind in the state, with \$297 million in assets and 434 donor funds. Many of those donors gathered at an event Monday to celebrate. Also, the foundation will be the title sponsor Thursday of the Association of Fundraising Professionals First Coast Chapter’s National Philanthropy Day, where the foundation’s work will be highlighted.

Over the years, the foundation has awarded \$278 million grants, focusing on public education, neighborhood revitalization, nonprofits, aging adults, veterans and the arts. In 2013 alone, it gave \$36 million to 1,500 recipients.

The foundation also formed several independent agencies to focus on specific community needs, including the Jacksonville Public Education Fund, which has played a leading role in education reform since 2009.

The foundation transformed the community, said Linda Moseley, who has three funds at the foundation and has been a local resident for 65 years. “I think it has been one of the best things to happen to Jacksonville since I have lived here,” she said. “It has enabled the community to really understand the power of giving ... created a whole new culture of giving.”

The foundation also created a culture of collaboration, said Linda Levin, executive director of ElderSource, a Jacksonville-based regional agency that funds programs for seniors.

ElderSource is part of the foundation-funded Senior Roundtable, a group of agencies serving the elderly who jointly discuss aging issues to better help their consumers and clients.

“This effort, along with their grantmaking process, is unique,” she said. “The Community Foundation builds in opportunities to bring organizations together to encourage collaboration and partnership, which further leverages their funding and support ... with what is ultimately best for the older adult in mind.

“We ... are so fortunate to have such a wonderful, caring and supportive partner in our community,” Levin said.

Despite McGehee's early optimism, success was not assured. The foundation started strong, then sputtered as it encountered growing pains. In 1983, McGehee, the driving force for almost 20 years, took steps to get it back on course.

An advisory board formed to link – for the first time – the foundation to its donors and beneficiaries. And McGehee asked his good friend Bob Shircliff, a businessman and philanthropist, for help.

The foundation “had been struggling,” Shircliff said. “He was just about out of gas.” Shircliff was named board chairman a week later. “That’s how I was immersed,” he said, with a chuckle.

He talked with leading community foundations across the country and was told image, governance and leadership improvements were in order, according to a foundation history. A marketing campaign was launched, as well as a search for the foundation’s first professional executive director, which led to the hiring of Andy Bell from a North Carolina community foundation.

Bell, Shircliff said, transformed a “stagnant” foundation into a viable and exciting foundation. The first mandate, Bell told him, was to earn the communities respect and trust.

“We enlisted the most trusted people to be trustees ... individuals that more than anything else represent integrity. It has been that way ever since,” Shircliff said.

A turning point came in 1989, with recognition and challenge grants from two prominent national philanthropies, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Jessie Ball duPont Fund. When Bell was hired in 1988, the foundation’s assets totaled \$4.5 million. This year, as of June 30, assets totaled \$327 million.

Shircliff attributed the success to three people — the initial visionary McGehee, and Bell and his successor, Nina Waters.

When Waters took over as president in 2005, the foundation finally was large enough to spread its wings. The focus, she said, became less on growing the foundation, as it had been in the early years, and more on community.

The foundation made its biggest impact in "sustained work for a long period of time" and on programs where there was a "deep knowledge of the subject area," she said.

So under Waters tenure, several independent organizations were formed to work on specific subject areas, including the Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida, to support nonprofits; the Local Initiatives Support Corp. Jacksonville, which redevelops at-risk neighborhoods; and the Jacksonville Public Education Fund, which works toward education reform.

The education push has been particularly ambitious, beginning in 2005 with Quality Education for All, a 10-year, \$2 million initiative to improve student achievement in Duval classrooms through research, grants and advocacy. That effort led in 2009 to the Public Education Fund, a

staffed, well-funded organization focused on research, community mobilization and advocacy, and in 2013 to the Quality Education for All fund, which has raised \$37 million of its \$50 million goal to support excellence in teaching and leadership in Duval schools.

Cindy Edelman, a 12-year foundation board member and former chairman, played a leading role in the education initiatives. "It has had tremendous impact on the community," she said. "We have created an infrastructure for education reform to take place ... There had been great reluctance to send private money to the school district. You didn't know where it was going."

Between the donation vehicle to the community awareness and advocacy, the efforts collectively have put the public back in education, she said. "That would not have happened without the Community Foundation."

Waters said the foundation will continue to be a leading player in such pressing community issues.

"What makes us unique is that we are independent and we represent the vision and the passion of multiple donors who care very deeply about this place," she said. "We take the long view and have the luxury of addressing things in perpetuity. We're going to be here forever."

#### WHAT OTHERS HAVE TO SAY

"The Community Foundation is much more than a grantmaking philanthropy. It is an organization completely committed to this region. They help diverse charitable entities coalesce around community priorities, bring the right people to the table, and then leverage their resources to bring more assets to bear. The leadership ... values partners and strategy; and they take the long view. Their work on public education is a great example. Bottom line is their agenda is driven by the community, not by politics or the issue de jour. We're lucky to have such an exemplary model of a community foundation here."

Rena Coughlin, CEO, Nonprofit Center of Northeast Florida, Jacksonville

"We chose the Community Foundation because it is locally established and actively aware of the St Augustine community. We have enjoyed the benefit of the Community Foundation's talent and experience in managing our contributions, providing the means to direct grants to those qualified recipients we recommend, while relieving us of the effort and cost of administrating a charitable trust ... From this experience, we confidently look forward to contributing and working with the Community Foundation to continue our support of our local organizations."

Darrell and Joanna Poli, foundation donors, St Augustine

"For over 50 years, the Community Foundation for Northeast Florida has provided local philanthropic leadership throughout the region. ... Their ongoing effort to engage a wide variety of donors throughout the region has enabled them to build the philanthropic capacity needed to mobilize resources ... to address some of Florida's toughest challenges. Of particular note are

their ongoing initiatives to advance educational opportunity, to strengthen neighborhoods, and to build the capacity of local nonprofits.”

Vikki Spruill, president/CEO of the national Council on Foundations.

“Community foundations are a vital part of Florida’s philanthropic sector. They connect people who care with causes that matter to make a difference in their communities ... The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida is a model for how a community foundation can be a community leader on critical issues, such as its leadership to improve education outcomes in the region ... The foundation’s dramatic growth demonstrates how well it is fulfilling its role in helping donors fulfill their philanthropic interest to make a difference in their communities.”

David Biemesderfer, president/CEO of the Florida Philanthropic Network.