



Inform ► Engage ► Impact

Community & Member Meeting

January 29th, 2026

FGCU's Entrepreneurial School:

Its Significance and Mutual Value,

**Dr. Bill McDowell, Dean, FGCU's Daveler and
Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship**

Gulfshore Opera:

Why Our Support is Important.

**Steffanie Pearce, Founder & General Director,
Gulfshore Opera**





Pledge of Allegiance





Welcome

Allan Bowditch
President, Engage Estero

Our Speakers



- **Dr. Bill McDowell, Dean, FGCU's Daveler and Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship**



- **Steffanie Pearce, Founder & General Director, Gulfshore Opera**

Our First Speaker



**Dr. Bill McDowell, Dean, FGCU's Daveler and Kauanui
School of Entrepreneurship**

The Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship

Why Entrepreneurship Matters
to Our Community

Presented to Engage Estero

Presented by Dr. Bill McDowell
Dean and Mark Ain Endowed Chair



Why the School of Entrepreneurship Was Created

- Southwest Florida needed job creators, not just job seekers
- Business founders who stay local and invest in the community
- An economic development and talent-retention strategy
- A bridge connecting education, innovation, and community

"Strong local economies are built by people who start and grow businesses where they live."

One of the Top Entrepreneurship Schools in Florida & the U.S.



Top 50

Entrepreneurship
Programs Nationally



1 of 4

Independent Schools
of Entrepreneurship
Nationwide



900+

Students in
Entrepreneurship

Coming This April:

Hosting the International Small Business Institute Conference at FGCU

"These rankings matter because they attract high-quality students, and those students become founders, employees, and leaders in our region."

How Do You Teach Someone to Become an Entrepreneur?

We Don't Just Teach Theory

- Students test real ideas with real customers
- Build prototypes in our MakerSpace
- Talk to customers and get market feedback
- Failure is treated as learning, not punishment



"Students don't wait until graduation to start businesses. They start here."

From Classroom Projects to Real Startups



Program Impact

\$1M+

Awarded to Student Startups

\$1M+

Awarded to Veteran Startups

374+

Businesses Launched

\$111M+

Revenue Generated

Runway Program: Students can launch businesses as early as their first semester through our incubator and accelerator programs.

Student Ventures Launched at FGCU

Cattyshack Cat Café

Andrew Townsend ('18)



Reducing feline euthanasia rates while giving the community a fun place to hang out with adoptable cats.

youBelong

John Ciocca ('22)

purple

Award-winning social networking platform making the internet a safe, welcoming space for people with disabilities.

Jade Strings

Jade Gibson ('19)



Six-figure revenue music business employing five musicians, started in her Introduction to Entrepreneurship class.

BounceBack Pickle

Dillon Rosenthal



Award-winning startup recycling cracked pickleballs into new equipment, pioneering sustainable practices in America's fastest-growing sport.

"These are not simulations. These are real businesses."



Right Here in Estero

FGCU Alumni & Student Businesses Operating in Your Community

Sundaze Studio

Cattyshack

Jack Thomas Media

Canine Cardio

Remora Boat Cleaning

Boats & Buyers

American Veteran Welding

Pelican Lawn Service

Amaz'n Graz'n LLC

BounceBack Pickle

These entrepreneurs chose to build their futures here, serving Estero and Southwest Florida.

Why These Student Businesses Matter



Create Jobs

Local hiring and employment opportunities for the community



Provide Services

Products and services that residents actually use and need



Keep Innovation Local

No need to import companies when we grow our own

70%

5-Year Survival Rate for Runway Program Businesses

(vs. 10-30% national average for startups)

The Reality: What Makes It Hard to Stay Local

- Cost of living and housing affordability
- Access to affordable workspace and facilities
- Finding early customers and building networks
- Access to early-stage capital and funding
- Limited support ecosystems compared to larger metros
- Competing job offers from bigger cities

"Talent leaves not because they want to, but because it's easier elsewhere."

Why Keeping These Entrepreneurs Here Matters

Local Founders:

- Reinvest their profits locally
- Hire from the local workforce
- Stay engaged civically
- Mentor the next generation

Entrepreneurship Strengthens:

- Tax base and local revenue
- Business diversity
- Economic resilience during downturns
- Community identity and pride

"This is how communities future-proof their economies."

How Estero Can Help Keep This Talent Here

Village Council

- Startup-friendly zoning
- Shared business spaces
- Student business visibility

Local Businesses

- Pilot projects with students
- Mentorship opportunities
- Internship programs

Residents

- Attend pitch events
- Support local ventures
- Spread the word

Upcoming Events to Attend:



Azul's Innovation Challenge Tradeshow: Spring 2026 (1,200+ attendees)



Veterans Pitch Competition: January 30, 2026



High School Pitch Competition: March 18, 2026

This Is a Community Asset

Let's Use It Together

FGCU is producing talent.

The question is:

"Do we let that talent leave, or do we build with it?"

We invite your conversation and partnership.

Entrepreneurship Is a Local Growth Strategy

- FGCU's School of Entrepreneurship creates job creators, not just job seekers
- Our students launch real businesses that serve the community
- Together, we can keep this talent in Southwest Florida

Thank You

Dr. Bill McDowell, Dean

wmcdowell@fgcu.edu

Daveler & Kauanui School of Entrepreneurship
Florida Gulf Coast University





GULFSHORE OPERA

Approachable Sophistication

Presented by Steffanie Pearce,
GO Founder & General Director

Amy Giacometti, Development Director

Engage Estero Community & Member
Meeting
January 29th, 2026



GULFSHORE OPERA IS

SWFL'S PROFESSIONAL REGIONAL OPERA COMPANY



Founded in 2014



OUR MISSION & VALUES



To enrich the community of Southwest Florida by presenting accessible, high quality vocal music performances with classically trained artists and to foster a sense of belonging within our diverse community through a variety music based activities.



Artistic Integrity



Financial Responsibility



Community Engagement

HQ ESTABLISHED IN THE VILLAGE OF ESTERO IN 2021

GO in the Village of Estero:

- 100 professional classical singers, musicians and directors per year
- Training space for GO's Grand Opera Chorus Members
- Central operations for Harmony Choir Youth Development Program
- Community concerts, socials and volunteer engagement

**GO Gives Back
to Estero**

And... 90% of our \$1M budget
stays local (\$0 debt)



**Gulfshore Life's Woman
of the Year in 2023**



OUR TEAM



**Steffanie
Pearce, GO
Founder &
General
Director**



**Michelle Westley
Operations Dir.**



**Amy Giacometti,
Development Dir.**



**Claudia Polzin, Donor &
Community Relations**



**Jorge Parodi,
Music Director**



**Audrey Delcompare,
Operations**



**Juliana Alfano, Youth
Engagement**



**Amy Brower,
Financial Mgr.**



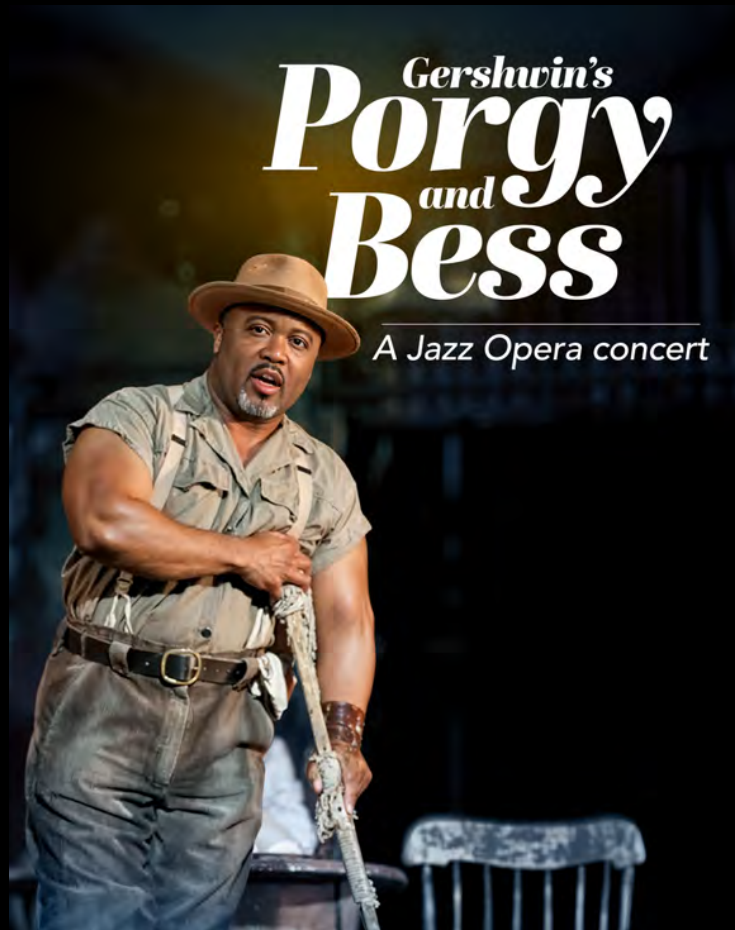
**Alejandro Castaño,
Marketing**

OUR PRODUCTIONS

Grand Opera



Chamber Opera

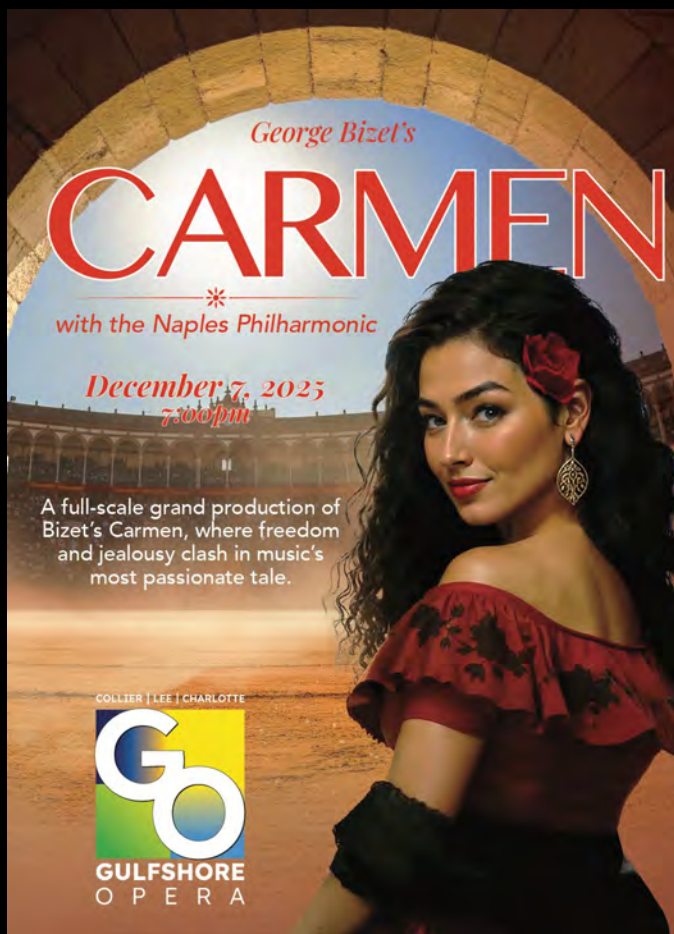


Community Concerts



GRAND OPERA

Grand Opera



- GO is the only production company offering full-scale grand opera at the area's leading professional venues
- International stars train with local emerging artists
- Partnership with Naples Philharmonic

Opera's most beloved masterpieces inspire and connect our community

Artis-Naples



Barbara B. Mann



CPAC



CHAMBER OPERA

Chamber Opera

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* A Jazz Opera concert



GO makes opera more accessible with productions scaled to fit more intimate community centers



Norris Center, Naples



Arts Bonita



Circle Theater,
Ft Myers



GO COMMUNITY CONCERTS

Community Concerts



GO engages
Professional
Artists in
Residence (Nov-
May) to inspire
appreciation for
the beauty of
vocal music

GO SOCIAL EVENTS

GO Social Events

Approachably sophisticated evenings at private clubs with elegant dinners and beautiful musical entertainment



GO SIGNATURE FUNDRAISING EVENT



- World-Class Concert
- VIP Reception with Artists
- Elegant Catered Dinner
- Live Auction

March 5th, 2026
Artis-Naples



GO GIVING BACK

EMERGING ARTISTS & HARMONY CHOIR



OUR GOALS

Present the finest in opera theater and vocal performances to the three counties



Make opera accessible with affordable ticket prices



Maintain a creative, inclusive and supportive environment

OUR GOALS



Increase meaningful community partnerships

OUR GOALS



Increase music education for youth and adults with a nucleus in Estero

OBJECTIVE: ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY & GROWTH



Search for a base of operations for Gulfshore Opera that serves as a community arts center for Estero



SHARE THE DREAM: *A shared community space where everyone belongs*

- Inclusive Community Center
- Classes, Workshops & Summer Camps
- Administrative Headquarters





OUR CONTACT

Website

www.gulfshoreopera.org

Email

info@GulfshoreOpera.org

Phone

+239-529-3925

Administrative Office

9911 Corkscrew Road, Suite
105, Estero, FL 33928



Thank You...
See You Soon!

The President's Report

Allan Bowditch

Report

A Warm Thank You!

- For your financial support, many have provided invaluable donations in 2025
- For your kind words about our communications
- For the amazing increase in attendance at our meetings.
- The increasing interest in our Social Media Posts and our Podcasts
- The expansion of our list of those who receive our communications to 14,000+
- My thanks to my hard-working colleagues on the Engage Estero Team
- The newly renovated Library on Three Oaks is now open.
- There have been regular meetings with the Estero Village management covering many topics.
- We put forward strong objections to the proposed development in place of the Cinema at Coconut Point.

Report

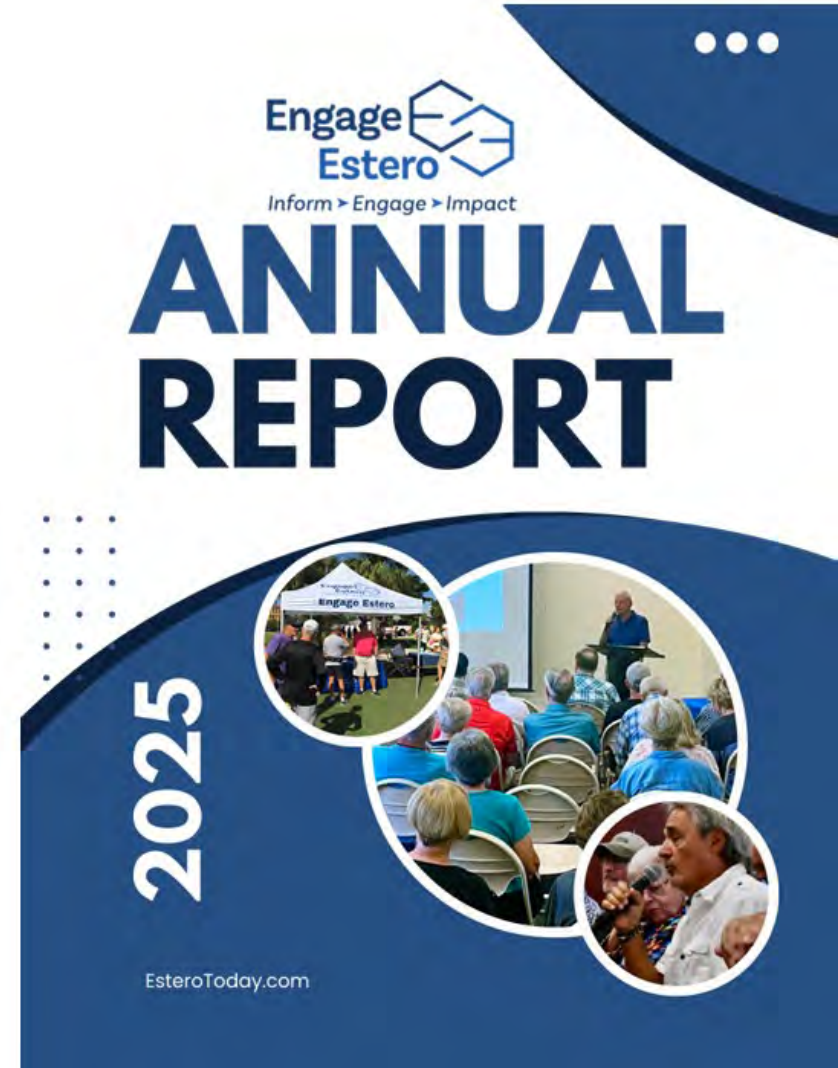
Upcoming Events

- The Don Eslick Person of the Year Award & Gala
The Estero Country Club at the Vines. February 26 th at 5-30pm
 - The 2025 Recipient is Dr Larry Antonucci, President & Chief Operating Officer, Lee Health. Tickets \$125 with 2 glasses of wine (no markup)
- The Public Forum at FGCU's Cohen Student Union Ballroom 2nd Floor, March 17 @ 5 pm – 7:30pm
- The Future of Estero: "Shaping Estero's Future: A Public Forum on Our Community's Tomorrow."
- **Please register online www.esterotoday.com to attend the Award & Gala and both Forums.**

Report

Engage Estero's Annual Report

- Our 2025 Annual Report will be released soon



Report

What's Coming

- We plan to have Don Scott, Head of the Lee County Municipal Planning Office, speak at our April Community meeting
 - Plus, the Coordinator of the Florida Department of Transportation to discuss the I-75 expansion through Estero.
- We will shortly be conducting our Engage Estero 2026 Survey to secure your views on various issues, and the issues you would like us to focus on in the coming months.







For Your Continuing Support and
Investment in Our Community