



Stories of Triumph

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Business Development Board of Martin County

"If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do you have to keep moving forward."
--Martin Luther King, Jr.

Preparing to launch

Project LIFT's mission of transforming young lives through trade therapy finds greater traction amid COVID

PALM CITY—Anchored to an opioid addiction and cynical far beyond his years from several cycles on the carousel of the juvenile-justice system, Cody Mussnug first walked into Project LIFT ready to write it off.

“When I first came in I was a mess,” says the 17-year-old Stuart resident. “I just looked at it as another punishment that the court system put me in. I looked at it as kind of a joke.”

He now looks back on that day in early 2019 with a clearer head and an honest, mature perspective.

“I had a horrible attitude,” he remembers.

Thankfully, he'd arrived at Project LIFT, a place where horrible attitudes—and the underlying mental-health factors that fuel them—get adjusted like car engines in need of tune-ups. Even when the onset of COVID-19 slowed everything down, Project LIFT took off.

Bob Zaccheo, licensed therapist, founded Project LIFT 10 years ago with intents on accelerating the progress possible for young people through therapy by transforming the environments in which it took place.

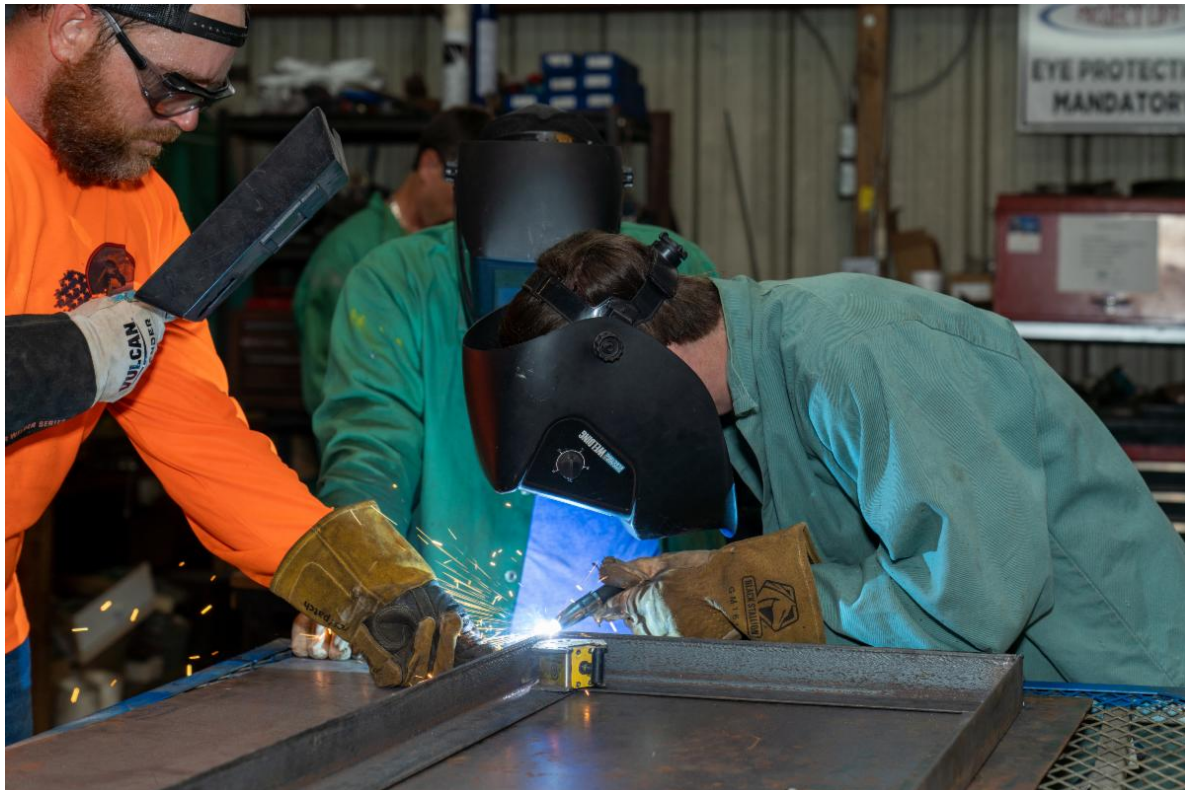
“We do psychotherapy,” says Zaccheo, executive director, “underneath the hood of a car.”

Experts acknowledge the built-in limitations of the formal clinical setting, which



can inhibit the establishment of trust between counselor and client by a couple weeks. Zaccheo knew the gap was even greater when working with youth. Young men and women struggling with trauma, mental-health challenges, substance-abuse issues and related problems in school performance and criminal entanglements needed something more hands-on and interactive.

Today, through the power of trades facilitated with the help of professionals in said field, Project LIFT and its staff of 46 work with about 400 kids a year at its locations in Palm City and Belle Glade. In 10 years, they've helped 3,900 young people.



Instruction in the trades and skilled craftsmanship provide the backdrop to allow the counselors to connect with the kids. As they learn valuable skills, they often grow comfortable enough to open up about the root causes behind the behaviors that landed them in trouble.

The trades include welding, HVAC, screen printing, graphic arts, automotive repair, bicycle repair, tailoring and upholstery, boat building and restoration, and construction, which includes building tiny houses.

“The kids choose what they’re really good at,” says Zaccheo, “which helps us replace that nefarious behavior.”

The virus-induced shutdown promised to exacerbate many local teens’ vulnerabilities to stress, depression and substance abuse, Zaccheo says. So rather than retreat, Project LIFT advanced. Its finance team worked with its “amazing funders” through endowments and other gifts to continue operations. The nonprofit saw a surge in activity, jumping from 45 teens a day to 71. To accommodate, they hired five new staff members in the mental-health field.

Running anywhere from five to 10 referrals a week, leading to three to five intakes, the Girls' Program runs weekdays from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Boys'

Program is from 2 to 7:30 p.m. Its Pathway Academy of Innovation, created for kids who dropped out of school, also trains students for successful life habits as well as employment, even honoring their efforts in graduation ceremonies. Project LIFT's close ties to industry enable ready job placement.

Operating with strict adherence to CDC guidelines to best protect participants from the virus, Zaccheo never doubts the program's needs—especially now. Already this year they successfully intervened to prevent five suicide attempts and four drug overdoses.

With emergency protocols in place, the staff made sure paramedics arrived in time to save the lives of the students involved in each event. Afterward, even if one of their members must go into a detention center, Project LIFT remains in contact.

Cody knows the power of that connection and the difference it's made for him.

"I thought my life was just gonna be about getting high or doing drugs," he says. "I didn't see any other way."

For him the change first came while working in screen printing and getting to know his counselor.

"He asked me how I was doing, not like people ask, 'How you doing?' He really cared," Cody recalls. "Every single person that works here has been through something in their life that you can relate to. They can help you, and not just talk but show you how to fix things in your life.

"It's a struggle every day," he adds," but you just gotta keep pushing."

Small (Business) Centric and Mighty



The Business Development Board of Martin County is showcasing these inspiring efforts of local business leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs in a reoccurring feature called "Stories of Triumph."

If you or someone you know is using their business to do something innovative and inspiring to help our community through this crisis, please [email](#) me so we can share their Story of Triumph.

Joan

Joan K. Goodrich
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