

Miami Herald

Passion for family and Florida's children drive this year's Sand in My Shoes award winner

By Howard Cohen | February 26, 2022



David Lawrence Jr., center, reacts during a press conference where Governor Ron DeSantis (not photographed) signed bills revamping Florida's literacy and early childhood learning in West Miami Middle School in Miami, Florida, on May 4, 2021.
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Since retiring from his position as publisher of the Miami Herald in 1999, David Lawrence Jr. has spent the ensuing decades striving for Florida's children to have expanded access to health insurance, education and literacy.

So retired is probably not the best word to attach to Lawrence, who tirelessly advocates for early childhood development and serves on numerous boards.

For his accomplishments, Lawrence's decades — plus one year — of civic mindedness coalesced into a major honor. Lawrence, chair of the Children's Movement of Florida, is the recipient of the prestigious 2022 Sand in My Shoes award from the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. The honor is given to individuals who demonstrate exceptional public service in the metro Miami-Dade area.

SAND IN MY SHOES AWARD

Lawrence, a trustee of Barry University, author and a key figure in passing a statewide constitutional amendment to provide pre-kindergarten for all 4-year-olds, will be the 41st recipient of the Sand in My Shoes award. The first was given in 1981 to the late Lester Freeman, a Southern Bell Telephone and Greater Miami Chamber executive.

Previous Sand in My Shoes recipients from the Chamber have included Penny Shaffer, the most recent in 2020, along with Brian E. Keeley, Gloria and Emilio Estefan, Harve A. Mogul, Eduardo J. Padrón, Jorge Pérez, Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin and Congressmen Dante Fascell and William Lehman.

"I'm deeply appreciative of all of this," said Lawrence, who turns 80 next week — four days after receiving the award.

"I know there are an extraordinary number of people in this community who deserve to be honored and celebrated and so forth. I do fundamentally believe that people ought to be celebrated before they die. And life can go very quickly," he said in an interview with the Miami Herald, the daily he served for 10 years.

After retiring from the newspaper business, Lawrence went on to establish voluntary pre-K funding for children in Florida, the Children's Trust and the Children's Movement of Florida, which fund and advocate for children and early developmental initiatives.

"The Chamber is truly honored to recognize David's exemplary dedication and far-reaching vision in serving his community and our children," said Alfred Sanchez, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce.



Former Miami Herald publisher David Lawrence Jr. (left) with his predecessor Richard Capen, who was publisher from 1983 to 1989, in downtown Miami Omni's Whitehall room during the announcement of Lawrence's appointment to publisher in a July 1989 file photo. Marice Cohn Band MIAMI HERALD FILE

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

Actually, Lawrence is the 2021 recipient. But last year's ceremony was postponed a year due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. So Lawrence will be feted Tuesday evening at the JW Marriot Marquis Miami at a sold-out dinner gala that will feature a presentation from Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava and a performance by New World School of the Arts.

The Sand in My Shoes gala, which usually hosts more than 900 guests, functions in hybrid fashion for its 2022 edition.

"I am so tired of the pandemic. Though I have been out, myself, for months and months and months and months and months because I cannot really stand to be without regular contact with other people. And I have not found the pandemic a substantial barrier to being with other people," the now Zoom-knowledgeable namesake of North Miami's David Lawrence Jr. K-8 Center said.

"But this is one of the events in Miami where people will be back together with 500 people actually present — but socially distant — and then another 500 or so who will be

essentially on the equivalent of Zoom,” he said. “I’ve been in Miami for 33 years and I think I’ve gone every single year to Sand in My Shoes. So to be there with a lot of people I know, and a lot of people I love and a lot of people I’ve worked with, is something very special in my life.”

FAMILY TIES

Adding to that glow, 16 members of Lawrence’s family — which include his wife Roberta, five children and their spouses and seven grandchildren — are to attend.

“And so this will be, for me, a family occasion with all of us gathering. There’s no one time more special to me than when our whole family is together,” Lawrence said.

The number would be 17, but the couple’s eldest child, son David, slipped on the ice in Brooklyn a few weeks back and has a herniated disc. “Painful for him and painful, frankly, for me because I wanted everybody here for this,” Lawrence said.



Children’s Movement of Florida and Sand in My Shoes recipient David Lawrence Jr. in Beijing, China, in 2002, with his wife Roberta “Bobbie” Lawrence. Monique Stephens

Perhaps the most special guest at Lawrence's table will be his wife, whom everyone affectionately calls Bobbie.

"I owe her so much," Lawrence said. "Bobbie and I have been married now for 58 years. I love my wife more than I did on Dec. 21, 1963, when we were married on the very day that I was graduating from the University of Florida. I didn't go to graduation. I didn't go to commencement. I went instead to a wedding at the Church of the Little Flower in Coral Gables."

Several years ago, Bobbie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. "She's doing pretty well. We also believe that we are more blessed and fortunate than many people and one of the pluses of the pandemic, if you will, is that I have fairly easily been able to spend more time at home," her husband said.

A DIFFICULT DECISION

But in his role as Bobbie's caretaker, Lawrence had to make a difficult decision this February. The Florida A&M University trustee announced he was stepping down from the FAMU board after serving six years.

"In some ways Florida A&M has been the single favorite board that I can remember being on. And I've come to know how important it is and what a difference it makes. But the meetings mostly are in Tallahassee and I do not want to attend board meetings by Zoom if I can avoid it. I need to be present. And it was just unrealistic because the two of us, my wife and I, would need to be together. But I didn't want her sitting in a hotel room for two days while I was attending board meetings," Lawrence said.

"That's why I turned the page on that because I have no other real option. I'll continue to contribute to Florida A&M in a bunch of different ways but I don't want to be on boards that I can't give full attention to and cannot be literally present," he said.

In a statement posted to the FAMU website, Trustees Chairman Kelvin Lawson said of Lawrence: "Your commitment and generosity to Florida A&M University as well as FAMU Developmental Research School have been outstanding. During your time on the board you have made a positive impact and have truly cultivated relationships that will help FAMU for years to come. We will always consider you a part of our family."

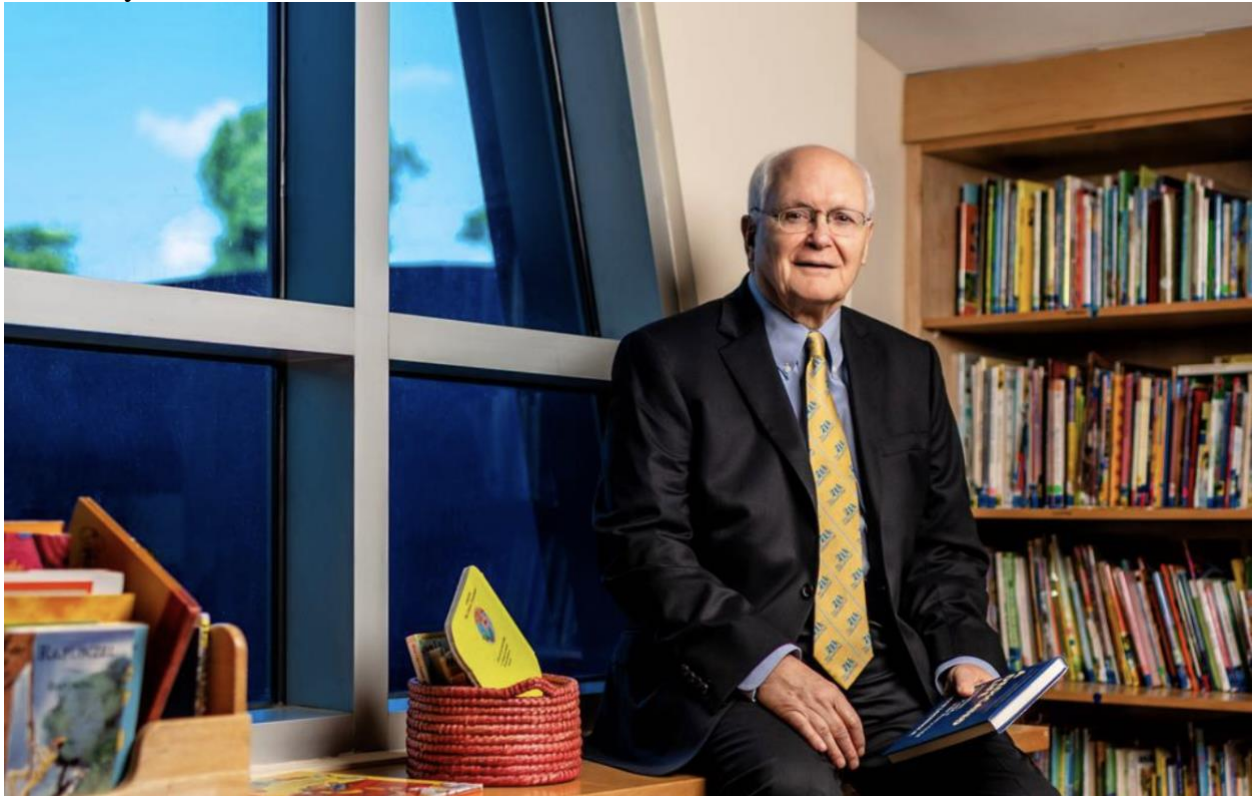
'A PASSIONATE PERSON'

That word "family" seems key in understanding Lawrence and why the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce chose him to be the recipient of the Sand in My Shoes honor.

"Dave is a passionate and caring person who always gives his all and demands others do the same," Chamber President Sanchez said. "During a time in life when most others would spend relaxing and enjoying the fruits of his life's labors, David instead chose to spend his retirement years making sure our children develop enriched lives. Because of

his work in nurturing our future leaders, Dave has helped to guaranteed a more vibrant, resilient, and successful future Miami.”

“South Florida without Dave would be a much sadder place, especially for children,” Sanchez said. “So many people from different generations consider Dave a mentor and credit him with much of their success. I know I do. And not only has he been my mentor, but when my daughters grew up, he became their mentors too. I know this same story is shared by countless other families.”



David Lawrence Jr., recipient of the 2022 Sand in My Shoes award from the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, is the author of the 2018 memoir, “A Dedicated Life: Journalism, Justice and a Chance for Every Child.” NICK GARCIA



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