

# Environmental leaders honored at inaugural climate awards

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**Sarasota-based Climate Adaptation Center's Champions Award Ceremony showcased individuals' potential to drive climate action.**

By [Ian Swaby](#) | 8:00 a.m. April 20, 2023



Elizabeth Moore, Climate Adaptation Center director; Robert Bunting, Climate Adaptation Center CEO and chair; Jon Thaxton, Gulf Coast Community Foundation senior vice president for community leadership; Jennifer Compton, Bay Park Conservancy board secretary; Amy Grossman, Climate Adaptation Center chief operating officer; Ed Chiles, All Clams on Deck founding board member; and Charles Reith, Sarasota Urban Reforesters.

Photo by Ian Swaby

Sarasota Neighbors

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From the wrath of Hurricane Ian, to flooding in Fort Lauderdale on April 12, severe weather events induced and intensified by climate change are experienced by many Floridians, said Robert Bunting, CEO and chair of the Climate Adaptation Center.

Yet many individuals don't know what they can do to address climate change, he said.

He hopes the center's 2023 Climate Champions Award Ceremony will offer the public an example. The inaugural event was held on April 18 at Michael's on East.

The CAC itself started off with a simple idea, after Realtor Janet Walter introduced community activist and philanthropist Elizabeth Moore to Bunting.

The two sat down for wine at Art Ovation Hotel, where Bunting told her something he'd been thinking about. Moore knew immediately she wanted to be involved with the organization, for which she now serves as director, and which she said is the only Florida-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to the climate and its impact.

The organization's continual growth, which Bunting said has resulted in 4,000 readers of its newsletter and its events always selling out, eventually led it to hold the ceremony recognizing the efforts of the wider community.



Robert Bunting, CEO and chair of the Climate Adaptation Center, and Elizabeth Moore, director of the Climate Adaptation Center address the attendees.

Photo by Ian Swaby

Honorees included Charles Reith of Sarasota Urban Reforesters; Bill Waddill, chief operating officer of Bay Park Conservancy; Ed Chiles, founding board member of All Clams on Deck; Jennifer and David Shafer of the Science and Environment Council; and Jon Thaxton, senior vice president for community leadership at Gulf Coast Community Foundation.

“The times are changing,” Thaxton said. “The question of climate change and sea level rise has been put to best put to rest, and I think people are now acknowledging the need to take action.”

“We are all part of the climate system,” Moore said. “What we do impacts the climate, and the climate impacts all of us in its turn.”

Also in attendance were city of Sarasota commissioners Jen Ahearn-Koch and Erik Arroyo and Longboat Key town manager Howard Tipton, director of support services Carolyn Brown, and Commissioner B.J. Bishop.

### **Accomplishments spanning a range of environments**

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Bunting said programs like the awards are a crucial first step to recognizing good work in the community, educating and inspiring others in turn.



Elizabeth Moore, director of the Climate Adaptation Center, presents an award to Ed Chiles, founding board member of All Clams on Deck.

Photo by Ian Swaby

“I am flattered to be considered,” said Ed Chiles of All Clams on Deck, who is also known for his ownership of local restaurants including Vista Dockside Restaurant & Pub in Longboat Key. “It’s great to be recognized. I’m inspired by the leadership in this room.”

The accomplishments of honorees involved a range of initiatives in the local area.

Charles Reith accepted the award of Sarasota Urban Reforesters, which is responsible for numerous microforests on small parcels of undeveloped land. Reith said these systems divert excess waters, prevent excess nutrients from reaching the bay, cool the surrounding area, and restore habitats.

List of honorees

- **Ed Chiles:** Founding board member of All Clams on Deck
- **Bill Waddill:** Chief operating officer of the Bay Park Conservancy
- **Charles Reith:** Sarasota Urban Reforesters
- **Jennifer and David Shafer:** Executive directors of Science and Environment Council
- **Jon Thaxton:** Senior vice president for community leadership at the Gulf Coast Community Foundation

Jennifer Compton, secretary of the board at the Bay Park Conservancy, accepted an award on behalf of chief operating officer Bill Waddill.

Waddill, who has over 36 years of experience as a planner and landscape architect, said in a video statement that when teams designed The Bay Park, which opened in 2022, they created the roughly 10-foot-high surrounding pathway to separate lower areas to the west — which are equipped to deal with flooding due to features including the choice of plants — and the higher ground to the east.

“I think the ability to leverage the public and private sector and partner together to do something like this is really a model for the future,” he said in the video.

Chiles said that he had become increasingly concerned about the environment and involved in environmental causes over his 45 years in the area, establishing All Clams on Deck after the 2021 crisis at Piney Point in Manatee County.

The organization helps restore seagrass and high-density clam sites to improve water quality and promote economic growth.

While Jennifer and David Shafer, executive directors of the Science and Environment Council, were said by Moore to be unable to attend, the award was personally delivered by Moore and Bunting. The pair have been involved in leadership, education, and strategic planning roles for various community organizations, and currently are working with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program on a climate adaptation plan.

Thaxton, who has participated in panel discussions and been a local advocate for resilience strategies, said among his roles was a project replacing 53 acres of hardened shoreline on Sarasota’s bayfront with a soft shoreline he said would allow habitats to migrate as sea levels rise, with the project also moving structures and adding filtering mechanisms for waters entering the bay.

Despite the accomplishments on display, Thaxton said the event was not about celebrating individuals, but about what the community as a whole can accomplish.

“It’s not about me. It's not about any of these other award recipients. They will all tell you it’s about the work. It's progressing the mission of protecting our natural environment, and if that means we have to get on stage and accept an award, then that's the price we pay.”

Bunting said the event would guide the public in the actions that can be taken and "make us feel that we all, as individuals, have a say in the outcome, and to inspire people to become climate champions, maybe not in the big way that some of these people are, but in our everyday lives.”

The room was filled with attendees who were also on board with the cause.

"I think this is a wonderful event," said Jack Rozance, a CAC member. He said he was glad to come out to celebrate those who are making a difference on behalf of sustainability, the environment, and the climate.

Janet Walter said she couldn't miss the event after having played a role in bringing her two friends together to guide the organization.

"They're both amazing people," she said. "Putting them together just made a dynamic duo."

author



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### **Ian Swaby**

Ian Swaby is the Sarasota neighbors writer for the Observer. Ian is a Florida State University graduate of Editing, Writing, and Media and previously worked in the publishing industry in the Cayman Islands.

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