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 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 health risks and early death, as so eloquently explained by the ACE Study.

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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 for the public as well as professionals.

The current model for resolving problems within a family or community does not always address these underlying traumas, 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.

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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.

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5 WAYS P4T HAS HAD AN IMPACT

• P4T distributes a printed resource guide to all city personnel, schools, library, faith-based 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.
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 Tarpons 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, Tarpons Springs Housing Authority, Tarpon Springs Homeshare Program, Tarpon Springs Fire Rescue Dep- uty Chief Don Sayre, Tarpons Springs Police Department Chief Kochen, Juvenile Welfare Board, Pinellas County Schools, Tarpons Springs Library, St. Petersburg College Tarpon Springs Elementary School.

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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 to 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