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CHARLES M. BLOW

Confidence, pessimism going into Election Day



Confidence, pessimism going into Election Day

Republican rout? Florida has red state vibes as Election Day approaches with battleground status in doubt

Zac Anderson | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

SARASOTA — Dan Smith moved from Ohio to Florida 26 years ago, and a Democrat hasn't won a governor's race since he arrived. The state was always competitive when election time rolled around, though. Indeed, the last three governor's races in Florida were decided by a percentage point or less. This year feels different, said Smith, a retired plumber from Cincinnati and a registered Democrat. He cast his vote Wednesday for Democrat Charlie Crist in the governor's race. But he doesn't think Crist has much of a chance. "This is one of the first times I've ever felt like my vote won't count," Smith said as he left an early voting site in Southwest Florida. He pointed to Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis's record-breaking fundraising as one reason for his pessimism this year.

That fundraising edge is just one of many advantages Florida Republicans have, including pulling ahead of Democrats in voter registration for the first time and beating them in pre-Election Day voting so far.

Beyond the numbers, there's a broader sense that Florida increasingly is out of reach for Democrats, who largely have abandoned the state this year when it comes to investment from the national party and affiliated national groups.

Republicans are emboldened as the election comes to a close. Florida GOP Chair Joe Gruters told a crowd last week that he expects an "absolute bloodbath" on Nov. 8, with Republicans winning big.

"We are going to absolutely annihilate the Democrats," Gruters said.

Perhaps sensing that their voters are discouraged, Democratic leaders have been imploring them not to pay attention to surveys that show big leads for DeSantis and Republican U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio.

“Don’t believe the polls,” former Florida Democratic Party Chair Terrie Rizzo told a crowd at a Crist rally in Palm Beach County last week, adding: “The only poll that matters is on Nov. 8.”

Yet even as leading Democrats work to rally voters down the stretch, there is a grim mood within the party and infighting already has begun, with calls for current state party chair Manny Diaz to resign.

Dour Democrats

“I just think he should go,” said Thomas Kennedy, a Democratic National Committee member and prominent Miami activist with more than 100,000 Twitter followers. “The bill’s coming due for Florida Democrats, the assessment for Nov. 8,” Kennedy added. “Whether it’s voter registration numbers, voter turnout, the money raised — I just don’t think a lot of those promises were delivered.”

It’s not unusual for Democrats to be nervous and Republicans to be more confident heading into Election Day in Florida. After all, a Democrat hasn’t won a governor’s race in 28 years and Democrats have won just three statewide elections over the last decade.

Yet Florida always seemed to be in play in past elections, a true battleground where either side could prevail. That reputation is being tested like never before in 2022.

In addition to deciding races for governor, the U.S. Senate, key U.S. House seats and a host of down ballot contests — the

results Tuesday night may shove Florida out of the national political picture as a competitive swing state going forward. That makes this election seem different, and even more consequential, as the potential end of an era for Florida as the nation's largest battleground state.

Some perennially anxious Florida Democrats are approaching something closer to despair, as they face the prospect of Florida going permanently red and their arch nemesis, Gov. Ron DeSantis, vaulting from re-election to a shot at the presidency.

Revved up Republicans

Florida Republicans, on the other hand, are rejoicing at the thought of a perpetual MAGA oasis where the GOP crafts policies that ricochet around the nation.

Florida Democrats are making a last, desperate push before Election Day to try and counter the GOP's momentum, with a heavy focus on abortion, one of the few issues where they seem to have an advantage in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court eliminating a federal right to the medical procedure by overturning the *Roe v Wade* decision.

Crist and Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Val Demings rallied in South Florida Tuesday with President Joe Biden, who slammed the "extremism" of the "mega MAGA" crowd. "Folks, this ain't your father's Republican Party," Biden said. "This a different breed of cat."

Meanwhile, Republicans are trying to keep the pressure on in an election where they seem to be in a strong position. Rubio is rallying with former President Donald Trump on Sunday as the GOP works to turn out voters, while DeSantis is holding rallies around the state.

“Don’t take your freedom for granted and don’t take the direction of this state for granted,” DeSantis told a crowd in Pensacola Tuesday.

GOP voters lead in early voting

So far, Republicans have done a better job of getting their voters to the polls, with 260,777 more Republicans than Democrats casting ballots through mail and in-person early voting as of Friday morning.

If that lead holds, it would be a big shift from 2018 and 2020, when Florida Democrats went into Election Day with more votes cast than Republicans. Republicans even have cast more ballots in Miami-Dade County, long a Democratic stronghold. “I’m not predicting us winning Miami-Dade County but if we are competitive there that’s a great sign for Republicans,” Rubio told Fox News on Tuesday.

Early voting ends either Saturday or Sunday in most Florida counties, but mail ballots can be turned in until 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Voices of early voters

Interviews with voters around the state this week who were casting early ballots show a range of emotions and issues are pulling people to the polls. DeSantis is driving much of the debate in Florida, with Democrats sharply critical of his record and Republicans eager to give him another term. Sarasota resident Joe Catanzarite, a retired building contractor from Michigan, believes “Florida’s red” now and DeSantis is unbeatable.

“He can’t be touched,” said Catanzarite, who was attending a GOP rally in Sarasota last week featuring Rubio.

That DeSantis “didn’t toe the line with the COVID farce” endeared him to Catanzarite. Other GOP voters say the same thing.

“He kept Florida open,” said Sarasota resident Carolann Banks, a 53-year-old landscaping company owner, after casting her vote for DeSantis last week.

In addition to praising DeSantis’s record, Republicans also said they want to push back against President Joe Biden’s policies and are concerned about issues such as the economy.

“The administration federally is a mess,” Banks said. “I went straight Republican this year. I want the Democrats out.”

Retired airline pilot Bill Riley pointed to inflation as a key issue as he put up DeSantis signs outside an early voting site in Palm Beach County last week.

“One of the most crucial things about this election this year is, of course, the economy because people vote with their wallets,” Riley said. “And people are upset with the way inflation is going.” Concerns about abortion access are

motivating many Florida Democrats, who say they worry about losing that right. DeSantis signed a new law banning abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy and said he plans to support additional abortion legislation. “Abortion is a big issue,” said Sarasota Democrat Brian Barton, 53, a building contractor who voted “straight blue” last week. “I got an 18-year-old daughter so I can relate. I’m not worried about the economy, that fluctuates.” Democrats also are motivated to beat DeSantis, who has become one of the most prominent and polarizing political figures in a country, someone who has a knack for attracting attention through provocative policy proposals and use of his executive authority.

“I do not agree with most of Governor DeSantis’s actions and games and the way he’s governing Florida, so I was going to vote for any Democratic candidate,” said Sarasota resident Sally Weiss after casting her ballot for Crist.

Recent Florida State University graduate Ashley Ige, 23, pointed to legislation DeSantis signed such as the Parental Rights in Education law, dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” law, and the “Stop WOKE Act,” which restricts how race is discussed in schools, colleges and workplaces, and sparked a nationwide debate over censorship, critical race theory and diversity training.

“I was always like: ‘Why is he focused on this, when they’re so many pressing issues that need his attention, like the environment?’” said Ige, a Democrat who voted for her party’s candidates at the FSU early voting location Wednesday. “It’s regressing us, not progressing us.”

Early voters worry democracy at risk

Former President Donald Trump’s false claims of a stolen election, which are being echoed by many GOP candidates, have some voters convinced that the foundations of American democracy are at risk.

“I’m worried, I’m absolutely worried,” said Delray Beach retiree Debbie Keller. “It bothers me, all these people who are doubting elections and election deniers. That’s why I feel democracy is at stake.” That’s one reason many Democrats are still eager to vote, even if they’re doubtful about carrying Florida. Weiss conceded that “based on polls, it’s not looking great” for Democrats but she was trying to remain “hopeful.” She still considers Florida a swing state, but perhaps not as much as it was a couple years ago. Democrats tend to do better among younger voters, but Florida A& M University student

Jordyn Thomas wonders if her fellow college students are engaged this cycle. Thomas voted early on the Tallahassee campus Wednesday. A Democrat, she doesn't expect her party will do very well this election cycle.

"I worry because one thing about Republicans is they're going to show up to the polls," Thomas said. "A lot of Democrats, they vote, but a lot don't vote, especially these college kids."

Kylie Aldridge, a freshman pre-elementary education student at Florida State University, voted for the first time on Wednesday at her campus early voting location.

Asked how she felt, she replied: "I don't know. I feel like it won't really make a difference." Her single ballot didn't seem like a lot compared with the millions of others that will be turned in across the Sunshine State. Still, if the results don't go the way she wants them to this election, she doesn't want to say she didn't try. While Aldridge, a Democrat, is passionate about multiple issues, including abortion, gun reform and tax structure, she isn't sure if she would have voted if not for DeSantes's education stances. She disliked comments by him stating that people without education degrees may be better teachers than those with degrees. Still, she thinks DeSantis has a better chance of being reelected to the governorship than Crist. Smith, the retired Sarasota plumber and registered Democrat, believes Florida's swing state days are over. "I'm not very optimistic at all," he said. Riley isn't convinced that Florida is a "solid red" state yet. He's looking to see what happens Tuesday. "This election will determine that," he said.

Sarasota Herald-Tribune reporter Anne Snabes, Palm Beach Post reporter Stephany Matat, and Florida Today's Ralph Chapoco, USA TODAY Network - Florida reporter Douglas

Soule in Tallahassee contributed to this report. Follow Herald-Tribune Political Editor Zac Anderson on Twitter at @zacjanderson. He can be reached at zac.anderson@heraldtribune.com



Sarasota resident Brian Barton, 53, said he voted “all blue.” Abortion is “a big issue” for him. ZAC ANDERSON/USA TODAY NETWORK



Sarasota resident Joe Catanzarite believes Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis “can’t be touched” and will win easily over his

Democratic opponent, U.S. Rep. Charlie Crist. ZAC ANDERSON/USA TODAY NETWORK



Florida A&M University student Jordyn Thomas wonders if her fellow college students are motivated to vote this cycle. PROVIDED BY DOUGLAS SOULE



An audience member at a Nov. 1 rally in Sarasota for Republican U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio shows of his “red wave” shirt. ZAC ANDERSON/USA TODAY NETWORK



President Joe Biden speaks about Social Security, Medicare, and prescription drug costs on Tuesday in Hallandale Beach. Democrats Charlie Crist and Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Val Demings rallied in South Florida Tuesday with Biden, who slammed the “extremism” of the “mega MAGA” crowd. “Folks, this ain’t your father’s Republican Party,” Biden said. “This a different breed of cat.” EVAN VUCCI/AP

Alachua sheriff was given money for employee pay raises
Where did the funds go?

Javon L. Harris Gainesville Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK
Alachua County officials are asking Sheriff Clovis Watson Jr. to account for millions of dollars intended for employee raises that never made it to their wallets.

Watson, who was voted in as sheriff in 2020, has had a rocky start to his term, butting heads with union workers and, sometimes, other elected leaders. But nothing yet quite

compares to his recent decision to not give any of his hundreds of employees a significant budgeted pay increase.

Earlier this year, the Alachua County Commission gave all its departments enough money to give employees a 7% increase. Watson's office was given \$4.8 million to also help his employees fight inflation, though he opted to give about half that — between 2.5% and 4% — to his workers.

The decision is leaving county leaders scratching their heads, wondering why he withheld the funds and why he plans to ask for more money at the Nov. 8 commission meeting.

“All employees are impacted by inflation and the challenging economy that we're in, and the idea of the 7% raise was to help offset that,” County Commissioner Anna Prizzia said.

During a budget process that started last year, county commissioners agreed to increase the salaries for employees to help retention and fend off rising inflation costs, county spokesman Mark Sexton said.

“The board had numerous discussions that lead up to the 7% across the board increases for county employees and those of constitutional officers,” he said.

Still, Watson opted to roll out a step plan for the pay bump, which employees must be eligible for. Of the office's 726 employees, about 250 of whom are unionized, none have received the full amount they were supposed to be given. Some haven't seen a raise at all, due to pending union negotiations.

“We are doing this incrementally,” said ACSO spokesperson Capt. Kaley Behl. “The first part of the process was the step increase which is 2.5% for civilians, 2.5% for deputies, first-time stepping sergeants are 4% and 3% thereafter. Lieutenants are 3% across the board.”

In an Oct. 13 letter to his employees, Watson said pay increases will be applied based on future funding from the Board of County Commissioners.

Prizzia said that while it's within the sheriff's discretion to determine how he disburses employee raises, it was the commission's intention that all employees receive 7% across the board.

"If he wanted to utilize his budget to create a step plan on top of the 7% raises that we provided, that would be totally up to him," she said. "But it was not our intention for that 7% raise to be variably applied."

Employee suspended for inquiry about raises

The Gainesville Sun learned that a detention officer, Erica Hollingsworth, emailed county commissioners to inquire why she wasn't receiving the full amount budgeted for.

"We were recently informed that the 7% raise does not actually translate to 7% for all of us," she wrote. "Since I have worked less than two years here, I do not qualify for the step plan. If nothing changes at your meeting on 11/8, I am looking at an \$0.86 (CENT) pay increase which translates to \$73/paycheck which is negligible when taxes and insurance are factored in." Hollingsworth was suspended by Watson soon after sending her email.

"In reviewing that employee's e-mail, it was apparent that the information was incomplete, inaccurate, and inappropriately communicated," Watson wrote. "Like the County, this Agency has policies and procedures that govern employee behavior. This action will be addressed immediately."

Prizzia said she was surprised by the move, saying that constituents have the right to speak with officials and that she

broke no rules or shared untrue statements when expressing concern about her wages.

Hollingsworth has since hired Gainesville attorney Gary S. Edinger to represent her interests in the matter. Edinger confirmed his client was suspended while under investigation but said she can't publicly speak about the issue at this time. County chairwoman Marihelen Wheeler sent Watson a formal letter asking what he did with the money intended for employee raises after seeing Hollingsworth's email.

"Concerning the funding you received for a 7% compensation increase for all employees, please provide information on how raises were applied to non-bargaining employees of the jail, law enforcement, combined communication center, and Court Security," the letter reads. "Where were the excess funds directed if any employees received less than 7%?"

Watson responded a few days later, though unresponsive to Wheeler's question, that his office intended to send back roughly \$4.8 million of unused funds from the previous budget cycle, which was \$2.8 million more than he originally reported a month earlier.

It's unclear how the sheriff's department made such a massive accounting error four days before the end of the 2022 fiscal year. Commissioners hope to receive answers at its upcoming Tuesday meeting, where Watson has vowed to further discuss the issue.

"Originally when we asked him how much money was coming back to us, we got one number, and then we've gotten another number since then," Prizzia said.

"We're trying to get answers to the questions we've already asked, in an effort to understand how he has utilized the

resources that we've already given him for raises for his staff," she added.

Prizzia said the unresponsiveness from Watson's office is nothing new and that it, at times, has made it difficult when making budgeting decisions.

"We've had very little communication from him when we've asked the questions that we've asked in terms of getting the information that we've asked for," she said.

Javon L. Harris is a local government and social justice reporter for The Gainesville Sun. He can be reached by phone at (352) 338-3103, by email at jlharris@gannett.com or on Twitter @JavonLHarris_JD

Judge tosses out lawsuit challenging county commissioner's residency

Andrew Caplan

Gainesville Sun USA TODAY NETWORK

A lawsuit filed against the chair of the Alachua County Commission has been thrown out by a judge due to a "lack of subject matter," court records show.

The suit, filed against Marihelen Wheeler in September, questioned her residency after her primary victory over former county employee Charlie Jackson after she earned nearly 73% of the popular vote.

In May, the Gainesville Sun exclusively reported inconsistencies with Wheeler's residency claims due to a homesteaded property she owns with her husband outside the district she serves. Under Florida law, elected county commissioners must live within the district they represent at the time of their election.

The court's ruling shows petitioner Eugene Garvin Sr. incorrectly interpreted the law when challenging Wheeler's

primary victory, believing that she had to live within her district ahead of the general election. He did not question her past election win for the current term she is serving.

“I am relieved that this has been put to bed and that we can now focus on getting the vote out,” Wheeler said Friday.

Garvin, also an Alachua County Democrat, shares close ties with Wheeler’s primary opponent, as he is listed as the vice chair of Manhood Youth Development, a local nonprofit founded by Jackson.

Wheeler, 70, faces Gainesville Mayor Ed Braddy on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Garvin might be able to re-file his case if Wheeler wins.

Complicated residency claims

In May, Wheeler told The Sun that she splits time between two homes, one of which she co-owns with her son inside District 2. She said the utility bill there is also in her name, as is her voter registration and driver’s license.

But for years, Wheeler claimed a homestead exemption — a tax break for a home that requires majority residency throughout the year — with her husband outside the district.

She said she was unsure why she was still listed on the property and corrected the issue prior to her primary race against Jackson — but not before her 2018 victory.

After The Sun’s article on Wheeler’s residency issues, she was fined roughly \$12,000 for back taxes and a homestead exemption penalty.

She said all the paperwork has since been corrected and feels confident the issue is now behind her in the event Garvin, or others, attempt to challenge her again.

Gainesville attorney Rod Smith represented Wheeler in the case

Parents frustrated over school bus delays

Gershon Harrell

Gainesville Sun USA TODAY NETWORK

A shortage of bus drivers for Alachua County Public Schools continues to be a problem, with parents from the Hidden Oaks community among those experiencing regularly late buses.

Parents say the buses have resulted in their kids being late to school and arriving home late. Sometimes, buses don't show up at all.

"I get the transportation issue. Everybody's under the gun on it, but it's affecting our kids. This is not fair to them," said Melissa Oshea, a mother of two students who has been frustrated with last-minute notices about delayed bus routes. Oshea isn't the only parent dealing with the problem. On Monday, the district had 11 late morning buses and 10 late afternoon buses. On Thursday morning, there were seven late buses.

School district officials say the problem is a shortage of bus drivers that has only worsened since the start of the school year. The school district needs to hire 44 bus drivers, said Darin Jones, director of transportation for the school district, in an email to The Sun.

"We are still in need of bus drivers," Jones said Oshea has a daughter at Fort Clarke Middle School and a son at Buchholz High School. On Oct. 26, she received an email from the transportation department that said her son's bus would "be up to 90 minutes late or longer, no driver. **Please be prepared to have alternative transportation.**"

"I work an hour from my children, to be told that at three o'clock in the afternoon — I'm a single mom, that's

ridiculous,” Oshea said. Oshea, who works in Lake City, said the delay resulted in Jones herself having to take her child home from school.

Jones said the district consolidated its bus routes to 110 from 121 routes over the summer. He said the district has 109 drivers employed, including regular route drivers and substitutes, to cover those routes.

Since the start of the school year, he said, the district had 14 bus drivers resign or retire. In an effort to recruit more drivers, the district has increased pay for drivers to \$17.50 from \$13.90 an hour.

The district holds open interviews to recruit drivers every Wednesday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the district office at the Alachua County Public Schools warehouse, located at 1800 SE Hawthorne Rd. A job fair will be held to recruit drivers on Nov. 14 from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the district office.

In the meantime, parents say problems with routes are causing a safety issue.

Kristian Beach is the mother of two girls attending Fort Clarke Middle School who also lives in Hidden Oaks, a mobile home community. Beach said she has a health disability that affects her ability to drive.

When school buses are late sometimes, she said she’s forced to keep her kids home or use the city bus as an alternative.

She noted that shootings have happened in the nearby Holly Heights apartment complex, including a shoot-out “minutes after the children were picked up” by a late-arriving bus.

“And I’m like, ‘You do know if any of these babies had been shot, that’s your fault because you put them in that situation,’” Beach said.

Gershon Harrell is an education reporter at The Gainesville Sun. He can be reached by phone at (352) 338-3166, by email at Gharrell@gannett.com or on Twitter at @GershonReports.

I still believe in newspapers

“From the time I learned to read I wanted to write.” — Webb

Miller In the summer of my 15th year I was a bellboy and dishwasher at a century-old inn in Great Barrington, Mass. And my first time away from home proved a heady brew indeed.

That’s when I discovered a treasure trove in The Chalet’s dusty attic.

It was a box full of books. One of which would change my life forever.

“I Found No Peace” was Webb Miller’s 1936 account of his life as a United Press International reporter during the first turbulent decades of that tumultuous century.

In the course of his all too short career —

See CUNNINGHAM, Page [2F](#)

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Miller died in an auto accident during the London blackout — this “timid Pennsylvania farm boy” covered hangings in Chicago, accompanied Black Jack Pershing on the pursuit of Pancho Villa, tread the killing fields of countless wars and interviewed the likes of Hitler and Gandhi.

From the time I closed the stained orange covers on the yellowed pages of Miller’s life, I never wanted to do anything but newspapering.

In 1976 I found a berth at The Gainesville Sun, first as higher education writer and then Tallahassee bureau chief before settling into a 30-year stint as editorial page editor.

(Fun fact: Did you know that both of The Sun's Pulitzer Prizes were for editorial writing? And no, I didn't win either of them.)

As editorial page editor I took to heart Meg Greenfield's declaration: "We have a license to get into the daily argument of life," the late Washington Post editorialist insisted.

With The Sun's license I argued for unified local government and against endless city-county wars. For restoration of the Ocklawaha River and against turning Gainesville streets into urban roads. For gun control and against the death penalty. And every day of the week — 365 days a year — The Sun provided space for anyone who disagreed with its editorial positions to make their own case.

Because a one-sided argument is no argument at all.

It breaks my heart to see The Sun and other newspapers opt out of the "argument of daily life" by reducing or eliminating editorial and op-ed pages. The only other "public forum" out there is a social media jungle that is as deceptive as it is treacherous.

All that said, I never regretted a single mile of my life's newspapering journey.

I only take this stroll down memory lane to make a couple of points.

First, that I found my destiny in a book. And if this 74-year old man has any useful advice for young people it is simply this: Read, read, read, read and read some more.

Believe me, you will find your life in there somewhere.

And the second thing is that I believe in newspapers. On paper or online, it makes no difference to me.

Listen, a newspaper is nothing short of a daily miracle.

Each and every day we start from scratch and attempt,

with varying degrees of success, to give readers some insight into the world around them. From what's happening in our own neighborhoods to who is doing what to who in the great halls of power and why all of those matters.

Still, I honestly don't know what I would tell a young person today who is considering a career in newspapers.

Because I had the best of it. I came into the profession just after a couple of young reporters broke the Watergate story and gave journalism a good name.

I retired about a year after the New York Times sold The Sun. And just as newspapers around the country were consolidating, laying off staff, reducing content and growing slimmer by the day.

Or closing their doors altogether. It's not that there aren't jobs in newspapering today. But the jobs that remain often do not provide young journalists with the security and wherewithal to support a family — or to even stay in any one place long enough to actually make a difference.

I understand the economic, political and social forces that are impacting the viability of newspapers. I point no fingers at villains and continue to hope that there are heroes out there who will find a way for young journalists to continue to do their jobs in the face of seemingly intractable odds.

Local news is particularly vulnerable in these uncertain times. The day when local newspapers would routinely field a city reporter, county reporter, police and courts reporter, environmental writer, sports staff, photographers and graphic artists and so on are likely gone for good.

The new local news environment is more likely to consist of one or two editors and a handful of reporters, all of them scrambling to keep up with whatever's breaking at the moment. The Sun's sterling reportage on deceptive election campaign ads is testament to what a few dedicated reporters can still get done.

Listen, I wish I had the answers. Perhaps the future of local news reporting lies in nonprofits. Even so, I find it hard to imagine a Gainesville without the Gainesville Sun, and I hope that never comes to pass.

Because The Sun was never just my job. It was my life's passion.

Ron Cunningham is former editorial page editor of The Sun. Read his blog at www.floridavelocipede.com. Email him at ron@freegmv.com.



Ron Cunningham Columnist

Seek new ways to improve our community

A winding path led me to Gainesville. The many great qualities of this community kept me here, while the frustrating parts gave me plenty of material for opinion pieces.

But I am now leaving The Sun to pursue different challenges. For my last column, I wanted to share my hopes for the place that I am proud to call home.

Gainesville has certainly changed since I moved here in 2005. My perspective on the city has changed as well: After marrying my lovely wife Colleen and having two wonderful

children, Kate and Sam, my priorities are much different than when I arrived here.

Sure, I still want interesting cultural events to be held here and a lively downtown scene. But a top-notch school system, safe streets and a wide array of jobs are now higher priorities. I don't expect my children to remain in Gainesville for the rest of their lives, but want them to have the opportunity to raise their own families here if they desire to do so.

We have all the ingredients here to make Gainesville an even better place to live and work, including more highly intelligent people per capita than most cities in the country. But we sometimes can't seem to get our act together as a community, squabbling over minor issues rather than focusing on larger goals. People too often seem more interested in protecting their own turf rather than collaborating on common interests.

My greatest hope is for the incoming leaders of the city and university to truly commit to marshalling their resources and bringing people from all walks of life together to solve Gainesville's most persistent problems. Gainesville's wide and well-documented racial and socioeconomic disparities should top that list.

Working with James Lawrence on the Gainesville for All initiative has been an eye-opening experience. It showed me there are no quick fixes for Gainesville's inequities, but many people willing to roll up their sleeves and work on lasting improvements if given the chance.

My time as The Sun's opinion editor offered a similar lesson. While writing columns and editorials was always a great joy for me, my most important role was providing a platform for other residents to offer their own views and potential solutions

to Gainesville's challenges. To everyone who has written guest columns and letters to the editor over the years, especially our regular contributors, I give you my heartfelt thanks for making my job so rewarding.

My departure from The Sun means that columns and letters will no longer be accepted for publication, with today marking the last edition of the Issues section. Readers can instead offer their opinions on news stories in the comments section on the online versions of those pieces and through social media.

The Sun has gone through its own changes since I started here, reflective of the challenges facing the newspaper business as a whole. But the reporting being done by its staff remains critical and deserving of support through your subscriptions, whether for the print edition or digital only. If you're not a subscriber already, I encourage you to

visit www.gainesville.com/subscribenow to sign up.

While national journalists get all the attention, reporters at smaller publications are responsible for less glamorous but even more vital work. They are needed to act as watchdogs over local government and other community institutions, sitting through public meetings and sifting through public records. At a time when the very notion of objective truth is up for debate, we need journalists committed to fairly documenting the world around us now more than ever. I have been fortunate to work with some giants in journalism in Ohio, Pennsylvania, California and here in Gainesville. I've also been lucky to live in some fantastic places along the way, but found the place I wanted to marry and raise a family in Gainesville.

While my departure from The Sun will likely mean the end of my career in newspapers, I don't plan on saying goodbye to

Gainesville and will seek other job opportunities here. And I hope that the many contributors to these opinion pages channel their energy into offering solutions to our community's problems in other ways.

I won't be lecturing from my editorial- page perch about these problems any more, but have confidence in community members putting aside their differences to solve them.

Gainesville is a great place to live, but it could be even better if we worked together.

Nathan Crabbe can be reached through social media at twitter.com/nathancrabbe and facebook.com/nathancrabbe.

A CHANCE TO START OVER

Gainesville helping ex-offenders get work

How long must people like Tequila McKnight pay society for mistakes made in their long-ago past? Now at age 44, and out of prison nine years after serving time for non-violent offenses committed in her early 20s, employers still see her as too much of a risk because of her criminal record. Ex-offenders deserve a fair chance. h Community Spring, a four-year-old grassroots organization created to equip people victimized by social and economic injustices with the means to seek systemic remedies, agrees. It is currently spearheading efforts to persuade the Gainesville City Commission to adopt Florida's First Fair Chance ordinance. h Under the proposal, employers of 15 or more people would be allowed to inquire about an applicant's criminal background only after extending a job offers..

Currently, employers can make such inquiries upon receipt of an employment application.

h "I still can't get a job because of my record," said McKnight, who along with five other grassroot citizens made fighting job

discrimination against ex-offenders the focus of their year-long Community Spring advocacy work in 2018.

“We wanted to work with people impacted by structural disadvantage,” said Max Tipping, who is a lawyer. Of those people, nationally an estimated 27% of the formerly incarcerated are unemployed. The documented evidence that unemployed ex-offenders are more likely to return to prison ought to be compelling enough reason alone to enact ordinances such as Fair Chance.

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“I’m a totally different person from who I was back then,” she insisted. Yet for years McKnight was either rejected by employers or left with little choice but to accept menial jobs like the one she took at a local motel. There she earned a paltry \$3.81 for each room she cleaned.

A determined McKnight later figured out that she could use her cleaning skills to start her own business. She founded TNT Dynamite Cleaning Services, which employs many workers with backgrounds similar to her own — rehabilitated people who paid their debt for past wrongs and needed a break to start again. In addition, McKnight is actively involved in pushing for legislation such as the Fair Chance ordinance, which would help make the workplace fairer by requiring private businesses to join the city in using more equitable hiring practices. She can be found speaking before the City Commission or to community groups to gather support.

Max Tipping, who along with his wife, Lindsay, organized Community Spring, said the proposal was customized for Gainesville but that similar measures existed in at least 15 states and 22 localities across the nation, including one in San Francisco that is much more restrictive. A federal law that is

similar, the “Second Chance Act,” was reauthorized during the Trump administration and was widely hailed as a major criminal justice reform.

“This type of work is what we had hoped to do,” said Tipping, who is a lawyer. “We wanted to work with people impacted by structural disadvantage.”

Of those people, nationally an estimated 27% of the formerly incarcerated are unemployed. The documented evidence that unemployed ex-offenders are more likely to return to prison ought to be compelling enough reason alone to enact ordinances such as Fair Chance.

In Florida, for example, taxpayers spend more than \$20,000 a year per inmate. It simply makes much more sense to rehabilitate ex-offenders and turn them into taxpaying, law-abiding citizens.

To its credit, the City Commission seems to recognize the benefit and the fairness of the proposal. The commission’s general policy committee has approved the measure and it is being drafted by the city attorney.

Next up is a final vote by the commission later this month. Surely commissioners will follow through on behalf of people like Tequila McKnight.

James F. Lawrence is executive director of Gainesville for All. Send inquiries to gmv4all@gmail.com.



From left, Latashia Mayze-Brimm, Tequila McKnight, Nadine Johnson and Kevin Scott worked as fellows at the nonprofit Community Spring, whose mission is to dismantle structural poverty and spur economic mobility in the Gainesville area. BRAD MCCLENNY/STAFF

