

Reflecting on a decade creating change in North Tampa's University Area community

CHRISTOPHER CURRY | WEDNESDAY, JULY 30, 2025



University Area Community Development Corporation Facebook

University Area CDC CEO and Executive Director Sarah Combs and board member Ross Fabian look on during the ribbon-cutting celebration for the Harvest Hope Park splash pad in April 2024



Longtime University Area resident Ross Fabian remembers back several years to the first time he met community nonprofit leader Sarah Combs.

Fabian and some of the other "old school guys" in the north Tampa neighborhood would sit outside and shoot the breeze for hours. At the time, a lot of the vehicle traffic in and out of the neighborhood was headed to and from several abandoned acres of woods and dirt that drug dealers had taken over. Combs, then in the early days of her 10-year tenure as CEO and executive director of the University Area Community Development Corporation, stood out in the predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood.

"We would sit and chit chat, and we would see her ride around," Fabian says. "This white lady keeps riding through the neighborhood. And then she got out. She got out and introduced herself to us. I've been here about 40 years, and you have to realize, for generational people, communicating with other people can be a very difficult thing. There's a trust issue. She kept riding around, getting out of the car, communicating with us, engaging with us, until she found out who we really were and what we did. There ain't too many people like Sarah Combs."

In those early conversations, Combs found out that Fabian was a longtime youth football coach

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and leader who had a team of neighborhood kids that played games at Cuscaden Park in Ybor City.

"She said, 'You have to bring the football team here,'" Fabian recalls. "If you bring the team here, it will be a lot easier."

The Bay Area Eagles youth football and cheerleading organization moved to the University Area, relaunching as the Uptown Eagles in 2021. They play home games and sometimes practice at Mort Park – a short walk from the University Area CDC's Harvest Hope Park along sidewalks that the community nonprofit advocated to have built. The Uptown Eagles also practice on the sports field at Harvest Hope, the park and community gathering place that the University Area CDC opened in 2019 on those seven abandoned acres in the heart of the neighborhood where drug dealers once roamed freely. This summer, the park got a new turf practice field installed with funding from a Hillsborough County Community Development Block Grant.

Combs, who departs in August to take over as CEO of Metropolitan Ministries, remembers when the University Area CDC obtained the future site of Harvest Hope as the first big acquisition of its real estate and land banking arm. The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office district major at the time offered words of caution and concern.

"The major said, 'Sarah, I won't even send my officers there at night. That's how bad it is. Do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into?'" she recalls. "I said, 'I appreciate your caution. But if we don't acquire properties like this and make a change, who will?'"



University Area CDC Facebook

Community volunteers at Harvest Hope Park during the University Area CDC's annual "Paint the Town" service event for Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Harvest Hope, with its community garden, teaching kitchen, multi-purpose sports field, playground, splash pad, walking trail, public art, tilapia pond, and fishing dock, is now the centerpiece of community activity in the University Area. Combs says the community crime rate has dropped by 65 percent after the park opened.

Of course, the park is no magic elixir for all community issues. On a weekday afternoon in late June, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, which has a seat on

the University Area CDC Board of Directors and an active role in the nonprofit's community revitalization efforts, makes a drug arrest at an apartment near Harvest Hope.

Still, as Fabian walks through the park a little while later, the playground and splash pad are crowded with families and children. An ice cream truck is coming down the street. Fabian sees one of his players from the Uptown Eagles – the program has about 170 neighborhood kids ages 5-15 – and waves him over.

Youth sports programs like the Uptown Eagles, the community basketball league, and the neighborhood soccer team that the University Area CDC's Get Moving! program launched in partnership with nonprofit Casa Chiapas Tampa give neighborhood kids something positive to do and bring the community together for games, Fabian says.

Whether it's the development of Harvest Hope Park or the affordable housing, wellness, cultural arts, and job training and placement programs designed to improve the quality of life for the neighborhood's residents, Fabian, who now serves on the University Area CDC board, says all the nonprofit's initiatives share a common goal – bringing the community together. It may be the most important thing the organization does, he says.

"This park has been a gathering place and a blessing for us," Fabian says while walking through Harvest Hope. "It's the UACDC that brings it all together. Thank God we have people actually helping us get to where we need to be."

“A community that needs champions”

Back in 2010, Combs was the Tampa area director of Best Buddies, an international nonprofit that works with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“I had our fundraising down. We had a good board together. Everything was set. Everything was rocking and rolling,” she recalls. “Then somebody reached out to me about this organization called the University Area CDC. I was so perplexed because I live in New Tampa, and I had driven on Fletcher (Avenue) so many times, and I had no idea where they were talking about. Where was this hidden community? So I wasn’t really interested in a position there. But I told them I would meet with them because I was so curious about this community. I just felt I needed to see where this community was. I drove into the community and, boy, did I see the need. It just felt like this community had been frozen in time. But I saw the opportunity. I said, ‘Oh my goodness. This is a community that really needs champions. This is a community that needs someone to love and care for it and advocate for it.’ That turned into me accepting a position.”



Provided by University Area CDC

Sarah Combs

She started as director of programs. Within a year, she was on her first stint as interim CEO and executive director. But she did not apply to fill the post on a permanent basis because she was pregnant with her first child. The University Area CDC recruited a new CEO from Pennsylvania, and Combs became the chief operating officer. A couple of years later, that CEO left. Combs was once again the interim CEO and executive director. This time, she was pregnant with twins.

“I had a decision to make, but it was not an option,” Combs says. “I was definitely going for it.”

Former board member Gene Marshall was chairman when the board selected Combs as CEO and executive director.

“We noticed her potential when she was chief operating officer,” he says. “Her performance in that role was stellar. She stood out.”

Marshall says in Combs, the organization had a leader who was committed, disciplined, skilled at planning and execution, and “a rather innovative thinker who was not afraid to try new stuff.”

Getting out in the community

After multiple stints as interim CEO and executive director, Combs took the permanent position in early 2015. Going in, she already had her first move planned out.

“I didn’t need to study anything,” she says. “I knew what we needed to do. We needed to get out to the community and talk to our residents. We needed to get out from behind our wrought iron fences. We gathered up our staff and we said, ‘Boots on the ground, tennis shoes and t-shirts, we are going to talk with our residents, to learn from them, to understand who they are, to understand their struggles, to understand their experiences, and to understand their strengths.’ That was incredibly important for us. We didn’t have time to waste.”

Staff rode buses with residents and sat in their living rooms and talked with them. The community’s input struck a chord.

“What we heard from residents was this power imbalance,” Combs says. “We do what we’re told

by whoever is in power, and rarely is it anyone who looks like us. We live in a community that wants to keep us down.' That's what we heard over and over and over again. And in a community that has about 95 percent renters, that's what it was. You just don't know when the rug's going to be pulled. We said we have to focus on how we shift this power imbalance. That was clear. The residents told us. 'We want to own the dirt. We want to have a say in what's built in this community and how it changes.'"

From there, community input guided community improvements.

"For me, as a community development organization, we should be making change in the community," Combs says. "We had the services at the center, but there wasn't anything happening in the community in terms of community development. So that's what we did. And that piece was so incredibly important."

Building trust, building the community

The University Area CDC launched Harvest Hope Properties in 2017 and started buying up land in the community for the community. The initial plan for the first big acquisition, those seven acres in the heart of the community with the area's highest crime stats, was to build affordable housing.

"The community wanted a park, a gathering place," Combs says.

Unlike an affordable housing complex, a private park would not bring in any income.

"In fact, it would create an operating deficit for us because a park is expensive," Combs says.

She went to her board, which turned down the idea and said to go to Hillsborough County, developing a park is the business of county government. County officials said no. Combs went back to her board, concerned about losing the trust of a community stung before by "drive-by philanthropy." An organization comes in and makes promises that are never delivered, surveys the community "to death," and then pulls out of the area, Combs says.

"I said to our board, 'We have to do this for our community,'" Combs says. "It's the only way we're going to build trust, giving them something.' And giving them a park is how we started to be a catalyst for change and transformation. If you can create an opportunity to change a narrative, that's how you begin to build trust."

The board told Combs to find funding for the park. She did, through a Hillsborough County Community Development Block Grant and private fundraising.



Blue Sky Communities

Uptown Sky is a collaboration between the University Area CDC and affordable housing developer Blue Sky Communities.

Attainable and affordable housing has been another priority during Combs' tenure. The University Area CDC bought land across the street from Harvest Hope Park and entered a partnership with fellow nonprofit Habitat for Humanity, which built 10 single-family homes, creating opportunities for home ownership. Other affordable housing initiatives include Sound & Secure Housing, a modular home ownership pilot program for single moms that launched in 2018, and Uptown Sky, a 61-unit apartment community developed in partnership with affordable housing developer Blue Sky Communities. Plans for University Townhomes, a community of energy-efficient, attainable townhomes, are also in the works.

Safety-focused infrastructure improvements in a neighborhood with significant pedestrian and bike traffic include new sidewalks and street lighting. The University Area CDC has also focused

on getting residents still on well water and old septic systems hooked up to clean water and sewer.

"It's hard to believe that a couple of miles from a preeminent university, you have some people living in third-world conditions," Combs says.

The community nonprofit's advocacy has produced results. A free Hillsborough County program converts properties from septic to sewer and hooks them up to City of Tampa water service.

Board member Leon Paige, a retired Hillsborough County Sheriff's lieutenant who patrolled the area when it was plagued by crime and drugs, says Combs' approach to community-building gets buy-in from residents. They begin to see the neighborhood as the place where they live, not the place where they stay, Paige says.

"Sarah talks about the investment in the area," Paige says. "If you have people with something they've invested in, they take care of it. The things out there are not there because they are what the board of the UACDC wants. They are what the people who live in the community want. That's what Sarah has tried to do."

Launching, expanding programs

Community health and wellness initiatives are another priority in an area identified as a food desert. Launched in 2016, the Get Moving! wellness program includes exercise, nutrition, organized sports, educational classes, and even line dancing for seniors. There's the community garden at Harvest Hope Park and free cooking classes, including "The Sauce: Young Chefs in the Making," designed for youth ages 7 to 14.

"And when you get into those programs, you meet other residents, you start to form community," Combs says. "That is so important. This community has a support system like no other community I have ever seen. They might not have a lot of money, but they have these relationships that are just incredible. I think we can learn so much from this community."



University Area CDC Facebook

The Get Moving! program's inaugural youth football camp in July 2024 featured Tampa Bay Bucs players Calijah Kancey, Tykee Smith, and Rachaad White.

Marshall, the former board member and chair, says Combs "also enhanced the programs that she inherited."

One example is Steps for Success. Combs shifted the program away from providing rental and utility assistance and increased the focus on helping people become self-sustaining, Marshall says.

"It's similar to the old adage, 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime,'" Marshall says.

"A blessing"

The University Area CDC has grown into a unique nonprofit under Combs' leadership, Paige says.

"Anything you can name to help that community, there's a program there doing it," he says. "Community development corporations are abundant. But one as diverse as UACDC, you'd be hard-pressed to find it. How many of those organizations have land banking programs? And it all started with Sarah."

As Combs departs, she's grateful for the opportunities and experiences of the last 15 years.

"It has been such a blessing, honestly, to work with the change agents we have at UACDC and to witness the transformational change in the community," she says. "Not many people get to say that they've had the opportunity to truly see a community change for the better. I've been able to witness that firsthand. I feel incredibly fortunate to be able to have this amazing opportunity to lead this great organization and be able to witness firsthand what dedication, love, kindness, and hard work can do for a community, and the lives that have been changed. I have profound gratitude for all that this community has given me, all that I've learned. To take that moving forward is just a blessing."

This story is produced through an underwriting agreement between the University Area Community Redevelopment Corporation and 83 Degrees Media.

For more information, go to UACDC



Read more articles by Christopher Curry.

Chris Curry has been a writer for the 83 Degrees Media team since 2017. Chris also served as the development editor for a time before assuming the role of managing editor in May 2022. Chris lives in Clearwater. His professional career includes more than 15 years as a newspaper reporter, primarily in Ocala and Gainesville, before moving back home to the Tampa Bay Area. He enjoys the local music scene, the warm winters and Tampa Bay's abundance of outdoor festivals and events. When he's not working or spending time with family, he can frequently be found hoofing the trails at one of Pinellas County's nature parks.

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