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PACE Article

Advocates of Lee County PACE Center address Zonta members;
Sanibel Sea School offers scholarships to PACE students

Lee County Circuit Court Judge James Seals, a strong advocate of early intervention among girls at risk, and Debra Webb, executive director, Lee County PACE Center, were the featured speakers at a recent meeting of the Zonta Club of Sanibel/Captiva. With 12 years of experience in the juvenile justice system, Judge Seals was instrumental in establishing the Fort Myers PACE Center, the 19th in the state, which opened on February 5, 2007. PACE (Practical Academic Cultural Education) offers gender-specific programming to meet the highly complex issues faced by girls ages 12 to 18 involved in the justice system.

The speakers pointed out the need for programs designed specifically for girls stems from the significant differences between girls and boys involved in juvenile offenses. For example, girls are the fastest growing segment of juvenile crime, girls are 15 times more likely to be involved in substance abuse, and girls are three times more likely to be sexually abused. Many of the girls come from families that are more likely to experience mental health and incarceration issues.

Florida is one of only two states that recognize by law the benefits of a gender-specific response to juvenile offenders. Started in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1985 with five volunteers, PACE has become a national model for result-based intervention. There are 41 girls enrolled in the Fort Myers PACE program where the goal is to return them

to their schools for graduation within a 12 to 15-month period. PACE offers education, counseling, training and advocacy to help redirect girls in crisis to achieve their potential and have an opportunity for a better future.

The speakers emphasized how early intervention helps prevent long-term, self-destructive and antisocial behaviors and how gender-specific programming achieves results. For example, among PACE participants nationally:

- 91% remain crime free after one year
- 89% show improved academic performance
- 88% fewer use alcohol

After hearing the presentation, Evelyn Neill, a Zonta member and co-founder of Sanibel Sea School, a non-profit dedicated to marine conservation through experiential education, decided that the first recipients of the school's new scholarship program would be PACE participants.

"When I heard the director speak, I thought it would be wonderful to offer these young women the chance to experience the natural environment," Neill said. "There are plenty of eyebrow-raising statistics about the positive effects of nature on so many things we are trying to help young people achieve: self-esteem, excellence in math, an even greater appreciation for humanities and ability to focus. Schools that use nature extensively as a classroom report some profound results."

In addition to this new partnership with Sanibel Sea School, the PACE Center works closely with the state of Florida, the juvenile justice system, the Lee County school district and other community organizations. They continue to look for partners and volunteers who can mentor the students, help them with life skills, and provide role models and counseling. Start-up funding came from local juvenile justice and school

systems and Florida State Legislature. Other support has come from the community, particularly for efforts beyond the classroom.

In her closing remarks, Debra Webb encouraged Zonta members to visit the new facility in Fort Myers. If other island organizations are interested in learning more or exploring how to partner with PACE, they can contact her at 239-209-7194.

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva is a service organization of professional women working together to provide hands-on assistance, advocacy and funds to strengthen women's lives on the islands, in Lee County and around the world through Zonta International. Club members – with the support of island residents and businesses – have raised and distributed more than \$100,000 in the last three years, primarily through the annual fundraiser, a PEEK at the Unique home tour.

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