# Citrus County Blessings

Silencing Weekend Hunger

FEED THE KIDS
a summer feeding program

Citrus County Harvest — Fighting hunger since 1999

**Summer 2024 Biannual Newsletter**

## When Kids Go Hungry, Everything Else Stops
## Citrus County Blessings Fills the Gap

In February, Horsefly Group, an international cooperative agency of advanced marketing professionals, concluded Citrus County's first CreateAthon event, naming Citrus County Blessings as the winner.

The presentation marked the culmination of this year's CreateAthon, a 24-hour creative marathon dedicated to providing professional marketing and design services to nonprofit organizations that could not otherwise afford them. Thanks to the expertise and generosity of the marketing company, we not only had the opportunity to give our image a modern facelift but also to establish a deeper connection between our brand and our audience, culminating in renewed engagement and an expanded outreach. This donated rebranding effort is not merely about unveiling a new logo; it symbolizes our commitment to embracing growth, innovation, and setting the course for the future of our organization. Since its launch in 1998, this "all-nighter for charity" has been instrumental in supporting over 1,300 nonprofits, delivering more than $100 million in pro bono services.

**Our programs are possible in part from support by:**

HCA Florida Citrus Hospital · Suncoast Credit Union · Citrus County Chamber of Commerce · Wawa · Rotary · Sysco · Kiwanis Club of Inverness · Cattle Dog Coffee Roasters

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# Hunger doesn't take a vacation, neither do we.

The summer program is such a wonderful extension of our school year program. We conduct surveys at the end of the year asking our kids what they would like to have and so many ask for fresh fruits and veggies. This isn't possible on a regular basis during the school year so summer gives us an opportunity to give them the healthy food they want and don't always have access to. All produce is purchased fresh from Sysco foods.

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We provide recipe cards each week for our families to help educate them on healthy eating. The cards include ingredients that our families may have on hand or could inexpensively obtain.

We put together menus every week with cool themes, such as salad week, where we load up on salad ingredients, and the 4th of July week, where we make sure to include all the fixings for a great picnic. Due to the way our program works, sending the bags to the school, we don't often get to meet our families. Summer gives us the chance to visit our locations and meet the families we serve, which is such a treat. We also send special little things for the kids throughout the summer, like ice pops, bubbles, or glow sticks. **We want our kids to know that they are valued by our program and our community.**

Rachelle Garrett-Butler, Operations Director

As we conclude another school year with our Blessings program, we take a moment to reflect on the remarkable growth and impact we've achieved together. This year represented a significant milestone with the addition of fresh produce once a month in our Blessings bags, further enhancing the nutritional support we provide to our kids. Our partnership with Sysco Foods has enabled us to reduce our food costs by 20% while offering a more nutritionally dense variety in our menu. This change is helping us to reach more children facing food insecurity each weekend and during extended breaks.

Additionally, we have seen a 15% increase in enrollments over the past school year. This growth underscores the growing need for our services and the unwavering dedication of our volunteers, donors, and supporters who make it all possible.

As we celebrate the end of the school year, we do so with gratitude for the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many children and families and with a renewed commitment to continue our mission of combating childhood food insecurity throughout our community.

**Left:** Staff from HCA Citrus Hospital regularly helps us with our extended break meal bags, ensuring the children we serve have food to get them through the week(s) away from school. **Middle:** Fresh produce is available to our participants once a month. **Right:** Thanks to Sysco's products and staff, we improved the nutritional value of each bag, made them lighter for children, and stretched our food budget. Jane Grout, Sysco's regional president, learned about our program during a recent visit.

## TURNING HUNGER INTO HOPE

Turn hunger into hope
by adopting a child here

### We survey our children each year, here are their words.

**Why is Blessings important to you?**

Because my grandma doesn't get a lot of money anymore.

**How do you feel when you get your Blessings bags?**

Happy because then I know I have food

**Why is Blessings important to you?**

are family went Thought a loss and we needed food.

## Caden Simpkins

Hi, my name is Caden Simpkins, and I served on the Board of Directors for Citrus County Blessings over the last two years. After graduating, I will attend the University of Central Florida, majoring in advertising/public relations with a minor in sports business management. After graduating college, I plan to work in sports as a public relations specialist or somewhere in social media. My experience on the board was incredible and rewarding. As a co-chair of student representatives, I was able to meet many leaders of the county and make connections with them. While on the board, I was able to give back to the community where I grew up. I saw firsthand the impact of helping the community and being a voice for students in my school, helping them when they needed it. Overall, my experience on the Board of Directors was very impactful and inspiring. I'm so incredibly grateful that I was able to be a part of it.

## Jaythan Fernandez

Hi, my name is Jaythan Fernandez. I had the privilege of serving on the Board of Directors for Citrus County Blessings for the last two years, including one year as co-chair. I cannot express how thankful I am to have been part of such an amazing non-profit organization and met all the amazing board members. Their drive and determination to ensure no child goes hungry in our county is truly inspiring. I have enjoyed every moment serving on the Board and volunteering at various events. My favorite event was the Ball, where I had the pleasure of judging all the incredible costumes worn by the guests. My future endeavors include attending the University of Central Florida to pursue a degree in computer engineering while participating in the prestigious Burnett Medical Scholar program, formerly known as the 7-Year BS/MD program.

## Taylor Waldrop

Hi, my name is Taylor Waldrop. I had the privilege of serving as a student representative of Crystal River High School for Citrus County Blessings. This was truly a fantastic experience for me and a highlight of my senior year. I have always had a passion for serving my community through various organizations, and Blessings allowed me to do this in numerous ways. This cause is very meaningful to me, and it was a privilege for me to be a part of serving food insecure children and students in my community through Citrus County Blessings. After high school, I am attending the University of Mississippi to major in Nursing in hopes of eventually becoming a Nurse Practitioner. This will be a career path that allows me to continue to serve my community throughout the rest of my life.

## Quentin Hicks

Hi, my name is Quentin Hicks. I plan to attend Princeton University and major in an engineering field and later go to graduate school for engineering. There, I hope I can use my technical abilities in order help innovate new solutions to world problems, such as the one Blessings tries to combat every day. (For one, I've been obsessed with a synthetic meat product which may be more sustainable to feed to a larger population in the future). My experience as a Blessings student representative from Citrus High School has been wonderful and enlightening. It has been a pleasure being able to see all the community involvement that is necessary to make a nonprofit like Blessings possible. As a kid who was on food banks, it's been amazing to see how many Blessings is able to help and how we, high school students, can serve that purpose and make a real difference.

## Ashley Trochez Castillo

Hi, my name is Ashley Trochez Castillo. I had the privilege of serving as a student representative of Citrus High School. After graduating high school, I plan to attend the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. I will major in Psychology to fully one day become a therapist and help people navigate their mental health. Blessings has taught me so many valuable life lessons in the short time I was in it. I have realized not only how blessed I am, but also that true change can happen when a group of people are work together for a good cause. I am truly Blessed to live in a community with Citrus County Blessings.