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FEATURED

Michael Saunders grants help seven nonprofits

First responders, the homeless, domestic violence victims will be served.

By ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH STAFF WRITER

Aug 13, 2021



Holly's Hope members Shannon Mesenburg, Ed Morgan and Laurie File receive a grant to help first responders from Realtor Mitch Mesenburg.

GONDOLIER PHOTOS BY ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

ENGLEWOOD — With a grant from the Michael Saunders & Company real estate office in Englewood, Holly's Hope will help first responders suffering post



traumatic stress disorder.

Laurie File, a member of Holly's Hope in North Port, spoke about how the suicide prevention nonprofit is working with police and firefighters who desperately need counseling after responding to child deaths, horrific crashes, hundreds of overdoses and dealing with COVID-19 patients.

"Firefighters and police officers are 'macho' and are told to suck it up, therefore they don't ask for help," said File, whose husband is a Charlotte County fire lieutenant. "They hold it all in. They don't want to talk about it when they come home to their spouse or they can't talk about it. But there is stuff they can't get past like a toddler who drowns or a teenager in a bad crash."

File said the grant from the Michael Saunders & Company office gives Holly's Hope funding to help the family of the first responder while in a treatment facility.

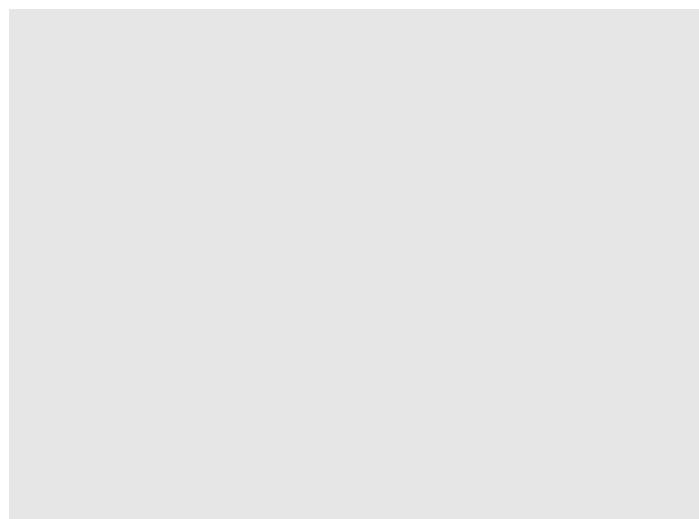
"The facility is in Maryland," she said. "My husband went for help and was there 47 days. It's very expensive. But how do you choose between saving your life and the money aspect? By giving the family support, the firefighter, police officer, crime scene technician, dispatcher or flight medic can get the help they need."

After hearing stories from File and six other grant recipients, Michael Saunders & Company's managing broker Mary Smedly said she was astonished by the "size of the heart" of the local group representatives.

Realtors who work out of the Englewood and Boca Grande offices donate portions of their commissions for the grant fund, the Michael Saunders Foundation, and each year, the funds are dispersed to a group of chosen nonprofits that apply in the form of grants.

"These are well-deserved grants," Smedly as she and Realtor Mitch Mesenburg

gave seven grants totaling \$14,500. “I wish it were more. I want to say after hearing what each group has done and is doing to improve our community, the size of their heart matters. These are amazing groups doing amazing things.”



Kathy Castellano talks about raising money for the nonprofit Wobbly Feet during the recent grant ceremony at Michael Saunders office in Englewood.

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Kathy Castellano explained how her 15-year-old grandson Connor Dzembo, who suffers from a very rare degenerative neurological disorder, ataxia telangiectasia, started high school this year. Castellano’s family started a Wobbly Feet Foundation local chapter to help with A-T research and a cure. The foundation raised \$100,000 and gave half for two research projects and the other half to several centers including \$30,000 to Johns Hopkins

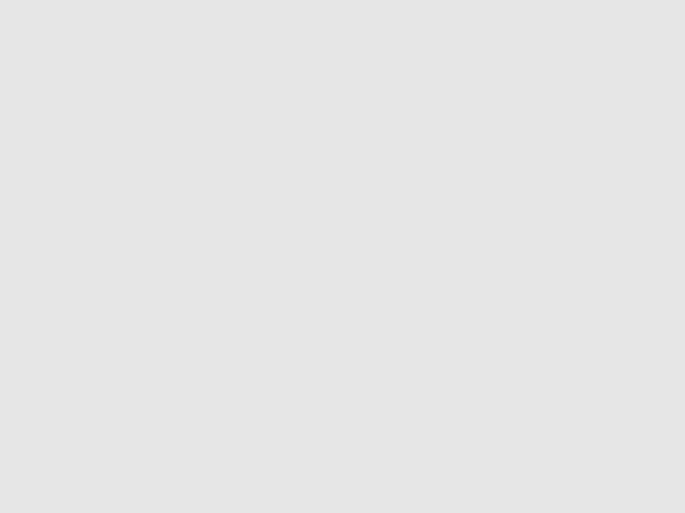
Hospital for the A-T Children’s Project.

“We feel blessed,” said Castellano, who along with a team of volunteers has an annual fundraiser to raise money for a cure. It was canceled due to COVID-19, but will come back in March or April of 2022. “This neurological disorder, which causes a person to be unstable while walking happens in about 600 children. We are working toward a cure.”

One new nonprofit received a grant to help the homeless. Bonnie Saxman and Cindy Voortman formed On the Spot Aid Inc. during the early days of the pandemic, after they treated dozens of homeless in need.

“Legally a hospital can’t discharge people to homelessness, but we know it happens all of the time because we treat these patients,” Voortman told the group.

"This becomes costly for the health care system because the homeless don't often go for medical treatment until their condition gets really bad. Then when they are discharged, they don't have a home to go to and recover. We will put them up in a hotel, but it's costly."



The pair said they will use the grant money toward a respite temporary care center for the homeless in the South County may prevent reinfections and longer hospital stays. They are currently looking for a home or other location they can use for respite care.

Bonnie Saxman and Cindy Voortman of On The Spot receive a grant from Realtor Mitch Mesenburg from the Michael Saunders Foundation.

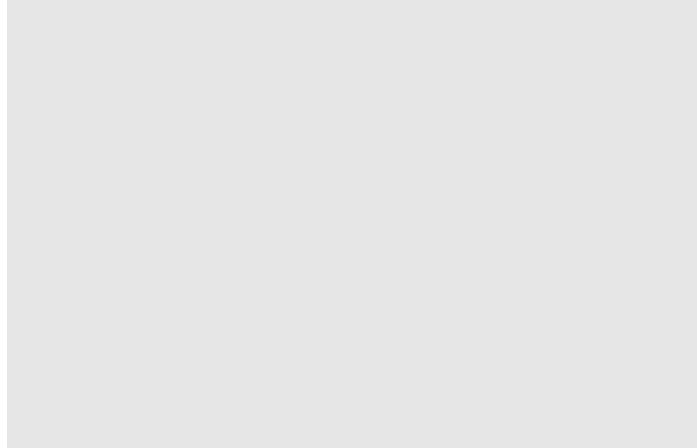
sun photo by ELAINE ALLEN-EMRICH

Other grants included Helping Hand of Englewood, Camelot Child Welfare Case Management for foster care and children at risk of being removed from their homes and parent reunification and When All Else Fails, a new nonprofit working on housing and those in need.

The Center for Abuse and Rape Emergencies, known as C.A.R.E., will use the money to give children the toys they play with while living at the center. During the pandemic, more families came to the shelter for protection against domestic violence offenders. Children grow attached to the toys at the temporary housing dorms. Instead of leaving them behind, the children are allowed to take it with them to their new safe home.

Since 2011, the Michael Saunders & Company office has given \$1 million in funds to charities in Sarasota and Charlotte counties.





Libby Birky, vice president of Englewood Helping Hand, said she's new to the area and loves helping those in need.

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"In Englewood and Boca Grande, 100% of our Realtors donate from their commissions to the foundation," Smedly said. "This is why we fight so hard to get grants for the Englewood area. We know there's a great need and these wonderful nonprofits are working so hard to support the community. Our company wants to be right there to help them flourish."

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