



## HELPING PEOPLE

# These millennials are making a big difference in South Florida. Here's how.

BY SUE ARROWSMITH  
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Mackenzie Marcelin, 26, recently attended his first county commission budget hearing, an often tedious civics lesson that can stretch into the early morning hours.

It turned out to be one of the most exciting things he's ever done.

“It was actually a lot of fun and heartfelt,” he said. “It was democracy at its best. The presenters were so diverse and passionate.”

The University of Florida grad is a campus organizer with Engage Miami, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization focused on encouraging young people to vote and get involved through political activism.

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He was at the hearing with a group of Miami Dade College students who made history that night when they convinced Mayor Carlos Gimenez and the commission to reverse an earlier decision and allow early voting sites at two MDC campuses.

“A lot of millennials are apprehensive about politics,” Marcelin said. “I understand how they feel, but there are a lot of changes you can make; you just need to learn how to navigate the process. You don’t have to accept what is.”

Engage Miami, an affiliate of the Alliance for Youth Organizing, has been gearing up for the Florida elections. On National Voter Registration Day last month, they registered more than 7,000 new young voters.

Millennials like Marcelin are transforming South Florida.

Cristina Rodriguez, 25, co-founded Mind and Melody in 2015 as a pilot program at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, where she studied biochemistry. The organization now provides music sessions for individuals with neurological impairments at more than 40 facilities throughout the state, as well as private sessions at home.



A guitarist with Mind and Melody entertains residents at The Palace, a skilled nursing facility and rehab center in west Miami-Dade.

Amanda Smith Photography

Her clients are mostly senior citizens with dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Trained musicians and volunteers teach them songs to help them remember and communicate.

"Music activates all the part of the brain at once and is linked with our memories and emotions," Rodriguez said. "Music taps into the systems in their brains spared by the illness."

Sandra Coles' sister-in-law, Alexandra Ordonez, has advanced Alzheimer's and receives music sessions three times a week at home.

“During the sessions, Alexandra manages to put words together. There are times she claps her hands or dances. None of these responses were evident to us before Mind and Melody came to us,” Coles said.

Rodriguez, who began playing the cello at age 10, is planning to launch a research study to demonstrate how music can slow down the progression of Alzheimer’s. She was recently named the 2018 Coors Lite Lider of the Year, an accolade that comes with a \$25,000 grant.

The United Way of Miami-Dade’s youngest members have also focused on serving the elderly. In February, Young Leaders organized a Happy Hearts Valentine’s Party for residents of Robert King High Towers in Little Havana. They danced to live music by Cuban singer Roberto Torres, played dominoes, enjoyed Cuban food and cafecitos.

“It was a celebration of love, a great opportunity to reconnect with them under happier circumstances,” said Jasmin Grant, Young Leaders’ executive co-chair.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, a group of Young Leaders and LINC (Lead. Impact. Network. Change) members ran up and down 14 flights of stairs to help 900 low-income elderly residents who were stuck in their apartments without power, food, water or medicine.

Young Leaders, ages 40 and under, make an annual gift of \$1,000 or more to United Way. LINC was established nearly three years ago for members 30 and under, who make an annual contribution of \$250.

Grant grew up with a family of givers. Her father was a United Way board member, her mother is involved with Women United and her young brother is a LINC member.

Next up: Grant will participate in JumpStart’s Read for the Record, an initiative where more than 2 million people around the world read the same book to children on the same day. On Thursday, the Young Leaders read *Maybe Something Beautiful : How Art Transformed A Neighborhood* by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell, at United Way’s Center for Excellence in Early Education.

“We all have busy lives, but it’s important to give back to the community,” Grant said.

“Millennials want to see where their money is going. They want to get their hands dirty and they want to see how they are impacting the community. I think that’s what sets us apart.”



United Way of Miami Dade Young Leader Carter Young reads to Andres, 3, (left) and Freddy, 4, at the Jumpstart Read for the Red, an international program where people around the world read the same book, on the same day, to children. This year, the group read "Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood," by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell on Thursday, October 25, 2018.

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## How to Help

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United Way of Miami Dade Young Leaders gather to read at the Jumpstart Read for the Record, an international program where people around the world read the same book, on the same day, to children. This year, the group read 'Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood,' by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell on Thursday, October 25, 2018. PATRICK FARRELL - pfarrell@miamiherald.com

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