

from the front page



George Horsford | Daily Sun

Linda Webb, left, and Randy Friedman, both of the Village of Fernandina, teach professional workplace culture training around the country.

TRAINING

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emotions and the emotions of their co-workers.

“If I roll out of that patrol car ... mad or angry ... and I’m at the bottom of the ladder, the engagement with you is not going to be good,” said Webb, RITE Academy co-founder and CEO. “The whole purpose of this program is mental health and wellness, to help that officer realize, ‘Where am I on this ladder?’”

Since 2015, Webb and Friedman have run the RITE Academy, a professional workplace culture training program that includes emotional intelligence training tools and talking about officer mental wellness, while improving community engagement.

The two just completed a training session at the SCSO and will host another in April. They have taught more than 1,200 police agencies across the nation, have created more than 970 RITE trainers and have given out more than 550,000 RITE tools.

Officers from Fruitland Park Police Department, Leesburg Police Department, Wildwood Police Department and Lake County Sheriff’s Office have gone through the program.

“We want to give that feeling of, ‘This is our agency, we all care about each other,’” said Friedman, RITE Academy co-founder and president.

Webb, who worked in law enforcement for more than 35 years, found that most agencies spend a lot of time on tactical training and asking how others are doing, but not checking in on themselves.

“I’m supposed to care about you when I can’t even get myself together,” said Webb, of the Village of Fernandina.

While an officer may start their career at the top of the ladder, riding high, within a few years they might be at the bottom, much like Webb was after seeing so much trauma in the field, she said.

Combined with Friedman’s corporate and athletic training experience, the two saw a gap in law enforcement training they wanted to fill.

When Ross, who coordinates training at the Sumter County Sheriff’s Office, came across this program, he knew he and Howard should participate.

The training is required for the agency’s school guardian deputies because they deal with students, Ross said.

But it is applicable to interactions with other officers and community members as well, Howard said.

“I love this (program) because it is everything that applies to law enforcement, as far as we talk about psychology in a simple, easy to understand way,” said Howard, SCSO victim services manager. “And it’s contagious. (Webb and Friedman) are dynamic presenters.”

During the two-day train-the-trainers course, Webb and Friedman teach those in attendance the information they need to train their own staff. The course includes informational slides, tool kits and hands-on exercises, said Friedman, of the Village of Fernandina.

One example is the clack and swoosh exercise, where people take a moment to let something go.

At the SCSO, staff in the 911 communications center, patrol, crisis intervention and schools have gone through

the program, but there are plans for more of the staff to experience it, Undersheriff Pat Breeden said.

“We’re human, we have bad days,” Breeden said. “Our mental wellness is important, along with understanding the mental wellness of the people we’re dealing with every day. If we show up and are having a bad day ... maybe being on the streets is not the place for you to be that day.”

You’ve got to get your mind right before you try to fix someone else’s mind, he said.

That also comes into play at the 911 communications center level, where dispatchers are receiving those initial calls for help, said Melinda Brown, assistant director of communications with the Sumter County Sheriff’s Office 911 Communications Center.

Brown said the program taught her a breathing exercise that she uses often.

Remembering to breathe and recognizing if you need to take a person off a call before things spiral out of control are key, she said.

One of the first lessons the course teaches is to talk about the program’s information with your family, because if you have a good professional life, your personal life is going to improve too, Friedman said.

“I will tell you, this works on all ages,” Brown said. “My 12-year-old tells me every day now where he is on the ladder.”

For more information on the program, visit riteacademy.com.

GRADUATION

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lead to the rate’s increase or decrease, as well as student transfers and deaths, which are removed from calculations.

The Villages High School has the top graduation rate in the Sumter County School District, with 100% of its seniors earning their diplomas.

“It’s a lot of hard work by everyone,” said VHS Principal Robin Grant. “My administration teams take pride in having a 100% graduation rate.”

While there are other indicators for individual success, the graduation rate can represent the overall success of a high school.

“Graduation rate is probably the most reflective ‘overall score,’ and is the best indicator of success for students,” Shirley said. “Graduation benefits both students and our local job creators. Our goal remains for our students to be prepared for enrollment, enlistment or employment.”

Sumter County School District’s graduation rate has been gradually increasing over the years. In 2018-19,



Daily Sun file photo

Graduating seniors in The Villages High School’s class of 2023 throw their caps in the air during their graduation ceremony. The Sumter County School District saw graduation rates rise from 93.1% during the 2021-22 school year to 94.3% in the 2022-23 school year, climbing further above the state’s average 88% graduation rate.

Wildwood Middle High School had an 81.9% graduation rate, while South Sumter High School stood at 84%. In 2022-23, those numbers grew to 97.9% for Wildwood Middle High and 95.44% for South Sumter.

The future is bright for the Sumter County School District, which is expecting further school population growth.

The district has been following its “enroll, enlist or employ” motto by building

on its career and technical education programs to motivate students to graduate and apply for in-demand jobs in the area.

“We provide options so our students can see personal connections between the content provided and their own future needs and interests,” Shirley said.

At the public school level, this could include forming the Construction Academy at Wildwood Middle High School

or the welding program at South Sumter High School.

“Everyone is not college bound and it seems pretty obvious that health, service industries and construction or maintenance skills will be pretty important in Sumter County going forward,” Shirley said.

The district is expected to have around 535 graduates for the 2023-24 school year, pending all meet graduation requirements.

VHS plans to graduate the largest number at around 248 students, while South Sumter follows with 204 and Wildwood Middle High at 83.

As for the state of Florida, the 88% graduation rate for 2022-23 is a 0.7% increase from the previous year.

“Florida’s graduation rate continues to climb because our educators place a sole focus on academics in the classroom,” said Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. “Whether Florida students choose a four-year university or non-traditional post-secondary learning, they will have built a strong foundation to set them up for success.”

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