

Education Matters: Rotary Future's College Resource Center

scenesarasota.com/magazine/education-matters-rotary-futures-college-resource-center



Education

By [Sarasota Scene](#) |

By Simone Knego | April 2023

Rotary Futures College Resource Center was founded in 2001 to educate, inspire, and motivate students of all ages to access post-secondary education and training by linking education, career, and life opportunities.

The team provides post-secondary educational planning assistance, personal guidance, and vital computer-based resources to Venice High School students at no cost.

Bob Vedder, the founder of Rotary Futures, saw a need to create a program that would assist guidance counselors in meeting the needs of more students. This idea rallied community support and the direct support of the Venice-Nokomis Rotary Club, which pledged the seed money to begin the program and has continued to provide annual support to the program. Rotary Futures has just entered its 21st year of aiding Venice High School students.

Since Rotary Future's inception, Venice High School students have more than tripled the annual scholarship dollars earned, totaling \$60 million in the last 18 years. In 2022 alone, Venice High School students earned \$13.1 million in scholarship funding.



Rotary Futures has an innovative, privately-funded approach to help students with post-secondary decision-making. Venice High School provides a resource center with 13 Internet computers, numerous printed materials, and willing volunteers to assist students, parents, and community members with linking education, career, and life opportunities.

According to Caitlin Joyner, executive director of Rotary Futures, “Our job is to help kids formulate a plan after graduation that includes some type of education or training. In our idyllic world, every student would either go to college, pursue a trade through a vocational

program, or enlist in the military. We want to ensure our students know there's so much more than the traditional four-year college pathway.” They intend to meet students where they are at.

Rotary Futures staff gives students one-on-one assistance to help them apply to any of these specific pathways, whether college, a vocational program, or the military. Rotary Futures team of two spends the whole first half of students’ senior year helping kids discover and apply to all the programs on their lists or helping them develop their lists and then apply. Then, once the students have submitted their applications, Rotary Futures helps them find funding for their programs. One of their most impassioned missions is ensuring that students do not use the cost of a program as a reason they would not pursue that program. This is especially true for kids coming from low-income scenarios, first-generation college students, or from families from different countries, diverse backgrounds, or where post-secondary education was not a huge focus or goal.



Joyner states, “We want to ensure that all our students know that we are here to help them find scholarships, funding, and to apply for financial aid. We help them complete the FAFSA, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. When kids are low-income, they often get automatic money from the government just by completing the FAFSA. Some of our students,

who are lower income, have no idea that just by filling out the FAFSA, they can qualify for something called a Pell Grant, which could fund their entire vocational program or their entire community college education. When our students realize this, it is such a tremendous feeling. They understand that income is not a limitation.”



Rotary Futures developed and implemented the first local scholarship database, which over 6,500 area students have utilized. This database contains about 300 scholarships, including local, state, national, and institutional scholarships, making rotary futures the link between the scholarship and students. Rotary Futures uses an app that reminds students of scholarship opportunities and deadlines. Joyner says, “If all we did was just hand the seniors a spreadsheet with a list of the scholarships and due dates, we wouldn’t have great success in getting completion

on these scholarships.”

The goal is to ensure that as many seniors apply for scholarships as possible. This app helps ensure that the students, who are over-committed and overwhelmed, do not miss a scholarship opportunity. “We want to make sure each student is getting every opportunity

possible for funding so they can comfortably afford the programs of study they embark upon when they leave Venice High School,” continued Joyner.

Everything Rotary Futures does is with a mission, to support and encourage the students to pursue education after high school and to help them find a way to fund those educational opportunities, especially for those students who feel like the cost would be the limiting factor as to why they would not consider it.

Gulf Coast Community Foundation has been a significant partner of Rotary Futures since its inception by providing operating support, event sponsorship, and scholarship funding. Last year alone, they awarded Venice High School graduating seniors over \$50,000 in scholarships. According to Joyner, “Gulf Coast Community Foundation is one of the most generous funding sources for our students pursuing education. So many of the students could not pursue post-graduate education without the incredible generosity of foundations like Gulf Coast Community Foundation.” The Foundation offers an application that enables students to be eligible for over 60 scholarship opportunities from local organizations. It is also a platinum-level sponsor for the Rotary Futures program. In addition, the Foundation co-sponsors Venice High School’s annual college night.

Last month, 70 colleges from around the world came to Venice High School to recruit students. Over 600 people attended this college fair, which is about building relationships with college representatives from London to California. The event starts with a dinner and allows the students to do a personal meet and greet. The fair truly gives Venice High School students a leg-up in the college decision process.

Senior scholarship night is one of the most powerful nights of the school year. It is when Rotary Futures gets to announce the winners of all the incredible scholarships the students have been applying for and the money they’ve been awarded.

“It is tear-inducing every year because the kids are so grateful. The parents are so grateful. For us, it is a job where we get to see the direct impact of our efforts and how they impact our next generation,” said Joyner. For Caitlin Joyner, and her colleagues, Heather Masden and Tami Wesner, this does not even feel like a job because it is such a gift. They get to be the people who help make kids’ dreams come true. And then they get to see those dreams become a reality.

Joyner has always been passionate about education. She believes that knowledge is power and that educated minds change the world. “The more educational opportunities we can pursue, the more we learn, the more we grow. And when we can open students’ perspectives to different possibilities that await them, that will make the world a better place in the long term. So, what will change our world is these kids’ pursuing education and finding their passion, and then rediscovering their passions repeatedly because of what they’re being exposed to in an educational setting. That is absolutely my deeper why.”



Rotary Futures relies on donations and sponsorships to make their work possible.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Rotary Futures please call 941.480.3178 to learn more or visit rotaryfutures.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Gulf Coast Community Foundation, please call 941.486.4600 to learn more or visit gulfcoastcf.org.

Put your add code here

