



Mistakes doom Jaguars in loss to the Ravens

SPORTS, 1C

The Florida Times-Union

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Pope OKs blessings for couples of same sex

Nicole Winfield and David Crary
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ROME – Pope Francis has formally approved allowing priests to bless same-sex couples, with a new document explaining a radical change in Vatican policy by insisting that people seeking God’s love and mercy shouldn’t be subject to “an exhaustive moral analysis” to receive it.

The document from the Vatican’s doctrine office, released Monday, elaborates on a letter Francis sent to two conservative cardinals that was published in October. In that response, Francis suggested such blessings could be offered under some circumstances if they didn’t confuse the ritual with the sacrament of marriage.

The new document repeats that condition and elaborates on it, reaffirming that marriage is a lifelong sacrament between a man and a woman. And it stresses that blessings in question must be non-liturgical in nature and should not be conferred at the same time as a civil union, using set

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Power

Ziegler

Florida GOP votes to strip Chair Ziegler of authority

Zac Anderson
Sarasota Herald-Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Florida GOP on Sunday began the process of removing Chair Christian Ziegler amid a sexual assault allegation, with the party’s executive board voting during an emergency meeting to censure the chair, strip his authority and reduce his salary to \$1.

The board also voted to hold a meeting of the party’s full governing body on Jan. 8 in Tallahassee, when a vote is

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JASMYN’S CEO WATSON RETIRES



Cindy Watson, photographed last month, is inside JASMYN’s Watson House that was the first of three properties the organization acquired and is now named after her. BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION

Built ‘safe space’ for gay Jacksonville youth

Beth Reese Cravey Jacksonville Florida Times-Union | USA TODAY NETWORK

They asked if she could help. A handful of people in Jacksonville had formed a support group for gay, lesbian and questioning youths. It was 1994 and hostility toward them was rampant. Cindy Watson, then a legal assistant for Jacksonville Area Legal Aid, knew from personal experience as

a gay woman what they were up against. Thirty years later, she has built that tiny support group into a prominent advocacy nonprofit, the Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network or JASMYN. Based at a

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Watson

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three-building campus near Five Points, JASMYN has grown its budget from \$20,000 to \$2.5 million and has a fervent board of directors, staff and alumni group.

Every year it provides a range of services for about 1,000 members of the local LGBTQIA+ — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual — community and has become a best-practices model for other similar youth centers.

With JASMYN at a “peak,” Watson, 66, plans to retire Dec. 31 as founding CEO.

“One does not look at JASMYN and not see Cindy Watson’s fingerprints on every aspect of this dynamic, life-saving organization,” board chairman Blake Osner said. “Cindy has helped build an organization that not only thrives today but is poised for exponential growth and resiliency.”

Barbra Kavanaugh of South Florida, part of the Interim Executive Network in Washington, D.C., has been named interim CEO. But Watson said she will remain part of the organization’s army of advocates.

“We have more community support than we have ever had,” despite recent “top-down” state government efforts to remove hard-won rights, she said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

Escape routes from the Deep South

Watson was raised in rural Six Mile, S.C., part of a Southern Baptist family. She did not identify as a lesbian until well into adulthood, but even in her younger years she felt the Deep South, small-town environment oppressive.

“Expectations, stereotyping, very rigid,” she said.

Watson initially aspired to be a teacher because she “wanted to help young people.” But at nearby Furman University she became “more interested in why people believed everything they did” and obtained a psychology degree instead, she said.

Armed with her psychology degree, she joined VISTA, or Volunteers in Service to America, a federal program that sent members to work on anti-poverty projects and assist local organizations throughout the country for a year. VISTA later became part of AmeriCorps.

“I just needed to get out of the South, to see things, experience things,” she said.

Watson ended up in the Alaskan town of Kotzebue, home to one of the largest populations of Alaska Natives in the state. She worked at a battered women’s shelter, in a place where “the system did not work to protect women,” she said.

“I had a terrific experience. I learned how to be with ... people who were really different than myself,” she said. “There were lot of people wanting to make changes. I could do something, I could make a difference.”

She signed up for a second year in Alaska, then headed across the country again to Vermont to lead Umbrella Inc., an agency that serves women and families. By that time, she had become a community organizer.

“It’s not about you. A community has to have agents of change, you are the catalyst,” she said.

After eight years at Umbrella, she headed south again and went to work at Jacksonville Area Legal Aid. She was a legal assistant and part of her role was being a health care advocate working with HIV/AIDS clients.

In the 1980s, human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV infection, the contributor to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS, “emerged as a leading cause of death” transmitted among young adults in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Because of AIDS and negative community attitudes, the early 1990s was a “really challenging time” for the LGBTQ+ community, Watson said.

“It was my job to help them figure out how to die ... help people prepare their last documents,” she said. “Some of those people are still deep in my heart. They had a bad blow in life.”

Still, they wanted to “be who they were and take care of their families,” she said.

Watson had already decided to be who she was in her personal life. While in Vermont, she met attorney Garnett Harrison, divorced her husband and claimed her identity as a lesbian. She and her now wife have been married 33 years.

So when the fledging Jacksonville support group sought her help in 1994, she quickly agreed. She wanted to build a positive force for the gay community.

“It was a hostile environment, people did not want you to be out,” she said. “I know people who lost their jobs, lost



Retiring JASMYN CEO Cindy Watson, center, with some of the people that helped her build the LGBTQ+ advocacy nonprofit: Edi Castro; Ernie Selorio Jr.; Dan Merkan and Laura Lane. PHOTOS BY BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION



The JASMYN Connects building, which opened in 2020, provides housing support services, hot meals, showers, a food pantry, lunch, mental health services and a cyber center for LGBTQ+ youth. It is the third house added to the JASMYN complex in Riverside.



The communal area inside the JASMYN Connects house, part of three-building campus that serves nearly 1,000 LGBTQ+ youth in Jacksonville youth each year.

their families.”

How to build an LGBTQ+ nonprofit from scratch

Twelve adult supporters, all volunteers, led JASMYN in its first four years. They raised money, sought grants and spoke publicly. The youth built a website. In 1998 Watson was officially hired as its first CEO.

“It was still very challenging, but other like-minded people came around,” she said.

When JASMYN received the first state Department of Health grant for HIV prevention, “people targeted us because we got that funding,” she said. “We just kept doing our work, didn’t make a big splash.”

In 1999, the Jaguars Foundation, which focused on children and youth programs, began awarding grants to JASMYN. Team co-owner Delores Barr Weaver, a prominent Jacksonville philanthropist, supported the nonprofit through her personal fund as well. Having the backing of an NFL team and its co-owner was a “turning point,” Watson said.

Other funders followed. As JASMYN expanded its services, the campus expanded as one neighboring house, then another, was donated.

The current JASMYN has a drop-in center, youth development programs, family support, mental health counseling, HIV testing, an onsite STD clinic and case management and services for homeless youth. And it works in the community “nurturing gay/straight alliances in schools, supporting corporate

and community diversity and inclusion, providing LGBTQ+ diversity training and advocating for a safe community that promotes equality and human rights,” according to JASMYN.

Watson also advocated as a member of the city’s Human Rights Commission. She encouraged the panel to study the impacts of discrimination on the LGBTQIA+ community, which led to a recommendation that Jacksonville’s nondiscrimination laws be updated to add “sexual orientation, gender identity or expression” to the protected classes, according to Dan Merkan, JASMYN’s chief policy officer.

In 2012, the Jacksonville City Council voted the idea down; in 2017, it passed.

“Then we really saw the tide turn, there was a lot of support,” Watson said. The LGBTQ+ community, she said, is “just regular folks like everyone else. ... They just want to live their lives.”

One of the youth who received JASMYN support was Christina Guiriba, a young transgender woman who later became a staff member and founded her own nonprofit, Transcending Adolescence, that offers summer camps to teach coping skills to struggling transgender youth.

“Cindy’s legacy lives on through the young people she’s empowered,” she said. “The majority of our staff have faced their own challenges as LGBTQ people. Cindy’s fortitude to keep JASMYN alive impacted our community beyond measure. ... Her presence and guidance have personally lifted my mind, spirit, and ambitions from my time as a JASMYN youth to right here, right now.”

JASMYN

To donate, seek help or get more information, contact JASMYN at P.O. Box 2973, Jacksonville, FL 32203; (904) 389-3857; jasmyn@jasmyn.org; facebook.com/JASMYNJAX or go to jasmyn.org.

Watson’s quiet but strong presence was key to JASMYN’s growth and the improved community attitudes, said Laura Lane, an early volunteer and JASMYN board member.

“She is a leader a lot of people look to,” she said. “She is comfortable and she makes other people comfortable. She is able to move in a lot of circles.”

Watson would “introduce herself as a professional lesbian,” Lane said. “That would get a laugh. ... She has a humanity, never in your face. You know that you’re welcome.”

Edith Castro was also an early volunteer and board member.

“Cindy is great at bringing people together — businesses, other nonprofits, corporate partners, Jacksonville health community, mental health experts ... and sharing her expertise about young people’s needs, and her passion for safe space and advocacy,” Castro said. That passion, she said, “created a network of support.”

Watson’s “greatest impact ... was bringing light to the challenges our LGBTQIA+ youth,” she said.

Merkan came to JASMYN in 1999 from Missouri to become AIDS prevention program coordinator. The early days were difficult, with limited resources and few other agencies willing to accept referrals for services JASMYN did not provide, he said.

“Many organizations wouldn’t even acknowledge they had LGBTQIA+ youth in their care or were openly hostile to them,” Merkan said. Watson created a “vehicle for change,” he said.

“Prior to JASMYN’s creation, the only LGBTQIA+ spaces for young adults tended to be bars, and teens really had nowhere safe to go to meet or feel supported,” he said. “Over time JASMYN helped create safer places throughout the city by helping businesses, schools and service providers become safer and more inclusive places.”

Her impact on the LGBTQ+ community cannot be overstated, Merkan said.

“Cindy founded JASMYN at a time where the LGBTQIA+ community was mostly unseen or unsupported,” he said. “We have raised a generation of LGBTQIA+ youth who have experienced at least a few safe places where they felt supported and accepted for who they are. ... Many lives will be saved because of it.”

‘We have been innovators’

A few years ago, Watson survived two battles with cancer. She was not ready to retire — “I was not done,” she said — but later decided 2023 was the time to “step back and move on.”

One of her greatest joys has been seeing former JASMYN youth, who “struggled to know who they were, didn’t have support,” return to see her as they build successful, happy lives.

“It’s been an amazing experience,” Watson said. “Leading JASMYN ... has been a joyful journey with many battles and even more accomplishments many did not think possible. We have been innovators. I know JASMYN and this incredible community have much greater things to achieve together.”

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