Celebrating the Generosity in Our Community

By **Susanna Barton**

For the past few summers, I have been fortunate to work with the advancement team at The Bolles School writing annual reports, donor profiles and spotlights. It is such inspiring work! Every donor has a different story about the "why" behind their giving. No two are alike, but every single one of them make me shed happy tears. I love understanding what motivates people to give and make a difference in the lives of others.

One of the unexpected pleasures of the work is discovering many of the people I interview are the same folks I wave to on morning walks or pass at the grocery store. They are our neighbors! We are so grateful to have some of these folks as our resident inspiration for community goodness.

Their stories remind me that philanthropy is often less about wealth than gratitude.

Take Mike and Jennie Shad, whose family has deep roots in the *Resident Community* and whose support recently helped create The Shad Family Robotics Lab at Bolles. Their investment story wasn't just about equipment or technology. It reflected a broader, more important belief that young people should have opportunities to explore, create and solve problems in ways that prepare them for the future.

Or consider the Dostie family, longtime supporters of faculty excellence and student opportunity. Their giving reflects a conviction shared by many parents and grandparents: that great schools are built not only by buildings and programs but by exceptional teachers who inspire students every day. The Ottenstroer family recently marked 25 years of supporting teaching fellowships that allow faculty members to pursue professional growth and bring fresh ideas back to their classrooms. Their commitment is a reminder that some of the most enduring gifts are investments in people. The Pearson family is another model of teaching young people to give back at an early age. I could go on and on and on.

The Bolles Annual Report isn't the only source for such yummy stories of goodness; they are just the ones I am privileged enough to hear about firsthand. Every school, organization, nonprofit, church, faith-based ministry and public agency has a long list of donors that make a difference in the lives of those they serve. And very often, those difference-makers are people who live in our *Resident Community.*

I am one of those weirdos who reads who gave at what level in annual reports and event programs and news stories. It gives me a very small hint about what's important to a person. But just a hint. It doesn't highlight the time or talent being invested. It does not provide scope or context. And it does not always explain the why.

That's why I enjoy being a part of annual report storytelling: I realized what connects these stories is sooooo much more than the size of the gift – it's the spirit behind what drives them. Each donor profiled in the report is motivated by a desire to give back to a place that shaped their lives, their children's lives or the future of the community they care about. They are expressing thanks in one of the most meaningful ways possible: by helping create opportunities for others. Oh, to have that passion, and the ability to put your money where your mouth is! I think that's so incredible when a person is so personally motivated by an experience or an organization that they back it up with a monetary gift – and make themselves an example of what is possible when we give thanks in this way.

As someone who writes frequently about gratitude and community, I find that particularly inspiring. Strong communities are built when people choose to invest in something larger than themselves. Sometimes that investment takes the form of volunteering, mentoring or serving on a board. Sometimes it takes the form of philanthropy.

Either way, it begins with gratitude and a good story. So, this month's column honors and thanks the neighbors whose generosity appears in the pages of annual reports, programs and listings and to all those throughout our community who dedicate themselves to supporting schools, churches, nonprofits and civic causes without seeking recognition.

Their gifts and example benefit all of us. In a time when headlines often focus on division and weirdness and WTH, it is encouraging to remember that many of our neighbors are still building, giving and believing in the future of our greater community.

Susanna Barton supports the Women's Giving Alliance, the Women's Board of Wolfson Children's Hospital, her church and many other organizations in Northeast Florida. A longtime Granada resident, she has written professionally for The Jacksonville Business Journal, The Resident *and The Bolles School. She is a newly minted Gerontologist and manages an online community called Grand Plans, which encourages healthy conversations about aging and preparing for it on www.mygrandplans.com.*