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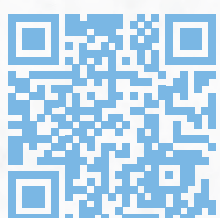
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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH **SIDE OF RANCH**

SMR takes harder path toward Lakewood Ranch success



JAY HEATER
MANAGING EDITOR

It was an all-time, win-win situation.

As Schroeder-Manatee Ranch launched its Lakewood Ranch project 30 years ago, the SMR brain trust selected the lesser traveled path.

The powers that be decided they weren't going to plop down a few thousand homes to become a bedroom community.

In fact, they never considered a home to be a building.

In those first neighborhoods in 1994, the Lakewood Ranch plan came to life. SMR was designing a community.

So what did that entail?

Well, it meant having all levels of homes for families, for retirees, for the rich, and for the not-so-rich. It meant having businesses so the people who lived in the community didn't all have to leave every day for a job.

It meant having all the services — grocery stores, gas stations, restaurants, and yes, even car washes and storage facilities — that the residents would need.

Because SMR didn't start the ball rolling to be No. 2, it meant having parks, trails, open space, preserves, playgrounds and activities.

It meant developing a lifestyle package that would evolve with the community as it grew, letting the residents pick their passions.

To complete the package, SMR needed to make sure the community had health services, fire rescue services, police services, church services, and schools.

So what was the win-win?

For you "Independence Day" movie fans, consider the alien beings who select a world, consume all its natural resources, and then fly off to another planet, leaving the temporary host in ruins.

That can be a common refrain for some builders. Buy a strip of land, mash as many buildings as possible on every square inch, then head to the next planet, leaving the residents in a wasteland.

That didn't happen in Lakewood Ranch.

SMR remains part of its master plan, its building still on Covenant Way. The win for the residents is that SMR knew that to build the nation's No. 1 master-planned, community for all age groups, it would have to sacrifice profit in the short- to medium-run. That meant paying for better infrastructure and lifestyle amenities. Profits were sacrificed by protecting more open space and preserves. Land was given away for schools and medical, fire and police services.

The second half of the win-win went to SMR. Since 2018, Lakewood Ranch has been the No. 1-selling, multigenerational, master-planned community in the U.S. Why? Well, for all the reasons above.

So to further explain, I offer Mr. Macy's comments in "Miracle on 34th Street" as he tried to explain why sending shoppers to rival Gimbel's when Macy's didn't have what the shopper wanted was a good strategy.

"We'll be known as the helpful store, the friendly store, the store with a heart, the store that places public service ahead of profits. And, consequently, we'll make more profits than ever before."

Would Lakewood Ranch have blossomed over the past 30 years

without SMR's master plan? Or would they have torn down the bedroom community and put the airport here?

You be the judge.

I am going into my 10th year living here and writing the Side of Ranch column. I wasn't here for the first 20 years, but the growth over the last 10 has been amazing.

Sure, there are more people, more cars, and more day-to-day pains. And yet, when I want, I can take a very easy, quiet drive from State Road 64 to Fruitville Road, and I have my choice of restaurants all along the way. I can enjoy The Green, Lakewood Main Street, the Center Point development, Waterside Place, or the Fruitville Commons.

Because of Lakewood Ranch Community Activities, I have my choice of hundreds of social clubs or activities. I can enjoy the state's No. 1 farmers market or can attend Sunday polo.

We have Music on Main, Movies in the Park, Boo Fest, the Tribute to Heroes Parade, Ranch Nite Wednesdays, Sights and Sounds at Waterside Place, and many golf opportunities (both for playing ourselves or for watching the pros).

Sure, are we all scared of the future. It's because we have something we love so much in this Lakewood Ranch of ours.

Then again, we've had 30 years of testimony about the master plan. The villages have been insulated from the growth around the perimeters. Much of that growth has been services to enrich our lifestyle.

So on the 30th anniversary of Lakewood Ranch's birth, I will give SMR the benefit of the doubt that the future will continue to be impressive.

And with that, I say, "Thanks for the memories."



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Photos by Liz Ramos
Laura Murphy, The Out-of-Door Academy's director of enrollment management rings the bell on the Lakewood Ranch campus.

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Lakewood Ranch 3-year-old Grayson Cruz sees what it's like driving an East Manatee Fire Rescue truck.

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As pictured: 2006 Shroeder-Manantee Ranch Headquarters, 2008 Energy Court Center, 2009 LECOM Medical, 2010 Manatee Technical College, 2012 LECOM Dental, 2015 - Premier Sports Campus, 2016 - The Lodge at Lakewood Ranch, 2016 Lakewood Ranch Country Club, 2017 Centauri Specialty Insurance Corporate Headquarters, 2021 Waterside Place, 2023 Lakewood Ranch Library. Coming soon: Premier Athletics & Aquatics Center at Premier Sports Campus North, Manatee County Sheriff's Office



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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH A MESSAGE FROM SMR

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS

Lakewood Ranch represents our legacy of vision and community building.



LAURA COLE

Lakewood Ranch marks its 30th anniversary this year, a milestone that reflects not just three decades of growth, but nearly a century of vision and stewardship under the care of the Uihlein family. The foundation of Lakewood Ranch was laid long before the first home was built in 1994, with community principles that emphasized patience, quality, and a deep respect for the land. These values and the many people who live here have shaped Lakewood Ranch into what it is today: The nation's No. 1 best-selling multigenerational community for more than six consecutive years. The vision for Lakewood Ranch was clear from the outset — a mixed-use, multigenerational community where residents of all ages and income levels could find a place to call home. This vision came to life through thoughtful planning, adaptability to shifting market conditions, and a dedication to understanding what is important to our residents today and in the future. Environmental stewardship has

always been at the heart of Lakewood Ranch. Over 40% of The Ranch is dedicated to open space, and this includes 13 community and county parks, more than 150 miles of sidewalks and trails, and numerous wildlife preserves. We even have dedicated a preserve for gopher tortoises needing relocation out of harm's way from development. This dedication to preserving nature guarantees that residents will enjoy the beauty and tranquility of their surroundings for generations, with ongoing care provided by the Lakewood Ranch Stewardship District. Beyond its physical features, Lakewood Ranch is distinguished by its dynamic and ever-evolving lifestyle. The community's town centers, Main Street and Waterside Place, are vibrant hubs of activity, offering a variety of events that bring people together. Monthly traditions like Music on Main, the performing arts series Sights and Sounds, and the weekly, award-winning Farmers' Market create a lively atmosphere year-round. Seasonal favorites such as Ranch Nite Wednesdays, Movies in the Park, the Irish Celtic Festival, and BooFest add to the rich tapestry of community life. Sports enthusiasts find their niche at Lakewood Ranch, with amenities that include golf courses, adult sports leagues, and active biking and running clubs. The Sarasota Polo Club — known as our "Big Green Beach" — was one of the first developments on The Ranch, and continues to be a key part of the community. The Premier Sports Campus, spanning 140 acres, hosts soccer, lacrosse, and field hockey leagues and tournaments, further enhancing the community's sports culture. Soon we will even have our own USL Soccer Team, the Sarasota

Paradise! Education is another cornerstone of Lakewood Ranch, with an array of preschools, top-rated primary and secondary public and private schools, and 10 campuses of higher education. The Ranch provides learning opportunities that span from early childhood to the golden years, making it a place where education is valued at every stage of life. Families often claim the No. 1 reason they moved to Lakewood Ranch was our A-rated schools, and new schools are on the horizon to meet the needs of our growing student population. Lakewood Ranch is more than just a residential area; It's a thriving job center with a robust economy. The community boasts thousands of businesses in sectors such as information technology, life sciences, retail, and healthcare. With diverse business parks and neighborhood shopping areas, residents have access to nearly everything they need without venturing far from home. Our healthcare services have also grown with the needs of our residents. The Lakewood Ranch Medical Center, which opened in 2004, has garnered national acclaim and is set to expand in 2024. The Ranch is also home to numerous medical specialty centers, individual practices, and four senior care facilities, with the upcoming Emerson Lakes 1,200-unit continued care retirement campus further enhancing its healthcare offerings. Having cared for two elderly parents in Lakewood Ranch, I can tell you we had access to every specialty imaginable within a five-mile radius of their home. One of SMR's most strategic early decisions was to establish organizations that would uphold Lakewood Ranch's vision and standards long after the developer's role ended. Legacy partners like the Lakewood

Ranch Stewardship District, LWR Business Alliance, LWR Community Activities, and the LWR Community Foundation play crucial roles in maintaining the beauty of our community, promoting business connections, driving community engagement and philanthropy. These organizations and so many others led by community leaders represent the "software" of Lakewood Ranch. Talking about "software," one of the things I love the most about Lakewood Ranch is that you are instantly welcomed into the community and can plug in with relative ease to areas of interest or affinity groups. To help our residents engage with the myriads of services and activities in their community, Lakewood Ranch has introduced the MyLWR app and website. This innovative tool helps residents and visitors alike to find and register for events, reserve parks and venues, join clubs, discover volunteer opportunities, and access HOA information with ease. If you haven't downloaded the app yet, I highly recommend doing so—it will reveal a world of possibilities right at your fingertips. As Lakewood Ranch celebrates 30 years of community, it continues to build on its legacy of vision, stewardship, and a commitment to creating a place where people of all ages can thrive. *Laura Cole is senior vice president of Lakewood Ranch. She leads the residential and lifestyle arm of Lakewood Ranch. She also serves as Lakewood Ranch's chief marketing officer.*

No rest ... more to come in future

Lakewood Ranch Southeast is on the horizon to provide more homes.

JAY HEATER
MANAGING EDITOR

With 5,000 homes at Lakewood Ranch Southeast on the way and more developments being built east of Lorraine Road, Lakewood Ranch is far from looking like a finished product after its first 30 years. But as Schroeder-Manatee Ranch continues to grow, CEO and President Rex Jensen, who is the 2023 Legend Award recipient from Zonda and Builder Magazine, will have lessons from the past tucked in his pocket. "You have to pivot, to adjust," Jensen said of the strategies in building Lakewood Ranch in its infancy. "You can get addicted to a plan and lose sight of what you are trying to do." Jensen said SMR did pivot when an economic downturn hit in the 1990s. SMR was going forward with a plan to sell lots to local homebuilders, but made a major shift toward selling larger parcels to national homebuilders. "How sacred is your master plan?" Jensen said. "You have to revise internally." As SMR moves toward the future, Jensen noted that everything is "market driven" so plans do change at times. He also noted that large-scale development "is not the enemy." "We've proven that case," he said, noting that Lakewood Ranch is likely to have 100,000 residents when the current construction and plans are finished.



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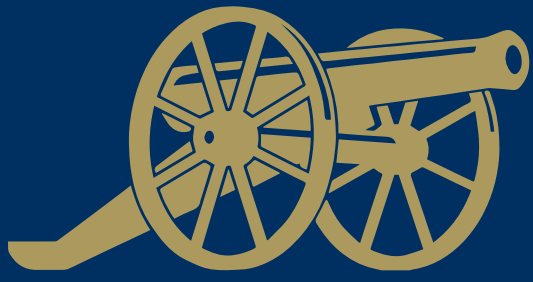
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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH LWR BY THE NUMBERS



300 The community offers more than 300 events annually to keep the residents active and engaged.

Lakewood Ranch's Rachel Hibbert and Lori Ziegler share corned beef and cabbage during the Irish Celtic Festival. File photos



33 Lakewood Ranch offers 33 villages, which provide a bevy of opportunities for home buyers to invest in the right fit for themselves and their families.

This Azario Esplanade home at 15518 Derna Terrace sold for \$2.8 million. It has four bedrooms, four-and-two-half baths, a pool and 4,841 square feet of living area.

33,000

Lakewood Ranch is made up of more than 33,000 acres, which has allowed Schroeder-Manatee Ranch to develop a complete community.

70,000

In its 30th year, Lakewood Ranch now has a population of 70,000 with more people moving here every day.

It all adds up to success

OBSERVER STAFF

Let us count the ways Lakewood Ranch, over the past 30 years, has become one of the most popular places to live in the U.S. So here are some numbers to show your friends who might want to join you in your little slice of heaven, right here in Manatee County, oh, and Sarasota County, too.

1 The Farmer's Market at Lakewood Ranch has been voted in 2024 as the top farmers market in Florida by the American Farmland Trust and the Farmers Market Coalition. It was the second consecutive year for the honor.



Lakewood Ranch Communities' Morgan Bettis-Angell and Nicole Hackel love seeing people enjoy the Farmers Market at Lakewood Ranch, which has been named No. 1 in Florida.

6 Consecutive years Lakewood Ranch has been named the No. 1-selling, master-planned, multigenerational community in the U.S. by national real estate consulting firm RCLCO.

19 While Lakewood Ranch consists of thousands of homes, the work has been done primarily by 19 homebuilders. SMR only allows the cream of the crop to build within its borders.

48 The percentage of land SMR has dedicated to open space, recreation and conservation out of the original 33,000 acres of Lakewood Ranch. In all, Lakewood Ranch has 13,488.3 acres of preserved conservation lands made up of nature lands, wetland and green space.

150 Like to hike or bike? Lakewood Ranch has cleared the way for 150 miles of trails.

360 Shops and restaurants call Lakewood Ranch home to serve the residents.

14,000 Since 2004, more than 14,000 acres in Lakewood Ranch have been certified as "green" by the Florida Green Building Coalition.

2,800 Overall businesses in Lakewood Ranch that employ more than 18,500 people.

13 Lakewood Ranch residents can explore the 13 parks that were built and are maintained by SMR for their enjoyment.



Savana's Ronan Knauf pulls a book from the Little Free Library that opened at Bob Gardner Park in Lakewood Ranch.

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*The Beverages in the Street program allows patrons to walk around with alcoholic beverages purchased from participating vendors within the town center.

30 YEARS ON THE RANCH LOVE OF COMMUNITY

WHY I LOVE Lakewood Ranch

In light of Lakewood Ranch's 30th anniversary, the *East County Observer* asked residents why they love Lakewood Ranch.

LESLEY DWYER AND LIZ RAMOS
STAFF WRITERS

Whether it's the parks, the trails, the hustle and bustle, the events, or the homes, Lakewood Ranch residents love their community, and have been loving it through its first 30 years.

And it's not just their opinion. Since 2018, a RCLCO survey has reported that Lakewood Ranch is the No. 1-selling, master-planned community in the U.S. for all age groups.

In July, Lakewood Ranch's No. 1 status was reaffirmed by RCLCO, a national real estate consulting firm, once again. Through the first six months of 2024, 1,238 new Lakewood Ranch homes were sold, again placing the community No. 1 in the nation at midyear.

Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch says the success is that the community is "built around residential segmentation and lifestyle amenities appealing to a broad variety of age, income, and household segments. The Ranch continues to offer something for everyone."

Indeed, Lakewood Ranch has new homes that range in price from \$300,000 to the millions. Those looking to buy into Lakewood Ranch currently have a choice in 26 villages. Homes under \$500,000 made up 33% of the sales.

Homes from \$500,000 to \$700,000 made up 30% of the sales, and those in the \$700,000 to \$1 million category made up 19%. Homes over \$1 million made up 18% of the sales.

Laura Cole, senior vice president of Lakewood Ranch Communities, notes "The increase in sales of new homes located within (master planned communities) reflects the lifestyle, community amenities, and quality schools, plus buyers' anticipation that home prices will appreciate and hold up well in all market conditions."



"I am such a proud, former Milwaukeean. The history of Lakewood Ranch has its roots in Milwaukee, so that was the draw. Schroeder, Schlitz Brewing – the people who built Lakewood Ranch are from Milwaukee. So the leafy neighborhoods, the parks, all the open space, the connecting trails, the water, it really keeps me connected to the place I love ... but here. And now beer is starting to happen in Lakewood Ranch."

— Summerfield resident John Holz



"Take in that beauty. We have beautiful weather. It's just beautiful. I just can't describe it."

—Greenbrook's Kathleen Lorello



"There's a lot of things you can do in Lakewood Ranch. There's so much to do you can't do it all in one time. You have to go out multiple times."

— Star Farm's Joe Riggio Sr.

"I've been living here for a year and a half, and it's the first time I've lived in a community that's a place with a central clubhouse. There's so many activities here. You can't run out of things to do. There's no excuse to be sitting at home alone, and I like that. You have Waterside, Main Street, so many parks."

— Lorraine Lakes' Adriana Grech



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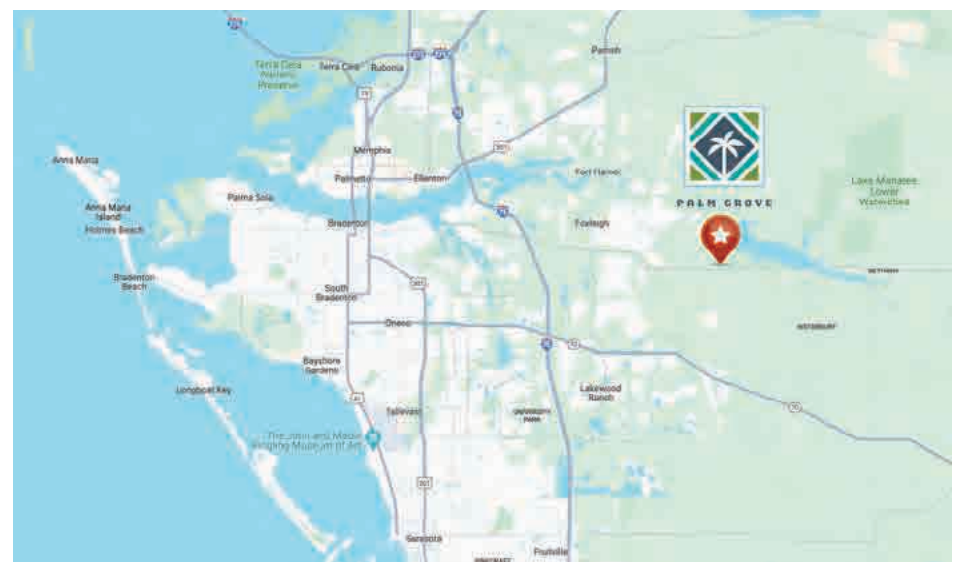
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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH BUSINESS



Photos by Ryan Kohn
Karen and Malcolm Ronney have operated The Granary since August 2015.



The Granary customers can sit at a table or at restaurant's bar. Owner Karen Ronney said the restaurant's clientele ranges from retirees to people holding business meetings to stay-at-home moms.

Lakewood Ranch provides menu for success

Karen and Malcolm Ronney found Lakewood Ranch to be the perfect environment for their restaurants.

RYAN KOHN
SPORTS EDITOR

While people might first think of homes when they think of Lakewood Ranch, the community hosts a hotbed of businesses that provide services and jobs.

For 30 years, Lakewood Ranch has attracted business owners who came, built and flourished. Such was the case of Karen and Malcolm Ronney, who arrived in Lakewood Ranch in 2006 with the quintessential American dream in their heads. The Ronneys came to Lakewood Ranch from Scotland, where they operated a hotel bar and restaurant. They were familiar with the Bradenton-Sarasota area, having vacationed there several times. Karen Ronney's family has a condo on Lido Key. After years of operating their Scottish business, they felt like

it was time for a permanent move. "Scottish winters are long and wet and cold," Karen Ronney said. "Here, you're in heaven. We had to come up with a way to make it work."

The couple's plan was to open a restaurant for five years and see how it went. That restaurant was MacAllisters Grill and Tavern, a Scottish pub located on Main Street where McGrath's Irish Ale House is now.

The Ronneys loved MacAllisters and it outlived their five-year plan, but in December 2014, the couple decided to make a change. They sold MacAllisters and in August 2015 opened The Granary, a breakfast and lunch restaurant on Lakewood Ranch Boulevard. The reasons for the change in restaurant were logistical, Karen Ronney said. The family had two young children at the time, and running a Scottish pub meant working long nights. Switching to a daytime establishment meant the Ronneys could spend more time with their kids.

It's a change the couple is happy to have made — even though, at the time, some of their customers thought they were making a mistake by abandoning their Main Street location.

"People thought we were nuts to come to a strip mall," Karen Ronney said. "But we believed in what we did and in our following. And luckily, we got a lot of customers who used to frequent (MacAllisters) to come up

"We feel like we are part of the community here. We're doing well. There's no need to go anywhere else."

— Karen Ronney

here. They have been regulars for almost 10 years now."

The first few months, everything was moving "100 miles an hour," Ronney said. From August to December 2015, the restaurant was inundated with customers as it was the only place of its kind and people wanted to try it. Things slowed down in January and February 2016, but once the pace picked back up that April and May, the couple felt confident that they were doing it right.

The Ronneys, who live in Mallory Park, love The Granary and their Lakewood Ranch customers as much now as they did when it opened. The restaurant largely serves traditional food with a Granary twist, like a breakfast version of grilled cheese that includes scrambled eggs, tomato and onion, or breakfast tacos that come with a side of citrus gazpacho. The menu was created by the Ronneys and general manager/head chef Hector Liemann, who also worked with the Ronneys at MacAllisters.

While the exact dishes were created by trial and error, the trio knew it wanted its menu to fit its clientele. Twenty years ago, that meant retirees, Karen Ronney said, for they had disposable income and a lot of free time.

In 2024, things have changed a bit. Many people in the area work from home, she said, so they will bring their laptops and send emails while eating a breakfast sandwich, or sit down at lunchtime to get out of their house for an hour. Sometimes stay-at-home moms will come in for a mimosa after dropping their kids at school and to catch up with a friend.

On the weekends, the restaurant sees more families. And yes, there are still plenty of retirees. It's a mix of people that the Ronneys enjoy seeing every week. Come often enough, and the Granary staff will have customers' beverage of choice, be it coffee or otherwise, out to them before they even ask for it, a sign of how much the restaurant cares about its customers.

Karen Ronney's favorite memories of the restaurant all have to do with those customers. Knowing that the Ronneys are from Scotland, she said, customers often ask the couple for travel advice. Karen Ronney said she feels like a tour guide sometimes, offering recommendations on hotels and things to see, or to avoid. Everyone visiting Scotland must go to Edinburgh, she said, but she also advises people to hop on a train to reach more rural areas of the country. Because Scotland "could fit five times over" within Florida's boundaries, she said, visitors can see much of the country in a single trip.

The couple is also close with the restaurant staff. Though there has been some turnover since 2015, many have stayed for years, and seeing how their families grow and celebrating milestones with them is rewarding, they said.

There will not be any moving in the family's foreseeable future.

"We feel like we are part of the community here," Ronney said. "We're doing well. There's no need to go anywhere else."

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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH RANCH FAMILIES

FAMILIES GROW WITH

Jimmy and Karisa Rhode moved to the area from snowy Minnesota and never looked back.

RYAN KOHN
SPORTS EDITOR

In the middle of a 2014 blizzard that would leave 10 inches of snow outside their front door in Portage, Wisconsin, Jimmy Rhode asked Karisa Rhode if she wanted to move to Florida.

It was an off-the-cuff question, but it was serious.

They were tired of the weather, and Culver's, with whom the Rhodes owned franchises, had just opened Florida as a market. There was no hesitation in Karisa's answer: Yes.

The only question remaining was where in Florida to call home.

After one visit to Lakewood Ranch, that question, too, was answered. They moved to the area in February 2015.

"There was a tour you could take that showed you all the fun stuff," Karisa Rhode said. "We got in a van and the guide said, 'We're going to develop here and here.' I was like, 'Oh man, let's go.' We fell in love with it on that tour."

The Rhode family wanted a place to stay warm, Jimmy Rhode said, and they were excited about the area's future development plans, but they also appreciated that Lakewood Ranch was not a "concrete jungle." Seeing cows and farmland on the tour helped. The family went on a few other visits, but no place felt more like home than Lakewood Ranch, so that's where they went.

"I've never shoveled snow again," Jimmy Rhode said.

The family initially moved into Greenbrook before moving to a bigger house in Sapphire Point. The family had expanded as their daughter, Britta Rhode, had gained a sister in Ellerie Rhode. Not once since the family's move has it thought about going somewhere else, Karisa Rhode said.

The Rhodes are ingrained in both the personal and business communities here and the family now owns several Culver's locations in Florida, including locations on State Road 64 East and State Road 70. They have no plans to abandon those locations, they said, but even if they did, the rest of what Lakewood Ranch has to offer is hard to beat, starting with its culture.

"Wisconsin is so laid back, and there's no emphasis on new things happening," Jimmy Rhode said. "It's old-school and set in its ways. You're going to eat cheese and drink beer and you're not going to exercise. And here, even though it's not a 'go, go, go' lifestyle like New York or anything, people want to be more active. There is always something to do and somewhere to



Courtesy photos

go to spend time with your family."

The Rhodes like to go to the Farmer's Market at Lakewood Ranch in Waterside on Saturday mornings to sample its food offerings. They take their daughters to PopStroke to test the family's putting skills — and have more than a few laughs. They take in Movie in the Park events in Waterside for the family-friendly entertainment and attend Bayside Community Church services each Sunday.

The Rhodes said they are glad to live in a place where kids are allowed to be kids. This is especially nice at mealtime as places like Ford's Garage in University Town Center serve good food while having an atmosphere that lets kids enjoy themselves. Jimmy Rhode said his children have polar opposite personalities as Britta is quiet, while Ellerie is rambunctious. She'll stack a tower of pillows, then leap off the kitchen counter into them, Jimmy Rhode said.

And yes, like many Florida families with young children, the Rhodes will hit the road to visit Disney World and Universal Studios Florida in Orlando. The family goes approximately once a month, Karisa Rhode said, something that is only possible because of Lakewood Ranch's great location.

"Our kids are spoiled," Karisa

“Here, even though it's not a 'go, go, go' lifestyle like New York or anything, people want to be more active. There is always something to do and somewhere to go to spend time with your family.”

— Jimmy Rhode

Rhode said with a laugh.

The Rhodes are also thankful there are more places being built for parents. Jimmy and Karisa said they enjoy hiring a babysitter and going to Agave Bandido in Waterside for a drink at its upstairs speakeasy. The first time they went, they said, they were stunned to see the crowd — in a good way.

"We joked, 'Oh my gosh, it's a room filled with (people like) us,' Karisa Rhode said. "It's cool. It's a vibe."

The best restaurant in the area is a hotly debated topic in the Rhode

house, they said, but they are big fans of Michael John's French-American Steakhouse in Bradenton. It's where Jimmy and Karisa go to celebrate their anniversary. Coming from Jimmy, who considers grilled food a passion, it is a high compliment.

Despite owning several Culver's locations, Jimmy still likes to hop on the restaurant's grill himself when he can. He's done it since he first got a job at a Wisconsin Culver's at 16 years old. Now, it's a way for him to blow off steam, he said.

It is a passion that follows him home from work, too. Karisa said Jimmy always has something on the smoker or the grill, to the point where houseguests now expect it when they visit. Jimmy cures his own bacon, he said, and is especially fond of brisket and prime rib. The next thing he wants to tackle? Learning how to sous vide his meat. Or perhaps getting a dry ager.

"At home, I get to experiment, and I enjoy that," Jimmy Rhode said.

The family is proud of their restaurants. They have watched their newest locations be built from scratch, they said, and have photos of themselves and their children at every stage of construction. Britta and Ellerie even helped their parents put out the chairs and other tasks. It became a family thing to do, Karisa Rhode said.

The Rhodes want to use their business to show their love for the community, donating food to local schools for parties and partnering with them for fundraisers.

"We want to give back to everyone who comes in and helps support our family," Jimmy Rhode said.

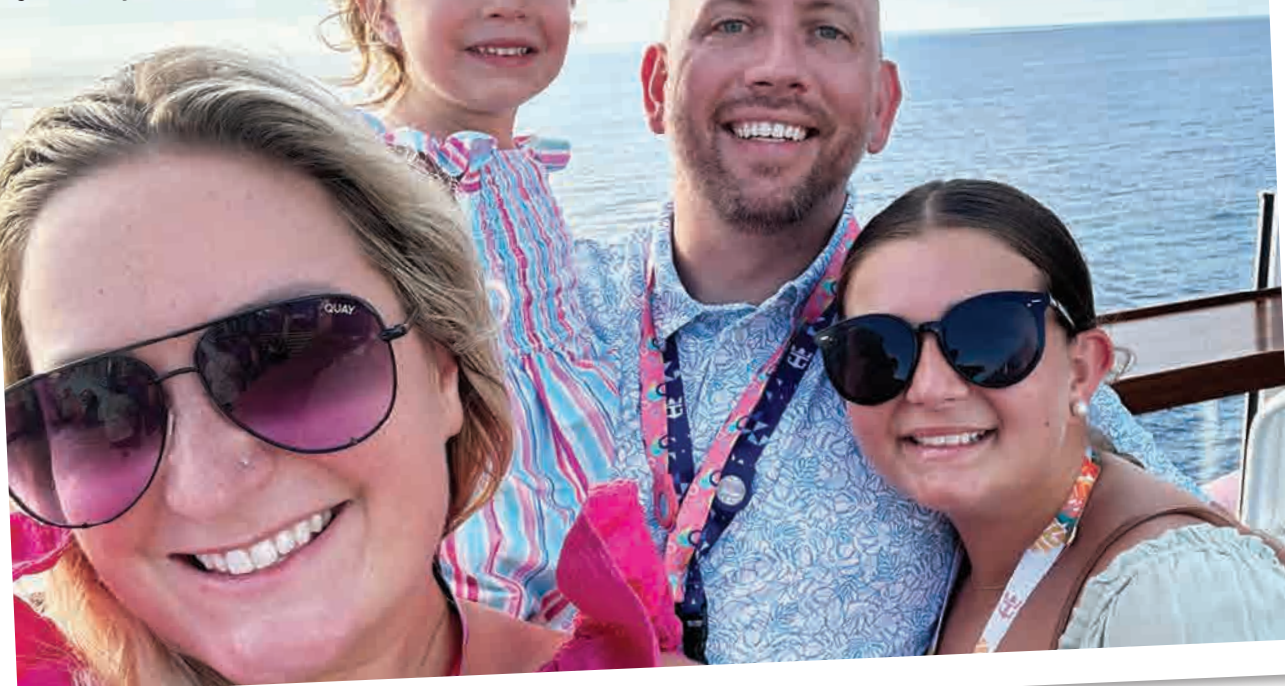
The Rhodes like the area so much, they have convinced almost everyone in their lives from Wisconsin to move to Lakewood Ranch themselves. Karisa's parents moved to Summerfield, while Jimmy's parents moved to Lakewood National Golf Club. Sisters, aunts and grandmothers are here, too. Once Jimmy and Karisa convinced everyone that Lakewood Ranch was an option, it became too good an option to turn down.

The thing about Lakewood Ranch that has impressed them the most? From their initial tour of the area and beyond, the developments that were promised have been delivered. The family said is proud to be part of such a fast-growing area, one where many memories have been made, and even more memories are on the way.

"It's cool to watch everything happen," Karisa said. "It's a nice life here."

Britta Rhode, Jimmy Rhode, Karissa Rhode and Ellerie Rhode believe Lakewood Ranch is their forever home.

Karisa, Ellerie, Jimmy and Britta Rhode said they feel entrenched in Lakewood Ranch's community.



LAKEWOOD RANCH



From first baby to larger families, the Schmitt family has grown on the Ranch.

JAY HEATER
MANAGING EDITOR

A pregnant Charleen Schmitt had a different kind of reaction when she arrived at her new Summerfield home in the still undiscovered community of Lakewood Ranch in 1995.

She went up to the front door, turned to her husband, Bob, and ... cried.

"Yes, I was crying," Charleen says now, 30 years later. "I had looked around. We had just bought into the cow fields. We were in the middle of nowhere, and I was pregnant."

It didn't help that Bob Schmitt was a planner for Manatee County who knew what was coming in Lakewood Ranch. At that time, it was a little scary. And they had a 3-year-old son, Derek, at home as well.

"We were living in west Bradenton after we had moved to Florida from Chicago in 1986," Bob Schmitt said. "But we wanted to relocate, and there was this DRI project. I saw what they proposed to do (in Lakewood Ranch)."

"John Clarke (who was CEO of Schroder-Manatee Ranch at the time) was in charge and he had developed The Meadows. Charleen and I were expecting and I had looked at what the schools in the area were rated.

"Our house was the first in Summerfield Park on Meandering Way, and we weren't ready for Lakewood Ranch. There was nothing here. We would go back to Cortez to eat at Demetrios."

Charleen's tears didn't last long. "The park already was there and we used it all the time," Charleen Schmitt said. "We had been here three months when Kirsten was born at Blake Hospital.

It was a landmark moment — Nov. 20, 1995 — for not just the Schmitts, but the entire community. Kirsten was the first baby born to a Lakewood Ranch family. A brick is placed in front of the entry to Lakewood Ranch Town Hall that notes "KIRSTEN SCHMITT LWR's FIRST BORN."

She, of course, became the first person in Lakewood Ranch who didn't come from somewhere else.



All the first families of Lakewood Ranch had their own landmark moments that they shared with their special group of neighbors.

"The first 50 families that lived here, we all were close," Charleen Schmitt said. "We all did the first Easter Egg hunt. We were entrenched in each other's families. We watched each other's kids, and there were men's basketball games at the park."

She said it helped that Schroeder-Manatee Ranch was doing everything it could to make sure those first families were happy. She said SMR provided security around the new neighborhood, and made little gestures, such as, during that first year, dropping off watermelons at the first 10 homes in the neighborhood. "SMR was so welcoming," Charleen Schmitt said.

She said it is a feeling that has carried over 30 years later. After Hurricane Debby brought record-breaking rain to Lakewood Ranch, she said her neighbors were all out checking on each other, just as they would have done 30 years ago. "The community feel is still there," she said.

Bob Schmitt had confidence SMR would follow through on its promises, including new schools. In 1994, Bob had taken Charleen to Lake Uihlein, which was surrounded by ... nothing. SMR representatives were telling him to picture a downtown area there.

Lakewood Ranch and the Schmitts grew together.

After three years in their first home, the Schmitts moved to a bigger home in Summerfield that had a pool. They didn't consider leaving the neighborhood that had made Charleen cry.

"We thought it was developing the way it was advertised," Bob Schmitt

"I liked being close to both his parents. And Lakewood Ranch has everything you need. All the schools are close and my mom wants to move this way."

— Stephanie Schmitt

said. "The kids were entrenched in the schools and the next neighborhoods were developing. I became heavily involved in the Legacy Golf Course's men's golf league. Then the town center came, and the hospital came.

"They told us what they were going to do ... and they did it."

Derek and Kirsten went through the school system and eventually graduated from Lakewood Ranch High School.

Kirsten married Trevor Lovett in 2018. They have a child, 3-year Emma, who was born at Lakewood Ranch Medical Center.

"It was like a hotel," Kirsten said of giving birth at the local hospital.

Although the couple still loves Lakewood Ranch, they live in Parrish because they feel they can get more home for the money. They both work in Palmetto.

Even so, their love affair with Lakewood Ranch continues.

"Everything is convenient here," Kirsten said "I hope we can watch Parrish grow into the same thing."

Of course, they continually visit her parents in Summerfield and they

participate in Lakewood Ranch's MVP Sports and Social programming, including its volleyball league at Waterside Place.

Kirsten will always have fond memories of growing up in Lakewood Ranch.

"There was a lot of construction, but I thought it was fun," Kirsten said. "And there were lots of cows."

They take their 3-year-old daughter Emma to Lakewood Ranch programming, and said she participated in the Happy Feet soccer program at Premier Sports Campus. Kirsten is pregnant again with a daughter, to be named Hallie, on the way?"

Her older brother, Derek, was part of the first graduating class of 2011 at Lakewood Ranch High that spent all four years in the high school. Kirsten graduated four years later in 2015.

Derek and his wife, Stephanie, live in Greenbrook and, love Lakewood Ranch as well. Stephanie grew up in Bradenton, but was totally OK with the move to Lakewood Ranch after marrying Derek.

"We talked about where we wanted to live, and we both said, 'Lakewood Ranch.'" Stephanie said. "I liked being close to both his parents. And Lakewood Ranch has everything you need. All the schools are close and my mom wants to move this way."

Bob Schmitt has confidence SMR will continue to improve Lakewood Ranch through its next 30 years.

"What they built at Waterside, what they built at Main Street, was fantastic," Bob Schmitt said. "Would I tell my brother to move here? Yes, I would.

"We don't have to go to west Bradenton anymore."

Jay Heater

Derek and Stephanie Schmitt, Kirsten (Schmitt) and Trevor Lovett, and Bob and Charleen Schmitt stand in front of Bob and Charleen's Summerfield home.

Courtesy image

30 YEARS ON THE RANCH SCHOOLS



Courtesy image

Faculty and staff spell out "ODA" to celebrate the groundbreaking of The Out-of-Door Academy's upper school in 1995 in Lakewood Ranch.

Build it and they will come

From dirt roads to school expansion, ODA's 'crazy' idea to open its upper school in Lakewood Ranch continues to pay off 28 years later.

LIZ RAMOS
SENIOR EDITOR

When The Out-of-Door Academy was preparing to construct its upper school campus near the Sarasota Polo Club in 1995, it was surrounded by dirt roads.

Laura Murphy, the current director of enrollment management at the K-12 independent school, remembered that time well. She said the head of school at the time, Martha Duffy, had her car become stuck in a ditch the first time she tried to drive to the 90-acre property on Deer Road off University Parkway.

In 1996, ODA opened the upper school to house its high school freshmen and sophomores.

Murphy and the rest of the ODA

teachers, staff and administrators who were opening the upper school didn't know 28 years later, ODA would be celebrating its largest graduating class of 2024 at 93 seniors.

Before the upper school opened in Lakewood Ranch, ODA was home to kindergarten through eighth grade in Sarasota. Once students graduated eighth grade, they went off to private or public high schools or boarding schools.

"It was a huge miss for us not to have a high school," said Sean Ball, the current head of upper school who has been with ODA for 33 years. "Who would have figured that we'd have all this now? I mean you look at Lakewood Ranch and the amount of growth that's happened out here. It's pretty remarkable."

He said it was Duffy's vision to

recognize the need for a high school that truly drove the entire school toward the future.

TRUST IN SMR

Murphy said Duffy developed a relationship with Lakewood Ranch developer Schroeder-Manatee Ranch and was told the master planned community needed a school. ODA trusted SMR would deliver.

Murphy and Ball said other people thought ODA was crazy for opening a campus in Lakewood Ranch. It was an area filled with wildlife, not people. ODA's campus continues to be visited by alligators, bobcats and other animals even today.

Murphy said Mike Belcher, a past head of upper school, used to come to campus early to go into classrooms to chase out rattlesnakes.

She recalled being at the groundbreaking of the upper school campus and grabbing a shovel and hard hat. They all gathered to take a photo of faculty spelling out "ODA."

Both Murphy and Ball said they still use the shovels from that groundbreaking at their homes now.

Administrators and faculty imagined a campus that although it would be an extension of the K-8 campus on Siesta Key, it would be its own. They were building from the ground up, literally and figuratively. They had to choose the school colors, mascot and more.

They settled on blue and white for the colors while the lower school was green and white. They chose Thunder for the mascot because the lower school was the Lightning.

"The lightning before the thunder was kind of the thought process behind it," Ball said.

Murphy said there was an effort to make sure the upper school had its own identity and to give the students taking a risk in enrolling at the upper school ownership of their new school.

CAMPUSES COME TOGETHER

As the years passed, the campuses came together and the lower school's colors changed to blue and white and both campuses' mascots became the Thunder. Although there were two different campuses, they were all part of ODA.

In 1999, ODA produced its first high school graduating class with 12 students.

The enrollment grew by leaps and bounds. The school needed more space, so the middle school was moved to the upper school campus. In 2020, ODA celebrated the opening of the middle school's expansion on the upper school campus.

"A lot of our population in the school used to come from Siesta Key. Now, it's all from Lakewood Ranch," Ball said. "We were the trendsetters. ... It was the vision of Martha Duffy and the board of trustees. Build it and people will come. We built it, and they came, and I feel proud to be a part of it."

LAKWOOD RANCH-AREA SCHOOLS

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- Robert E. Willis Elementary
- Gilbert W. McNeal Elementary
- Braden River Elementary
- Tara Elementary
- Freedom Elementary
- Gene Witt Elementary
- Dr. Mona Jain Middle
- Carlos E. Haile Middle
- R. Dan Nolan Middle
- Braden River Middle
- Lakewood Ranch High

CHARTER SCHOOLS

- Imagine School at Lakewood Ranch
- Lakewood Ranch Preparatory Academy

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

- The Out-of-Door Academy
- Beyond the Spectrum
- New Gate Montessori
- Risen Savior Academy
- Sea of Strengths Academy
- The Pinnacle Academy

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH FIRE

SMR ignited trust for fire district growth

In 1994, there was only one fire station in the area. Now, East Manatee Fire Rescue has 10 stations and a training tower.

LESLEY DWYER
STAFF WRITER

Lee Whitehurst, chief of the East Manatee Fire Rescue, was one of the first paid fire fighters on the force in 1988. He remembers Lakewood Ranch from before it was Lakewood Ranch. “The Cypress Banks DRI (Development of Regional Impact) is how it began,” Whitehurst said. “It even-

tually changed from the Cypress Banks DRI to what became Lakewood Ranch. It was a total change of the people in place.”

Cypress Banks won the commission’s approval in 1989 and would have been where the Summerfield and Riverwalk neighborhoods are now.

Now, the East Manatee Fire District has 10 fire stations and one training tower. In 1994, it had just one station and was still known as the Braden River Fire Control and Rescue District. A second station opened on State Road 70 in 1997.

“We would be something, but we wouldn’t be who we are today without Lakewood Ranch,” Whitehurst said. “That project easily accounts for half of our beans as a farmer.”

Henry Sheffield served as the first paid fire chief from 1983 until his retirement in 2007. Whitehurst said Sheffield’s background at the property appraiser’s office in Polk County made him the perfect fit for such a rapidly growing area.

“He understood a lot of property related things, including what we needed to know for our future and what was coming,” Whitehurst said. “He would frequently create relationships with these developers as a means of looking ahead, and we continue that to this day.”

Lakewood Ranch accounts for less than 50% of EMFR’s district, but half of the 10 fire stations are in Lakewood Ranch.

Whitehurst credits Rex Jensen, CEO of Lakewood Ranch’s parent company Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, for the fire rescue growing in pace with the community.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Whitehurst said they heard about a lot of projects, but for every 10, maybe one would actually be developed. Lakewood Ranch was different, and Jen-



Division Chief Bob Mikulski, Administrative Officer Stephen Beecher and Chief Lee Whitehurst work out of Station 1 on Lakewood Ranch Boulevard.

LAKEWOOD RANCH FIRE STATIONS

- Half of the East Manatee Fire Rescue’s stations are in Lakewood Ranch.
- Station 1, 3220 Lakewood Ranch Boulevard
- Station 4, 9136 Town Center Parkway
- Station 6, 8800 State Road 70
- Station 7, 14500 Covenant Way
- Station 8, 6975 Bournside Boulevard

sen became a trusted man around the fire district.

“When Rex spoke, we listened,” Whitehurst said. “Once Lakewood Ranch started in 1994, they lived up to their predictions.”

Lakewood Ranch found land for the fire stations, too. When neighborhoods like Edgewater and Riverwalk were breaking ground in the late 1990s closer to University Parkway, the stations in the Braden River area couldn’t cover those homes.

The standard, set by the insurance industry, is that each fire station should only cover homes within five road miles of the station. Lakewood Ranch Boulevard didn’t reach University Parkway yet.

Lakewood Ranch gave the fire district land on Town Center Parkway under the agreement that a station would be built within two years. Station 4 opened in 2002.

Fast forward almost 20 years, and Station 7 came about in a similar manner. Response times in the Lake Club and Country Club East were at nine minutes, which is double where they should’ve been.

Whitehurst said Jensen doesn’t see

“When Rex spoke, we listened. Once Lakewood Ranch started in 1994, they lived up to their predictions.”

— Lee Whitehurst, chief of the East Manatee Fire Rescue

The district hit pause on another station going in on Bournside Boulevard and bought an 11-acre property with three buildable acres from SMR for \$200,000. Station 7 opened on Covenant Way in 2020.

“It was probably the quickest land deal we’ve ever been involved in,” Whitehurst said. “Within two months, we owned that piece of land.”

That particular station is unique in that, just like Lakewood Ranch, it serves two counties.

Whitehurst said Jensen doesn’t see

county lines, just Lakewood Ranch. Waterside Place was about to break ground when the district realized it had an issue with response times.

“Having a station there, not only served our purpose, but for Rex, it could serve a purpose in Sarasota County because there was no property over there,” Whitehurst said. “We struck up a deal. For the last couple of years, there’s been a fire engine with a paramedic on board that runs out of our Station 7 because it’s only 1,200 feet off the county line.”

The engine runs all the calls received from the Sarasota County side of Lakewood Ranch.

Fire Rescue needs to stay ahead of development, and Whitehurst knows from experience that East Manatee isn’t done growing just yet.

When Station 1 was built on Lakewood Ranch Boulevard, he said it was in “the middle of nowhere.” Now, it’s the busiest station in the district.

Looking ahead, plans are on the drawing board for a sixth fire station in Lakewood Ranch.

The district bought five acres of land from SMR 12 years ago that’s located on the southwest corner of Bournside Boulevard and State Road 64.

“It could get kicked a year, but that (fire station) is going to happen,” Whitehurst said. “I don’t anticipate any more after that because we’ve got it all pretty well covered.”



Liz Ramos

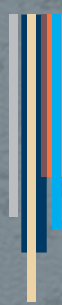
East Manatee Fire Rescue Lt. Steve Ryckman helps Lakewood Ranch 10-year-old Avery Cruz try on a self contained breathing apparatus in 2023.



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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH **NONPROFITS**

‘Just as important as roads’

Nonprofits play a key role in making Lakewood Ranch the most desirable master-planned, multigenerational community in the U.S.

JAY HEATER
MANAGING EDITOR

It has been a common joke around Lakewood Ranch. A person says he or she was born in Florida.

Then comes the reply, “So you’re the one?”

Certainly, Lakewood Ranch’s immense popularity among both in-state and out-of-state buyers — even out-of-country buyers — would seem to be ripe for an apathetic attitude when it comes to supporting local nonprofits.

Wouldn’t it take years to develop a feeling of allegiance to the community?

Brittany Lamont, who became the CEO of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance in 2021, said she found quite the opposite when she took over as the nonprofit’s leader.

“It has amazed me that the second people touch down here, they want to be immersed in their community,” Lamont said.

She said Schroeder-Manatee Ranch, which is celebrating its 30th year of developing Lakewood Ranch, played a key role in creating that environment.

“SMR made sure Lakewood Ranch has a small town feel,” Lamont said. “That’s even though it has big city amenities. SMR created the culture out of the gate.”

Lamont said upon hitting the ground in Lakewood Ranch, people discover a “love thy neighbor” mentality.

“It has a ‘Love the place you’re investing in’ feel,” Lamont said. “The people in Lakewood Ranch, in general, have privilege. But they go beyond their walls to support the community. They had volunteered at their food bank or their nonprofits at their previous home, and they brought that here. What a giving

“The nonprofits are just as important to a community as roads and utilities. They can impact the community in such a positive way. They need to be able to deliver.”

— Mark Clark, president of the Lakewood Ranch Community Foundation

community this is. They care about those who live in it.”

Lamont, who had lived in Sarasota most of her adult life, said people don’t come to Lakewood Ranch primarily to retire like she experienced in Sarasota.

“They want to be active mem-

bers of the community,” she said. “I always tell people half of my customers (who will be interesting in joining LWRBA) haven’t even arrived yet.”

She said that is because Lakewood Ranch has new communities being built that will host thousands of homes.

“We have to keep the pulse and understand what the community needs,” she said. “We know the needs will change. It’s never one size fits all. Do we have the right makeup of amenities? Do we have the right makeup of businesses?”

Angela Massaro-Fain moved to Lakewood Ranch in 1998 and has seen the community grow. She saw immediately that Lakewood Ranch would support nonprofits and in 2011 she founded Sisterhood for Good, primarily with other Lakewood Ranch women.

While Sisterhood for Good has grown to include members from outside Lakewood Ranch, the nonprofit



Annemarie Grafts of Bank OZK and former LWRBA CEO Heather Kasten volunteer at the first annual Alliance Gives Back Volunteer Days in 2018.

keeps Lakewood Ranch as its home and still serves the area’s needs.

“Has Sisterhood for Good been embraced by Lakewood Ranch?” Massaro-Fain said. “I would say it has.”

This year, Sisterhood for Good broke its own record by handing out \$153,036 in grants to 40 nonprofits. That broke 2023’s record total of \$110,800.

The all-female volunteer force has grown from 10 ladies the first year to more than 260 members.

Mark Clark is the president of the

Lakewood Ranch Community Foundation. The nonprofit was formed a quarter century ago with the backing of SMR and the direction of former SMR CEO John Clarke.

“I would say that embracing a nonprofit is a journey,” said Clark, a 20-year Lakewood Ranch resident. “A lot of people moved here for lifestyle and the climate. Once they got here, once they planted some seeds, they asked ‘How can we make a difference?’”

“I am thankful SMR had the vision to lay the foundation for this community. It’s been a fantastic design in an attractive community, but then the people have to take over.”

Clark said SMR’s master plan has been effective in not only drawing people to Lakewood Ranch, but drawing “quality people.”

He said the effort has to continue by the nonprofits to provide valuable services to the community across all ages, from kids to retired folks.

“The nonprofits are just as important to a community as roads and utilities,” Clark said. “They can impact the community in such a positive way. They need to deliver.”

He said nonprofits has to be prepared as the community continues to grow and the needs change.

“The needs will continue to grow,” he said. “And services must be provided on all socio-economic levels. It’s a whole different service offering than it was 30 years ago.”



The runners sprint away at the start of the Run for the Beads 5K at Waterside Place. Funds for the race support area nonprofits through the Lakewood Ranch Community Foundation.



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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH **ACTIVITIES**

Community Activities makes connections

Lakewood Ranch Community Activities monitors the community's desires and growth to present the correct programming.

LIZ RAMOS
SENIOR EDITOR

Every year, Lakewood Ranch residents mark their calendars for major Lakewood Ranch Community Activities events.

Whether it's the Community Campout, Eggstravaganza, the Tribute to Heroes Parade or BooFest, hundreds, if not thousands, come together to celebrate any given occasion.

Those are just examples of staple events Lakewood Ranch has become known for over the years.

But Lakewood Ranch Community Activities is responsible for much more.

The nonprofit coordinates clubs and community groups and hosts parks and recreational programming.

Much like the population boom in the Ranch, Lakewood Ranch Community Activities has had to increase its offerings to ensure it stays on its mission: To provide a social structure to bring residents together to establish a sustainable community.

Keith Pandeloglou, the president and CEO of Lakewood Ranch Community Activities, said the nonprofit started in 2000 with at least 30 community groups and clubs and five to seven large-scale events.

Now the nonprofit hosts more than 700 events throughout the year and coordinates more than 60 community groups and clubs.

Pandeloglou, who has been with Lakewood Ranch Community Activities for eight years, said he finds the ever-changing demographics of the area to be the most interesting.

"It's a good testament to doing the right things over and over again, and eventually, it gains some traction."

— Keith Pandeloglou, president and CEO of Lakewood Ranch Community Activities

When he first moved to Lakewood Ranch in 2010, he believed the community had a "branding problem" where it was perceived as a retirement community. But that couldn't be further from the truth now as out of the more than 40 communities in Lakewood Ranch, only two are age restricted, and the average age of residents is in the mid-40s as more young families move to the area, Pandeloglou said.

With an ever-changing population comes challenges for Lakewood Ranch Community Activities.

How does the nonprofit provide opportunities for social gatherings that will draw people of all ages?

Pandeloglou said one way is to have its staff, board and committees reflect the community demographically and geographically, encouraging people from all communities and all ages to participate. The same goes with volunteers, ambassadors and others.

"We had board members and committee members with kids every-



Olivia Escorcia, 7, and Marco Escorcia, 5, meet the Easter Bunny at Eggstravaganza.

File photos

where from 4 to 12 (years old)," he said. "Well, over the past eight years, the strangest thing happened, they all got eight years older. So now we're really good in teens (programming), but we need people that have 2, 3, 5 year olds again. ... You want to make sure you're serving the people you represent, and the best way to do that is to have them be a part of it."

Chirs McComas, who handles most of the parks and recreational programming for Lakewood Ranch Community Activities, said although there are challenges resulting from growth, it comes with "freedom to grow because the demand is there."

He said there were programs, like field bocce and bingo, that weren't well attended in the past, but they are now thriving.

Learning that location is everything and sometimes having one program right after the other draws people in, Pandeloglou said.

Bingo sometimes can have 40 people in attendance and the nonprofit

has had to stop advertising field bocce and cornhole because of the large number of participants.

Pandeloglou said the nonprofit previously had to chase people and business owners to provide services, such as a yoga or dance instructor.

Now, he said, they're coming to the nonprofit, filling out applications for new programs. He said in a matter of two weeks, there were five applications for new programs while in the past, the nonprofit would go months without receiving five applications.

"It's a good testament to doing the right things over and over again, and eventually, it gains some traction," Pandeloglou said.

Pandeloglou said planning is now focused on whether an event or program should have two sessions to accommodate demand or where will people park and how to transport people from off-site parking.

Even with the growth, Lakewood Ranch Community Activities is focused on providing quality, inten-

WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

Lakewood Ranch Community Activities always is looking for more board members, committee members, volunteers, ambassadors and more.

Keith Pandeloglou said the meetings are quarterly. To get involved, call 757-1530.



Country Club East's Barbara Bishop-Reid plays casual cornhole. She celebrates every time she lands a bag in the hole with a dance.

tional social gatherings with the thought of "how do we get bigger by getting smaller?" Pandeloglou said.

Pandeloglou said while the larger events such as BooFest are wonderful opportunities for residents to connect and learn about area businesses, the true community connections happen at a smaller scale.

"With our spaces and our parks, both indoor and outdoor, we're able to create connections daily, whether it's through new clubs, new committees, new groups, new social activities that can happen five to 30 people at a time," he said.

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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH HOSPITALS



Chief Nursing Officer Judy Young, surgeon Samuel Yelverton, CEO Andy Guz and Director of Quality and Accreditation Malou Kaseta enjoy working at the Lakewood Ranch Medical Center together.

to do something for her," Young said. "But she decided that she wanted to celebrate the staff on her birthday, so she had her husband bring in their favorite cupcakes."

Kaseta said the quality of patient care is what makes LWRMC a David among Goliaths.

"The difference between a metropolis and a community feel is that every patient that comes through our door is a rock star," she said.

Getting to know patients is the icing on the cupcake of accreditations that ensure expertise and top-quality care.

LWRMC is a certified primary heart attack center and has core certifications in knee replacements, hip replacements and sepsis, among other awards and recognitions.

"You can lose those accreditations or not get them," Guz said. "An accreditation provides a level of accountability because now we know where we're at, and if you don't get better, you could lose your certifications."

Certifications are based on the established best practices with the best outcomes for a particular surgery or disease management.

The medical center is undergoing an expansion. A five-story, 170,000-square-foot addition is planned to open in December 2025. The tower will increase the number of beds from 120 to 180.

"We're adding beds because the

community has the demand," Guz said. "The organization gets bigger, but it's all still going to be local people coming here, and we're going to hire local people. We're just trying to respond to what the community has asked us to do."

THEN AND NOW

Opening in 2004, the Lakewood Ranch Medical Center has grown alongside the community over the past 20 years.

In 2004, LWRMC staffed 160 physicians, 256 employees and 80 volunteers. Now, LWRMC staffs 525 physicians, 233 nurses and physician assistants, 810 employees and 69 volunteers.

When completed, its new tower will add 100 more jobs.

The increased staff is a result of increased services. In 2004, there were four operating rooms. Now, there are nine.

A sleep center, a breast health center, a second endoscopy suite and two catheterization lab suites are among the additions along with an array of medical specialties including orthopedic and spine services and wound care and hyperbaric medicine.

Small-town touch, big-city medicine

The Lakewood Ranch Medical Center opened 10 years after Schroeder-Manatee Ranch started building Lakewood Ranch.

LESLEY DWYER
STAFF WRITER

The Lakewood Ranch Medical Center isn't the biggest hospital in the area, but that's part of the draw for both staff and patients.

"That's the cool aspect of it. It's not just a corporate machine," surgeon Samuel Yelverton said. "It has a small-town hospital feel, but we do wild stuff here, nothing that a small-town hospital could do. We do pretty advanced things for the size of the hospital."

Yelverton worked at larger hos-

"The difference between a metropolis and a community feel is that every patient that comes through our door is a rock star."

— Malou Kaseta

pitals before joining LWRMC about two years ago. He said he never had as much fun, and he certainly couldn't text the CEO whenever he felt like it.

But that's one of the upsides of working at a neighborhood hospital. The staff see each other regularly, and that includes CEO Andy Guz.

"In big facilities, you don't pass the

same person in the hallway," Chief Nursing Officer Judy Young said. "The same person that brings your patient from the operating room today is the same person that's going to bring the patient next week."

Those regular interactions have created what Director of Quality and Accreditation Malou Kaseta called a palpable culture that draws and keeps employees.

LWRMC has the lowest turnover rate compared to any other hospitals where Guz has worked. He said there have only been two directors out of over 35 to leave in the past two years.

"That's pretty unheard of," he said. "Right now, our overall turnover is at the lowest it's been since pre-Covid."

That neighborhood feeling transfers to the patients, too. Some visit more regularly than others, and the staff get to know them and vice versa.

"We had a patient who was having a birthday, and the staff wanted



The new Lakewood Ranch Medical Center tower is expected to be completed in December 2025. The five-story tower will add 60 beds to the hospital's capacity.

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30 YEARS ON THE RANCH CHURCHES

Churches mirror Lakewood Ranch's growth

Faith communities say rapid expansion is a blessing and a challenge.

JIM DELA
DIGITAL CONTENT PRODUCER

For faith communities in Lakewood Ranch, the explosive population growth of the past 30 years has created its own set of blessings. Two of the larger congregations in the area say their services are full to overflowing most of the year. While that creates challenges, they have managed to work out their time and space concerns.

WITH GROWTH COMES CHALLENGES

Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church on State Road 70 celebrated its 25th anniversary this year.

The church was created in 1999 by parishioners living east of I-75 but who were attending Our Lady Queen of Martyrs church in Sarasota. After getting approval from the bishop, the group's first service was held in a borrowed space, at Living Lord Lutheran Church.

Eighty people attended, including Jack Millhalland, who's now a deacon at Our Lady of the Angels. "And then there was all the development out here," he said. "So like that, I would say (the parish) just doubled and doubled."

"Those people who understood what Lakewood Ranch was, the development, knew that this was going to take off."

Today, Millhalland and the parish's pastor, Father Sebastian Szczawinski, say in season, the parish will see 4,000 people on a typical Sunday. This past Easter, 10,000 people attended services.

That can make it tough to connect with newcomers, Millhalland said.



Jim DeLa

Father Sebastian Szczawinski and Deacon Jack Millhalland Jr., of Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church in Lakewood Ranch, say the explosive growth of the community has been both a blessing and a challenge.

"There's so many new faces, and you get to see them only for that short period of time before Mass," he said.

With 3,400 families attending regularly, classroom and meeting space for the parish's various groups is also at a premium.

"For us, that's a challenge, and because we have more groups that would like to come and meet, and we need to limit that," said Szczawinski. "We need to say 'sorry, but the place is not available,' and it's awful."

The parish, which just built a new sanctuary building six years ago, is expanding again, with a new 13,000-square-foot building for classrooms and meeting space.

"We have so many young people here and so many groups. And they need space," Szczawinski said. "It is a challenge for us and a blessing, obviously. So that's why we decided to resolve this problem and to build a new building."

MEGACHURCH STILL EXPANDING

One exit to the south, Grace Com-

"I think that the overwhelming growth in this area has challenged all of us who need to build or need to do something quickly."

— Grace Lead Pastor Chip Bennett

munity Church sits at the intersection of Lakewood Ranch Boulevard and Communications Parkway.

A modern megachurch, Grace also had humble beginnings in 2010 at the site of a former Baptist church in Sarasota.

After three years, Grace opened a second campus, near its current location. "We rented maybe 6,000 square feet," recalled Lead Pastor Chip Bennett.

The initial turnout was bigger than expected. "I think we opened up that first Sunday with like, 150 or 200 people. I was shocked," Bennett said.

"It was the first time that I actually said, whoa. I mean, we actually could have a little bit larger church than what maybe I thought," he said. "The church just continued to grow."

Instead of trying to expand the existing space, they saw the property at Lakewood Ranch Boulevard and Communications Parkway. They raised the money and paid cash for it, he said. They opened their current building in 2021.

Bennett stood in the main auditorium that seats 900, pointing out the large LED screen on the stage and the multiple cameras that feed Sunday services to social media platforms, as well as an overflow room that seats 300 additional people when the auditorium is full. And it happens a lot, Bennett said.

Grace also averages about 4,000 worshippers during its four Sunday services in season, but off season is not far behind. They saw an estimated 8,600 people at Easter and set a non-holiday attendance record of more than 3,600 on a recent Sunday.

As big as Grace is, it is also planning to expand. "We are in the process of building a student center, which will be 14,000 square feet," Bennett said, to house three gyms that community leagues will be able to use for free, as well as more worship space.

Grace also owns three of the four pieces of property at its intersection. "We need a building twice as big, but we don't have it." The church is also planning to add a balcony in the main auditorium for even more seating.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Neither congregation sees growth in Lakewood Ranch slowing down. "All you have to do is travel back here and see all the apartment buildings and villas and townhomes that are being built," said Deacon Millhalland. "They're looking for a place to worship, and they're looking for a place

WORSHIP ON THE RANCH

Lakewood Ranch has many places to worship, including:

- Evangel Baptist Church
- Grace Community Church
- Our Lady of the Angels Catholic Church
- Chabad of Bradenton and Lakewood Ranch
- Woodland Community Church
- Cornerstone Church
- Church of Hope
- Bayside Community Church
- Peace Presbyterian
- Oasis Church
- Risen Savior Lutheran
- Renaissance Church
- St. Mary's Magdalene Episcopal
- Mill Creek Baptist
- Christ Presbyterian
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
- Legacy Church
- King's Cross Reformed Church
- Bethel Mennonite
- Harvest United Methodist Church
- Lakewood Ranch Baptist
- Faith Life Church
- Cornerstone Church

beyond just worship, they want to be engaged."

The speed of the area's growth puts pressure on faith communities trying to keep pace, Bennett said. "I think that the overwhelming growth in this area has challenged all of us."

It's a learning process. "Just the challenges of growth, unless you've done it before, and most of us haven't. We don't have a manual of how you go from, you know, 200 people to 8,000 on Easter," Bennett said.

Our Lady of the Angels aims to be a place where people can find connection. "I still see it as a strong, vibrant community," Millhalland said. "This is going to still be a magnet to draw people to build community with."

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