

Education Matters | Interpreting Nature: Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast

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Education

By [Sarasota Scene](#) |

By Ryan G. Van Cleave | Photos by Steve Berlin | November 2022

For years, the growing success of Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast’s robust youth programs had adults asking, “What about us? We want to explore and experience nature in fun and educational ways, too!” From those questions came the idea for a new Nature Interpreter position—a role which would offer the community new pathways to learn about, discover, and interpret the natural world, as well as appreciate how land and water conservation affects their day-to-day lives. “Quite simply,” says Foundation president Christine P. Johnson, “the goal is to connect people to nature and foster a deeper understanding of our natural world.”

Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast’s mission says it plainly: “We protect the land and water in Southwest Florida for the benefit of people and nature.” Johnson explains that knowing WHY that mission matters is crucial. It’s because it’s important to have a natural

thriving world as well as a thriving built world. “We believe they can coexist if they are planned well. So, we envision a future where the built and unbuilt worlds of Southwest Florida can flourish together.”

After receiving funding for a one-year trial, Jenna Biggs was hired as Conservation Foundation’s first Nature Interpreter in May. An environmental educator for more than 15 years, Biggs has worked in the zoo, aquarium, and resort industries. “I’ve been getting people out into nature and helping them connect to it for a long time. I just love it,” she says.



What appealed to her about the Nature Interpreter opportunity was Conservation Foundation’s focus on mission and connecting people. “That’s the idea—connection,” Jenna notes. “Part of my role is to make nature memorable. When people have a memorable experience, they’re more likely to connect with nature and then, hopefully, want to protect it. By creating opportunities and giving participants space to learn and engage, we’re helping to grow more nature lovers.”

Biggs is starting with Conservation Foundation’s existing audience, such as those who already attend the events, follow the organization on social media, and receive e-blasts. But she’s also looking to expand further into the community and reach a more diverse population. “We have such a far reach with our five counties now, yet I would love to keep building on existing programs and create brand new ones.”

Johnson adds that from a leadership standpoint, the goal is for everyone to be invited to participate, from young children all the way to senior citizens. “It’s not a children’s program, though, so kids do need to be with adults, but it’s going to be spectacular for families as well as retirees and everybody else.” And most of the events and activities will be free, she adds.

Part of what made Biggs so successful in her previous roles is her ability to help people digest new information. “You can be a computer user without being someone who understands how to code. The same situation is true with nature. As a Nature Interpreter, I’m bringing it all to a level that’s understandable so people can connect with it. I have to make the experience engaging, funny, memorable. People might not ultimately remember the exact name of a specific plant, but they’re going to remember the story behind it and why it’s important.”



Technology can play a big role in this, too, by bringing conservation and nature to your fingertips. Johnson explains that “we’ll share how to use your smartphone to identify plants, along with where to go to learn things like what kind of plants bring a certain kind of bird to your yard. We’ll make it simple by introducing you to easy-to-use tools, including many free apps that work with nature.”

The entire foundation is thankful for the support of Gulf Coast Community Foundation, which funded the Nature Interpreter position. The Harlan family also made a \$15,000 donation to purchase program supplies and equipment such as night vision goggles, UV lights, glow-in-the-dark materials, and more, allowing Biggs to facilitate a wide range of activities. As a whole, the community has responded enthusiastically to the idea of a nature expert like Biggs living and working here so we can all learn a bit more about Florida Gulf Coast's wildlife, waterways, and land.

Biggs believes in Maya Angelou's famous quotation: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." She says that's a good way to think about environmentalism, which is often something people feel they need to get perfect from the start. That sense of all-or-nothing stops some people from even trying. "Don't beat yourself up for your failures," she explains. "Just keep trying to do better when you can. That's how I live and work, as well."

Biggs and Johnson realize that the majority of people who live here aren't from here. That means they might not have familiarity with the natural world they live near or in. But Biggs is fully committed to finding ways to get everyone comfortable being outside. No more thinking, "Oh, I can't go outside in the rainy season!" or "I don't know what to do besides go to Siesta Key Beach!"

"We're going to have a lot of fun," Biggs promises. "And if you only take away one thing—and that's the experience—that's perfectly okay. We don't want it to be overwhelming because it's all about having a great time, experiencing something new, and maybe learning something along the way. That's what it's all about."

FOR MORE INFORMATION on Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast, please visit www.conservationfoundation.com or call 941.918.2100

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