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Healing a Community

Robin Saenger Takes on Trauma to Bring Peace to Tarpon

Taking on Trauma to Bring Healing and Change

Former City Council member created Peace4Tarpon to make the community better from the inside out.

by Mary Sharrow
Community contributor

During her time as Tarpon City Council member and vice mayor, Robin Saenger witnessed talented people working tirelessly in the community dealing with issues like homelessness, domestic violence, child abuse and drug abuse; however, problems still persisted.

When she began looking at these community challenges, a pattern of trauma kept surfacing. She began researching trauma and she realized how unresolved trauma plays out in terms of personal costs, financial costs and community costs.

Through her research, Peace4Tarpon — Initiative for a Trauma Informed Community was born and is now well into its third year and is garnering a national following.

Robin, an artist and Tarpon Springs resident, has dedicated her energies and time to bringing this initiative, many years ahead of its time, into fruition.

It started with asking the questions — what is trauma and what is a trauma informed community?

Unlike the old trauma paradigm, “trauma is a horrific event that one must learn to cope with but will always suffer from,” Robin found that the current understanding of trauma: “trauma’s definition is unique to each individual and how it is affecting their life in a negative manner” is shedding light on many common problems today. What may seem inconsequential to one may be devastating to another, resulting in long-term consequences if left unresolved.

Unresolved describes most trauma.

Robin believes that trauma is universal; it cuts across every imaginable line without regard to geography, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, age, sex, or level of education. She also discovered that unaddressed traumas, especially those of childhood, were devastating and commonly linked to later drug use, psychiatric problems, incarceration, homelessness, health risks and early death, as so eloquently explained by the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) Study. Early childhood trauma strikes before a child has gained resilience and gathered lifetime skills and tools to handle traumatic events.

The ACE Study is the largest mental health study you’ve



Peace4Tarpon partners, Kathleen Sullivan, a local art therapist, watches 4-year-old Coco Brown draw a Peace Flag at Craig Park.
Photo by Cheryl Segal



Coco, daughter of Jared and Annie Brown, hangs her flag with the others that were displayed. (See page 17 for more on the Peace Flag effort.)
Photo by Cheryl Segal

probably never heard of. It is a collaboration between Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to see if multiple traumatic incidents of physical or emotional abuse that happen to a person before the age of 18 have connections with the physical issues later in life. The Study was done over 10 years with 17,000 adults participating, and the results were astonishing. If you want to read more about this pivotal study, the P4T website homepage has a link where you can take the test for yourself and see why these results were so amazing.

The current model for resolving problems within a family or a community does not always address these underlying tra-



Art therapist Kathleen Sullivan and Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs minister Marni Harmony started the Peace Flag project to draw attention to Peace4Tarpon’s initiative. There are more than 3,500.
Photo by Cheryl Segal

mas, and instead focuses on symptoms. A symptom-only approach is shortsighted, short-lived and very expensive because you are forced to revisit the problem again and again.

Robin felt there had to be a better way. She invited community members to become partners and problem-solve together with the understanding that trauma was the root of most if not all of their shared challenges. This has created community cooperation that makes the most of Tarpon Springs’ current resources to accomplish the most for the most people.

First, Peace4Tarpon is raising awareness about the impact of unresolved trauma on personal and community problems. Raising awareness and then providing tools allows a community to heal and become resilient — another popular word these days.

To become a Trauma Informed Community requires that the community approach all events and all problem solving while looking through a trauma-informed lens. Instead of “what is wrong with you?” we ask the more pivotal question, “what happened to you?” Peace4Tarpon has initiated many free trainings through our partners for the public as well as professionals.

It is so easy to point to a single issue such as substance abuse or poverty as the instigator of all ills. Looking through the lens of trauma changes the perspective.

The largest common denominator of many social issues, including incarceration and homelessness, is violence. Both

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5 WAYS P4T HAS HAD AN IMPACT

- **P4T distributes a printed** a resource guide to all city personnel, schools, library, faith-based and businesses explaining all services available and who to call for help, in hopes that those with a need will make a phone call before the situation is critical.
- **Annie Dabbs, P4T partner**, Guardian Ad Litem, developed a Read in the Park program to offer free books to children and have the children read to an adult or have an adult read to them. Other P4T partners gather books for her.
- **P4T partners help supply** backpack snacks for students who need food over the weekend.
- **P4T partner The Shepherd Center** offered office space for Tarpon Springs Police Homeless Outreach Officer, who has placed more than 100 homeless in housing.
- **P4T partner Tarpon Springs Housing Authority** offered space for another P4T partner, Suncoast Center, to have a social worker in Cops and Kids to work directly with the children.

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witnessing and experiencing violence have the same impact and both are highly traumatizing.

Fortunately, when someone is ready to address their trauma history, there are very effective tools and protocols available to help. One exciting and extremely useful tool is a therapy known as TIR (Trauma Incident Reduction) that has been approved as an evidence-based protocol by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a federal agency. You can learn more about TIR on the P4T website and hear Dr. Robert Moore describe this approach. Peace4Tarpon holds many TIR trainings every year.

Supporting a school

Part of Peace4Tarpon is also supporting people where they are, not immediately going to their trauma history. More pressing needs may require addressing first.

For example, when talking with Principal Lakisha Falana at Tarpon Springs Elementary School about what was most needed, she mentioned uniforms. Some students can't afford the uniform; some only have one uniform or quickly outgrow theirs and need a new one. Absenteeism is related to not having the required uniform. So Peace4Tarpon, through their partners, has provided a very well stocked uniform closet at the school so no student need be without this basic necessity.

Peace4Tarpon was named the site of the North County Children's Initiative by the Juvenile Welfare Board and Pinellas County Schools. The initial focus is on Tarpon Springs Elementary School (and will include all Tarpon Springs' schools down the line) to focus their energies toward positive solutions. Tarpon Springs Elementary School was a D school and moved to a B school. Tarpon Springs Elementary has great parents, teachers and staff, but the support of Peace4Tarpon also made a significant difference.

Peace4Tarpon is also promoting a mentoring program and hosts mentoring trainings to help at-risk youth and participated in home visits to discuss parents' concerns. During these visits, a lack of reading material was noted, and Peace4Tarpon began buying used books to encourage early reading and better school preparedness. The parents were asked what their needs were, did the children have a place to do homework, for example.

The partners that came to sit at Peace4Tarpon's table are still sitting at the table and many others have joined us. Partners include: Mayor David Archie, City Manager Mark LeCouris, Andy Blanch, consultant for the National Center for Trauma Informed Care, Tarpon Springs Housing Authority, Tarpon Springs Homeshare Program, Tarpon Springs Fire Rescue Deputy Chief Don Sayre, Tarpon Springs Police Department Chief Kochen, Juvenile Welfare Board, Pinellas County Schools, Tarpon Springs Library, St. Petersburg College Tarpon Springs



Trenia Cox, faith-based coordinator from the Juvenile Welfare board, and Joi Koulianos, representative from the Greek Orthodox faith, at a meeting of the Tarpon Women's Interfaith Network, formed to women's issues and trauma.

Photo courtesy of Peace4Tarpon

Campus, Florida Hospital North Pinellas, Director Chris Warwick of The Haven, Ron Haddad of Rotary, The Shepherd Center, Cops and Kids, CAP Neighborhood Center, Suncoast Center, TIR and trauma expert Robert Moore, CEO Directions for Living, Eckerd Community Alternatives, Community Health Centers of Pinellas, First United Methodist Church of Tarpon Springs, St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, Church on the Bayou and Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs. Virtually "meet" many of our partners through videos and hear them discuss their commitment on the Peace4Tarpon website.

Expanding its impact

One of the latest developments in Peace4Tarpon is TWIN, or Tarpon Women's Interfaith Network. TWIN was launched through a small grant awarded to P4T through the Center for Religious Tolerance, a Sarasota-based non-profit organization of which Robin is a board member. The women of TWIN have come together to identify common interests and passions to address, with a unified voice, their shared concerns around trauma and violence in their community. TWIN has only met twice so far, and there are already 44 women representing over 14 different faith-based organizations.

The faith-based part of Peace4Tarpon is vitally important, as they are already doing so much in Tarpon Springs and are natural community spark plugs already walking the walk. The

women have identified several areas of interest to work on.

"Grassroots" is the best descriptor for Peace4Tarpon, and involving the entire community is what makes for a sustainable and creative initiative.

Robin receives phone calls and emails from communities, students and organizations around the country asking her to share information about Tarpon Springs and Peace4Tarpon.

Last year, Mayor Archie was invited to Washington, D.C., to speak about Peace4Tarpon to trauma champions and experts at the federal level and brainstorm ideas about creating Trauma Informed systems nationwide.

Last November, the University of Wisconsin invited Robin to be the keynote speaker at the Dane County Trauma Summit in Madison, Wisc. In June, Robin was a panelist at the Institute for the Future Conference in Sausalito, Calif. The institute believes that what Peace4Tarpon is creating is about 10 years ahead of the curve in the field of health, and wants Robin to inform their clients about this groundbreaking initiative.

Tarpon Springs can be very proud of Peace4Tarpon and its work. The motto of Peace4Tarpon is "Everyone offer the piece / peace you can" and that is the beauty of this initiative. Everyone can offer a unique piece to the solution.



Making a Difference

What's behind the Peace Flags you see around town, and the impact P4T has had on an elementary school.

About the flags: Peace4Tarpon partners Kathleen Sullivan, a local art therapist, and the Rev. Marni Harmony, of Unitarian Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs, initiated a recent outdoor art installation of Peace Flags to draw attention to Peace4Tarpon's initiative. Tremendous support by the City of Tarpon Springs designating this as a public art project and Mayor David Archie's proclamation of Peace Flag Week (April 5-8) around the event added to its value. Kathleen and Marni wanted it to be impactful and to include as many people in the process as possible. The visual impact of these personal flags imbued with everyone's idea of peace was a visual painting of hope and very well received. It will be a yearly Peace4Tarpon event. Kathleen visited schools, pre-schools, aftercare, faith-based communities, elder care facilities, the library and hosted a complimentary booth provided by the Sunday Farmers Market for people to make a personal peace flag which totaled more than 3,500 flags. Some of the flags will be visiting Haiti in a Peace Flag Exchange —**Mary Sharrow**

Tarpon Springs' Peace4Tarpon group has helped the students at Tarpon Springs Elementary in many ways. The pooled resources of these various organizations are available for home and school. We have had donations of boxes and boxes of uniforms- some from an anonymous donor - for those students whose parents cannot provide clothing that meets uniform requirements or proper size/condition for their child. They have provided us with school supplies that are distributed to needy students and to the classroom teachers for use in class. Other organizations within the group have provided food, clothing and shoes to students and families on an emergency basis when the 2-1-1 resources were not available. Volunteers from P4T physically moved a mother and her children from a hotel into temporary housing after they lost their home. Representatives from the organizations and our school made home visits on a Saturday morning to make direct contact with the families to see what their needs and concerns are. We have had representatives from the organizations attend our Open House night and speak to the parents at a PTA meeting. —**Debbie Willoughby, Family & Community Involvement Liaison, Tarpon Springs Elementary**

Websites for more information

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Peace4Tarpon:
peace4tarpon.org/;
Traumatic Incident
Reduction Assn: tir.org