

## McKinlay Memo - Farewell

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Tue 11/22/2022 12:58 PM

To: Updates <updates@gladesinitiative.org>



November 22, 2022



### Farewell

Thank you for the honor of serving you. It has been an incredibly humbling experience. I did my best to balance needs, to speak when necessary and listen otherwise.

My motto was always “Never forget where you came from and don’t be afraid to share your story.”

I came to public service as a young single mom of three who understood the struggles families like mine faced in our County. That was my voice.

On behalf of my family, thank you for letting me be a part of yours.

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### A Few More Accomplishments

For this final newsletter, I will end with a few of my proudest moments as your District 6 County Commissioner.

**Firefighter Cancer Presumption:** Did you know firefighters are far more likely to get diagnosed with 22 different types of cancer due to on the job exposure?

Did you know for years bills were filed in the Legislature to require that any firefighter who received a diagnosis of one of those cancers would be “presumed” to have gotten it on the job thereby providing them with medical, disability and workers comp benefits? This legislation never passed.

Then Palm Beach County came along. And I met a man affectionately know as Bull. I listened to him speak with such passion (ie he cursed me out and rightfully so) as he made a trek across Florida raising awareness of the lives lost from these cancers. I promised Bull I would do something.

Our 5yr firefighter contract was up for renewal that year. At the tail end of one of our management team meetings after staff laid out the terms of the new contract, I told staff I wanted cancer presumption coverage in our contract.

Staff responded by saying they would absolutely add it as soon as the bill passed the Legislature. I was Mayor at the time so I took the lead on clarifying this conversation. It went like this:

“I’m not sure you understood me clearly so let me say this another way. I don’t want to follow the Legislature. They’re going to follow us. I want to be the first county in Florida that provides this to their firefighters and I want to do it in this contract.”

Took a few rounds of meetings to get it right and Mack Bernard had my back. And Palm Beach County did become the first in the state to protect our first responders and help their families when battling these cancers.

And, lo and behold, by the end of that year’s legislative session, it became the law in Florida.

I made a promise to Bull. I kept that promise. I didn’t give up when told no. I always had the firefighters’ back. And I always will.

This will go down in my diary as one of the best things I accomplished.

**Combating the Opioid Epidemic:** November 2016. Six years ago. My phone rang at 7am. I was at a conference in NYC. Caller ID said it was Johnnie, my Chief of Staff, but all I could hear was sobbing on the other end.

“She’s gone” was all Johnnie could get out.

For 12yrs, she watched her daughter battle addiction. As a mother, she used all the tools she knew to save her daughter.

And still Tasha died.

I watched Johnnie navigate an endless path to no avail. As I wrote in an op-ed in the Palm Beach Post, as leaders, we talked a good game but no one was listening to the families on the frontlines of addiction. Leaders weren't hearing those families desperately trying to tell us the system ain't working.

Addiction is personal for me. I never really talked about it much, but I empathized with Johnnie. Addiction hurt my family and changed my trajectory in life but I didn't know how to truly do anything substantial about it until I heard the pain in Johnnie's sobs.

First, because we were losing a life every 12hrs in Palm Beach County to an overdose and we had the highest overdose rate in the State after notoriously leading the country as the US Pill Mill Capital, I asked then Governor Rick Scott to declare a public health crisis. Why? Because it was and a declaration would also allow Florida to draw down federal resources.

Governor Scott didn't initially support my call. So I built a coalition. Of families. And Moms. And those in active recovery. Then the medical community. And the chambers. And the business development board. And economic council. Then law enforcement. First responders. State Attorney. Our legislative delegation. Volunteer groups like Junior League. Counties. Cities. Urban and rural. And I looped in the media. And then our Chief Judge chimed in...

Then one day while standing inside the State Capitol working the last week of session, Senator Latvala comes bursting through the chamber doors into the Rotunda aiming right for me. "The Governor is signing the declaration! You did it!"

Poetic I was standing with Dave Aronberg. We did it.

Back home, we used research compiled by the National Association of Counties, Natl League of Cities and the National Governor's Association as guidance to develop our own local response plan.

We hired a Drug Policy Manager (Drug Czar) to lead our efforts. We added Substance Use Disorder Response to our budget priorities. We funded it with millions over the past few years. We enhanced the Fire Rescue pilot project with the Healthcare District to provide mental health and substance use treatment to patients who volunteered for such. We committed to opening an Addiction Stabilization Unit. And we became one of the first counties in Florida to sue those responsible for deceptive advertising and helping to create an environment that allowed for pill mills to thrive.

The Addiction Unit opened in early 2020 with a partnership with JFK North Hospital and the PBC Healthcare District. The center for followup care opened this summer. The HUB drop-in center opened in Delray a year ago.

The syringe exchange harm reduction program opened in 2020. The pilot project became the model the Governor is now using to expand to 12 locations in Florida.

The Florida Attorney General and the attorneys from Florida counties and cities are finalizing settlements to the class action lawsuits that will result in a revenue stream to help provide treatment and prevention services as well as fund law enforcement efforts to reduce drugs coming onto our streets to begin with. And just last week, Palm Beach County updated our Response Plan based on the advice of families, healthcare professionals and other stakeholders who will now sit as the official advisory board for our county per requirements set forth by AG Moody.

And, our State Attorney is still going after unscrupulous sober home providers to ensure those in treatment are safe.

We've changed state and federal laws. We created an environment where addiction is discussed as a medical disease. More importantly, it's discussed! And we expanded beyond opioids to recognize crack, meth, and alcohol addictions are also part of the conversation.

We have a long way to go. The world of drugs changes daily. But we've come a long way. And we have an amazing team to continue the work.

I did it for Tasha.

And Jesse.

And Brandi.

And Tina.

And Robin.

And it helped me heal from the pain addiction caused me from watching my own loved ones suffer.

In the end, this one was for you, Mom.

Proud? Yes.

Healed? That, too.

**The Glades:** I've spent so much time thinking about this proud moment. It goes back to my campaign promises in 2014.

I promised to be a forceful voice for the Glades. I have been.

I promised to have a full time aide just for the Glades. I did. Thank you Lisa!

I promised to have a permanent office in the Glades. We opened it up shortly after I took office (We had to remodel it; I wasn't going to tolerate rat traps & sticky paper to get the roaches).

I promised to help provide services in the western communities like we have in the eastern communities. We are doing that now.

I promised to work closely with our state and federal partners to leverage funding. We did.

I promised to bring jobs to the Glades. We did. Two of the largest economic development investments in a quarter center backed solely by county incentives. I promised better roads. We're building them. Better housing. We're enforcing the rules and improving the housing. Better programs for kids. We have new facilities for Boys & Girls Club, Student Aces, the Pahokee Gymnasium, Pioneer Park, etc etc.

I promised a comprehensive conversation on Lake Okeechobee. We're having it.

I promised to learn all I could about agriculture and to support those that grow our food. I now rattle off random statistics that fascinate family & friends over dinner. And our local agricultural community is now known across the county, state and nation.

Between our local, state and federal partners, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in the Glades according to the Glades Regional Master Plan.

We have so much more to do. But we've come a long way. Promises made. Promises kept.

I fell in love with the western reaches of my district. They are humble. They are modest. They are of this Earth.

They stole my heart.

Thank you to the Glades for trusting me, working with me, and being my partners.

Thank you to Senators Abruzzo, Rader, Latvala, Benacquisto, Clemens, Negron, Harrell, Polsky, Simpson, Albritton and Powell, Rep. Skidmore,

Congressmembers Hastings, Cherfilus-McCormick, Frankel, Deutch, Diaz Balart, Rooney (Tom) and Steube & US Senators Nelson, Rubio and Scott for all you did to help me lift this community up.

Thank you to the School Board and the Cities of Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee. To the Ministerial Alliance. PBSO. PBCFR. Healthcare District. Health Department. And all the nonprofits. The farmers. The farmworkers. And all the small business owners. The Business Development Board. Finfrack. Tellus. And all my county employees who helped our Glades.

Together we are better.

This is what makes me the most proud. I hope this work continues...



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