

Naples Pride, BookBuddiesOnline Receive Jewish Federation Awards

The Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Naples named two community organizations as recipients of the Human Needs Awards: Naples Pride Center and BookBuddiesOnline. Awards were presented by federation President Jeffrey Feld in an outdoor, socially distanced ceremony at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples in February.

The Jewish Federation gives financial awards annually to two small, under-funded charitable organizations that are performing much-needed service to a disadvantaged population to meet specific life needs. The Human Needs Awards are designed to provide financial assistance to the selected organizations, raise awareness of the needs of the selected group by publicizing the awards, and build coalitions with agencies outside the Jewish community.

Naples Pride Center President Cori Craciun accepted the award on behalf of Naples Pride Center, a volunteer-based grassroots nonprofit that offers a wide range of support groups. Examples include the bereaved, veterans, transgender individuals, and those suffering from substance dependency. Notably, it offers a professionally facilitated live chat support group for teens. The focus on youth protection arises from bullying, violence, and even family rejection. About 40% of LGBTQ youth have contemplated suicide in the past year, according to a national survey by the Trevor Project.

Naples Pride Center also advocates for county-wide ordinances ensuring protection for everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity as part of its outreach and educational efforts to combat hate and discrimination.

Typically, the annual Naples Pride Festival is a main source of funds to operate the center, Craciun explained, but the 2020 event was canceled and the 2021 event likely will be canceled as well. Craciun said this award will go toward purchasing computers to help with daily operations, running virtual support groups, and to have a computer available for those who need access to one.

The second award recipient is BookBuddiesOnline (BBOL), a child literacy program co-founded by Golden Gate High School seniors Lindsey Adellard and Brittany Nguyen. Accepting the award were Adellard and Nguyen, as well as Dr. William McCormick, director of the Emerson Academy at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples (UUCGN), and Vincent Keays, president of NAACP Collier County.

"BBOL was developed by five students who attended Emerson Academy in 2019 and 2020," said McCormick. "In this program, academically strong high school students work one-on-one online with elementary age children in collaboration with their parents to keep the children reading at or above grade level in proficiency and comprehension."

Emerson Academy is a free summer academic camp aimed at helping students improve their SAT and ACT scores, as well with



Left to right: Bill McCormick, Jeffrey Feld, Brittany Nguyen, Lindsey Allard, and Vincent Keays.

applying to colleges and universities. The program is a collaboration of NAACP Collier County and UUCGN. BookBuddiesOnline originally was intended as an in-person program, but COVID-19 created the challenge of tutoring students virtually. With the cooperation of Collier County Public Schools (CCPS), identified students were able to keep their school-issued computers over the summer and participate in the free program, according to Keays.

Currently, BBOL is operated at Shadowlawn Elementary School. Keays said that the award would help sustain the BBOL program and expand it throughout CCPS. The Emerson Academy, he explained, was created to assist a select group of minority students identified as college bound, but the need to start younger was critical. "We really wanted to do more for the primary years, to ensure that all children have a quality education," Keays said. "The Emerson Academy and BBOL have the same goal. [To see] kids helping other kids has just been fantastic." ✨

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