

**CENTRAL FLORIDA  
FOUNDATION**

**THRIVE  
VENTURE  
PHILANTHROPY  
COHORT**

FIRST EDITION



**IMPACT REPORT**

**2025**



## **About this Report**

In 2024, Central Florida Foundation began building an intentional space for philanthropists that focused on values-based giving and grantmaking with relationships at the center. This effort eventually evolved into the Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort. The first Cohort launched in February 2025, and we are thrilled to share with you the outcomes, outputs, and what's on the horizon - which you'll find all here in this report. We are humbled by the incredible group of diverse philanthropists we had around the inaugural Cohort table and the partners who believed in our mission. As you read this report, we hope you are also inspired to strengthen your giving and create a community of intentional charitable giving in Central Florida.

## **About Central Florida Foundation**

Central Florida Foundation serves as a launchpad for high-impact philanthropy. Championing the collective power of head, heart and dollar, we coordinate the commitment and investment of philanthropists, nonprofits, and community partners to target today's most critical challenges and those on the horizon. The Foundation also offers expert giving advice, a personalized approach to managing charitable funds, and the capacity to convene collaboration across sectors. Learn more at [cffound.org](https://cffound.org).



# Welcome. \_\_\_\_\_

At the heart of every thriving community is a strong foundation of strategic philanthropy. These are individuals and organizations who not only give generously, but also think boldly and act collectively to create lasting change.



This consists of solving complex challenges, and building a more inclusive and thriving future requires more than just good intentions. It demands thoughtful leadership, shared learning, and deep investment in one another. That is why the Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort was created.

This inaugural cohort represents more than a grantmaking initiative. It is a powerful exercise in community-building, bringing together generous, curious, and diverse individuals committed to reimagining how we support transformational work. This group has explored what it means to give with purpose, to fund with an emphasis on relationship building, and to invest in the kind of solutions that strengthen our region from the ground up.

We are excited to share the story of this first cohort with you. We hope it inspires you to imagine what's possible when people come together to give with intention and impact.

Warm regards,  
Mark Brewer  
President & CEO  
Central Florida Foundation

---

# Acknowledgements. —

A lot of kind, caring, and visionary people went into this inaugural cohort. This collaboration is a testament to the incredible things that can be created when working together for a better future. We are very grateful to be in good company.



## Gilbert Miller, Cohort Supporter

Gilbert Miller serves as the board chair of the Bradley-Turner Foundation and has served as a trustee of the Beloco Family Foundation for over two decades, formally joining the board in 2000. He is also a director of the W.C. Bradley Company, a family-owned holding company focused on consumer products and commercial real estate development.

Gilbert is a past board chair of Philanthropy Southeast, a current trustee of the National Center for Family Philanthropy and a member of the steering committee of the Georgia Grantmakers Alliance. While not in the boardroom, Gilbert manages a small commercial real-estate development partnership and co-owns his family's 40-year-old Christmas tree business, Kimi Farms.

**“In a region as dynamic as Central Florida, it’s rare to find the time and space to connect around how we’re all showing up as philanthropists. This cohort creates that space — a shared experience where diverse perspectives come together, build understanding, and strengthen our collective impact. I believe this work will not only shape better giving, but also build a healthier, more connected community.”**

**— Gilbert Miller**

---



## **Sarah Asma, Participant**

Executive Director, Big Nova Foundation  
Attorney



## **Lyn Berelsman, Participant**

Community Member  
100 Women Strong Legacy Member



## **Roi Ewell, Participant**

President, Ewell & Associates  
Vice Chair, Central Florida Foundation  
Board of Directors



## **Yue Kuang Ku, Participant**

Community Member



## **Paul Oppedisano, Participant**

Community Member

---

---

## **Sandi Vidal, Instructor & Program Designer**

Serving as Central Florida Foundation's Vice President of Community Strategies and Initiatives, Sandi's expertise includes community knowledge, data analysis, impactful relationship-based grantmaking, and executive leadership.



Sandi has a passion for public speaking, advocating for solutions to complex social issues. She is also a local Jefferson Award winner for volunteerism, and currently serves on the Nominating Committee for the League of Women Voters of Orange County, manages a peer cohort with the Council on Foundations, and serves on the Second Harvest Health and Hunger Task Force.

## **Nicole Donelson, CAP®, Instructor & Program Designer**

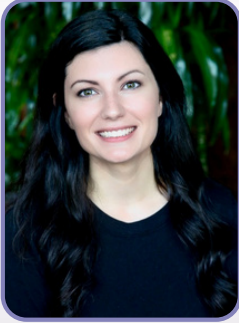
Nicole Donelson served as Central Florida Foundation's Vice President of Philanthropic Strategies and Partnerships from 2018-2025, and played a critical role in the formation of this cohort. Her expertise includes relationship building, values-based philanthropic strategies, business development, and executive leadership.



Nicole is now the Director of Community Engagement with AdventHealth, where she continues to work in the Central Florida community and the independent sector.

---





**Laurie Crocker, Communications  
and Program Designer**

Vice President of Strategic  
Communications,  
Central Florida Foundation



**Alissa Mahadeo, Community  
Engagement Support**

Community Investment Manager,  
Central Florida Foundation

This cohort was made possible through the teamwork of the entire Central Florida Foundation staff. We appreciate everyone's contribution to the process.



# Cohort Overview. \_\_\_\_\_

The Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort is a collaborative experience for community-minded individuals in Central Florida who are eager to deepen the purpose and impact of their giving. Over six months, participants engage in a thoughtfully designed journey that blends values-based philanthropic learning with strategic charitable investment. Each member contributes to a pooled grant fund, with additional co-investment by Central Florida Foundation, and together they explore how to give more intentionally, impactfully, and effectively.

The result is more than a single grant. It's the growth of a community rooted in thoughtful giving — where philanthropists are better equipped to lead with purpose, invest strategically, and strengthen the culture of charitable giving across Central Florida.



## THRIVE CENTRAL FLORIDA

The Cohort intentionally has “Thrive” in its name because the Foundation’s Thrive Framework guided the grantmaking work. This Cohort focused on one of the five Thrive focus areas: Community and Social Connection [CSC]. While the other four Thrive focus areas influence CSC, selecting a specific impact area set participants up for better research and overall focus.



### **CSC Priority Areas**

**Culturally Rich Communities**

**Belonging and Connection**

**Civic Engagement**

Many sub-areas fall within CSC. After several sessions learning about Thrive, CSC, and all the directions their collective grant could go, participants ultimately selected civic engagement as its prime focus, specifically looking to home in on youth civic engagement.

---

# Structure and Flow

The cohort is designed to be an intimate experience with up to 10 participants. Each session was held in person, with additional email communication in the latter half, especially when working on grant proposal drafts.

Sessions were mostly divided into two sections: personal philanthropy and strategic grantmaking. Personal philanthropy sessions included candid discussions about narratives and philosophies, values inquiries and exercises, and legacy building.

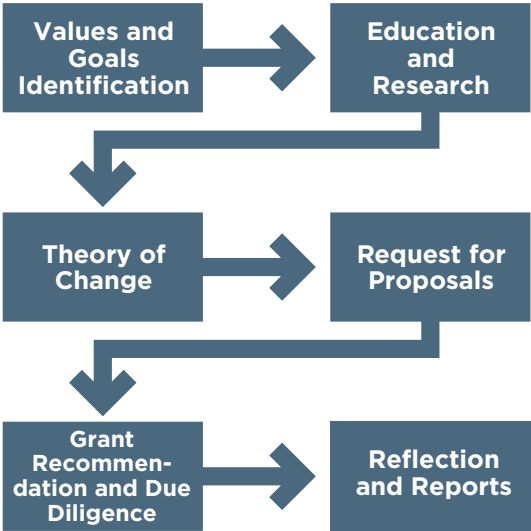
For strategic grantmaking, participants learned the Foundation’s process, focusing on a problem statement, root-cause exercises, research process, and more. During this process, participants were encouraged to consider how they could apply this information to their own personal or professional charitable giving outside of the cohort.

CENTRAL FLORIDA

FOUNDATION

Grantmaking Process

Participants experience a strategic grantmaking process with the guidance of our professional Foundation team. The process focuses on sustainable programs that accelerate, scale, pilot or fill gaps in the Central Florida landscape.



# Highlights & Outcomes.

While the ultimate goal was the co-invested grant, several other important outcomes came from this Cohort – some hoped for and some unexpected.

## The Co-Invested Grant

Following initial research and discussion, the cohort developed a problem statement. After further dialogue, participants aligned on this vision as they issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to nonprofits:

“We are seeking a creative, youth-centered nonprofit partner to design and pilot an engaging, replicable program or experience that empowers young people to understand government, participate in civic life, vote thoughtfully, and identify misleading news.”

**The cohort was looking for a nonprofit that could also:**



**Communicate  
with youth**



**Create a  
replicable model**



**Focus on the inclusion of  
historically underserved  
communities**

In this RFP process, participants learned how to not only design the RFP, but evaluate submissions, score applications, discuss thoughts, and came to a consensus – the last of which is sometimes not an easy feat.

The Cohort received several compelling proposals, making the final decision challenging. Although only one organization was selected, some participants requested site visits to the nonprofits that weren't chosen, for their own personal philanthropic interests outside the Cohort.

---

Ultimately, Junior Achievement was selected as the grant recipient, approved by Central Florida Foundation’s Board of Directors in July 2025.



**The Funded Project to Bring the Cohort’s Vision to Life:  
Connecting Gen-A With Tools to Change Their World**

Opening its doors in 1961, Junior Achievement Central Florida [JACF] is dedicated to giving young people the knowledge and skills they need to own their economic success, plan for their

future, and make smart academic and economic choices.

With the cohort grant, JACF will build on two existing programs to incorporate voting and civic-engagement components:

- JA Inspire: a career-exploration program for middle schools
- 3DE by Junior Achievement: a four-year curriculum that prepares high schoolers for post-secondary education, careers and economic success.

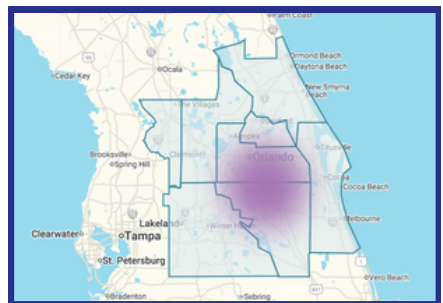


The program, called Connecting Gen-A With Tools to Change Their World (Connecting Gen-A), will leverage the reach, resources and other structures of these two existing programs to develop and implement a program that:

- allows students to experience a new Inspire civics encounter about voting, elections, civic engagement, and vote in a mock election.
- allows students to engage in new government and/or civic groups participating in 3DE's capstone project, called senior consultancy.

The Connecting Gen-A project is currently being developed and is set to pilot in fall 2025.

Connecting Gen-A will serve Orange and Osceola youth.



## The Participant Experience

Participants either did not know each other or were only loosely acquainted before the cohort began. Each person joined after a one-on-one conversation with Nicole Donelson, exploring their philanthropic goals and challenges to determine if the cohort would be a meaningful fit.

The result was a dynamic mix of voices, each at a different point in life, with some connected to the Foundation for decades, and others newly introduced within the past year.

From the group we had:

- Two retired professionals
- A private foundation executive director
- Two Central Florida Foundation Fundholders
- A 100 Women Strong Legacy Member
- Central Florida Foundation's Board Vice Chair



In a pre-cohort survey, participants revealed a variety of reasons that were joining the cohort:

- Skills to better evaluate high impact potential,
- Insights into how other donors approach their evaluation process,
- Understanding the pros and cons of supporting fewer organizations with more dollars versus supporting more organizations with less,
- To get to know some of the organizations in our community so I can decide how to invest my resources more effectively.

“

“It was truly incredible to watch the participants step into the role of evaluators. They not only helped shape the RFP, but also led the entire evaluation process—scoring applications, engaging in thoughtful discussions, and ultimately reaching consensus. That’s no small feat. They took the responsibility seriously, brought sharp insight to the table, and collaborated with real intention. It was inspiring to witness.”

—Sandi Vidal

”



It’s also important to note that participants came in with various levels of philanthropic experience. Some came in with decades of charitable giving through various methods, while others felt novice, questioning their very role as a participant.

At Central Florida Foundation, we firmly believe everyone is a philanthropist, and there’s no one right way to do your charitable giving. To set the stage for everyone to feel at ease, the first session allowed participants to share their inner narratives. What stories do they tell themselves around money? Around giving back? Around impact?

The result was a dynamic and thoughtful conversation, with each participant bringing openness, honesty, and reflection to the table. This first session was pivotal in setting the stage for the unique bond that formed throughout the cohort — one where every individual’s perspective was valued, heard, and respected by the group as a whole. In fact, with this bonding experience in mind, that is why sessions were designed to be in-person versus virtual.



# Participant Testimonials

## Yue Kuang Ku, “Ku”



This was my first exposure to philanthropic work. To be honest I thought philanthropy belongs solely to the very rich people. I was encouraged by a friend to sign up and learn. In the beginning I was worried that I may not fit in with the group as I didn't even

know most of the language used in this “field”! But everybody was so supportive. Obviously, they all have the spirit of inclusivity and community building, and sharing experiences. I would encourage any “newcomers” to come and explore with the cohort.

“

To be honest I thought philanthropy belongs solely to the very rich people...but everybody was so supportive. I would encourage any “newcomers” to come and explore with the cohort.

—Ku

”

## Sarah Asma



As I'm beginning my career as an Executive Director, I'm trying to absorb information about philanthropy everywhere I can. The Thrive Cohort was such a unique way to learn a process of grant giving. It gave me new perspective on the meaning and goals of giving, but also gave me ideas to implement in our grant process.

## Post-Cohort Participant Takeaways

From the post-cohort survey, participants shared clear and personal reflections on what they learned and how their thinking evolved as a result of the Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort.

### 1. Collaborative Philanthropy & Family Dialogue

Participants gained tools not only for strategic group grantmaking, but also for facilitating giving conversations at home:

“[The Cohort had me] thinking about giving more collaboratively and ways to talk to my family about our goals.”

### 2. Clarified Motivations & Legacy Awareness

Participants deepened their understanding of why they give, and how legacy shapes their philanthropic identity:

“[I] learned more [about] why I give, and the importance of legacy”

### 3. Stronger Philanthropic Foundation

For some, this cohort was a first structured step into strategic giving:

“I didn’t know much about philanthropy at all... now I have some guidelines to go forward.”

### 4. Systems Thinking & Root Cause Focus

Participants reported learning to view issues more holistically:

“[I learned to] approach thinking broadly about needs/opportunities; researching root causes to ensure efforts focused on solving core issues.”

## Participant Outcomes

From the pre- to post-cohort surveys, participants’ thoughts about what makes a grant “successful” became more refined.

Before the cohort:

- Definitions were broad, with some showing uncertainty:
  - “Transformative and sustained impacts”
  - “Impact”
  - “That it meets most of the words described above”
  - One participant explicitly said: “Not sure – struggle figuring this out”

After the cohort:

- Definitions became sharper, outcome-driven, and measurable:
  - “The organization met the grant purpose and could measure and report on outcomes”
  - “Granted program met/exceeded impact goals”
  - “Outcomes match with the cohort’s expectations”

Key Change: There was a shift from vague or philosophical concepts to practical, evaluative, and results-oriented definitions.

**How confident are you in your ability to evaluate a nonprofit’s effectiveness before donating or selecting a grantee?**  
[Scale: 1 = Not confident, 10 = Very confident]

Cohort Stage	Mean Confidence Score
Before Cohort	6.0
After Cohort	8.0
Change	+2

A 2-point increase in average confidence reflects a considerable increase in participants’ self-assessed ability to evaluate nonprofit effectiveness.

---

# What We Learned.

The inaugural Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort was nothing short of inspiring and impactful; however, it is still a new program with bumps along the road from which we can learn and evolve. Here is a summary of what worked and what we learned from this Cohort.

## What Worked

### 1. In-person sessions are key.

While it might be easier to meet via Zoom, having to intentionally carve out time for cohort meetings in person encouraged a space of trust and open conversation that might not have happened virtually. Having in-person sessions is a critical component of this experience.

### 2. Incorporating personal philanthropy and grantmaking created a holistic experience.

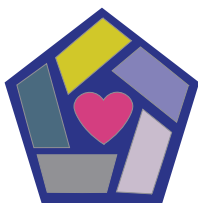
Focusing on both personal philanthropy through values work and grantmaking through the Foundation's grantmaking process created a balanced, holistic experience.

## What We Learned

### Time was an obstacle.

Because time was an obstacle, we'll be launching a new schedule in 2026 that takes into consideration sessions where, in 2025, participants wished we had spent more time.





# THRIVE VENTURE PHILANTHROPY COHORT

## CENTRAL FLORIDA FOUNDATION

### THE NEXT COHORT LAUNCHES JANUARY 2026.

Join Central Florida's premier immersive learning experience for philanthropists, Thrive Venture Philanthropy Cohort!

Space is limited. Indicate your interest via the QR code below to be contacted by our team and learn more about becoming a cohort participant.



Scan  
or click for  
interest form





THRIVE COHORT - 2025