

# Group aims to build hope for most vulnerable kids

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ST. LUCIE WEST – During the past 6 months, nearly 300 children have been removed from homes in St. Lucie, Martin, Indian River and Okeechobee counties. Most of them are 5 years old and under and they have been removed because of abuse and neglect.

For children who are removed, placement may take up to 24 hours. Traumatized children may have to stay in state offices or with case managers until placement in a safe, stable home is made. Right now, there is no temporary emergency location for maltreated youngsters who are brought into care. Offices may be safe but they are not equipped to deal with the physical and emotional needs of these frightened, vulnerable children.

Now, some help is on the way. The non-profit Guardians for New Futures has launched Sanctuary4Kids and set a goal of \$400,000



Photo courtesy of Guardians for New Futures

Phil Petruzzelli, Mark Montalto and Thomas Milone (not pictured), of Port St. Lucie Properties meet with Gus the dragon, mascot for Sanctuary4Kids, to chat about the planned emergency home for abused and neglected children. The Sanctuary will provide a 'soft landing' for kids while they await a stable home placement. The organization Guardians for New Futures, whose dream the sanctuary is, hopes to have it up and running by September.

for the construction of a sustainable emergency shelter for these children. More than \$200,000 has been raised since November and they are preparing to close on a lot in St. Lucie West, central to the four counties that will be served.

Port St. Lucie Properties is helping the organization plan the Sanctuary and bring it in within budget. Guardians for New Futures is working with Devereux Community Based Care, the Department of Children and Families and other organizations to help share operating costs.

The Sanctuary will accommodate up to six children. Its central location is necessary because children may have to be removed at night. Debbie Butler, president of the board of directors of Guardians for New Futures, said that it's heartbreaking when a

child is removed at night, often during a drug bust and there is no place to take the child.

"Once the child is removed, they have to go to the DCF office," she said. "There was no place for the child, so the child has to go to the office. This is a place where they can go for a 'soft landing,' with clean pjs and people that understand."

The plan is to create a home, available around-the-clock, for newborns to teens. They will be able to take a bath or shower, get a good meal, clean clothes and a safe place to sleep while being able to talk to care professionals, trained in trauma, who can help reduce the impact of what the child has already suffered. Debbie Butler hopes that with the help of the community, it will be up and

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running by September.

Butler noted that more than \$50,000 of the amount raised has come from the community.

"People know this needs to happen for the children," she said. "We're so blessed to be in such a loving and caring community."

Although cash donations are welcome, Butler has a bigger "wish list."

"I hope that businesses will open their inventory to furnish the house," she said. "(We need) things like trundle beds, a sofa and chairs, dishes, toys, rugs. It's so easy for an organization to pull from inventory and write it off."

As the age range is broad, the Sanctuary, will, in fact, need everything from diapers to toilet-tries to just about anything that will make a temporary accommodation seem like a home. The Sanctuary will work initially with two interior designers, but hope, eventually, to have one from each county with relationships with businesses who can help furnish and decorate.

The Sanctuary already has a mascot, Gus, a big green dragon, who travels with Butler as she makes presentations about the Sanctuary.

"He's on a mission to find and build the house," Butler said. "Then we're going to get him a

wife who's not a dragon. There will be wedding announcements and a registry for household items. They'll adopt and there will be a birth announcement and baby registry for things like diapers and bottles. It's a long-term way to keep people aware of the needs. This is a community project and our community is coming together to help these children. It's really heartwarming."

*For more information about Guardians for New Futures and the Sanctuary4Kids, visit the website [www.gfnf4kids.org](http://www.gfnf4kids.org). Donations can be made at the website or by sending a check to Guardians for New Futures, 546 N.W. University Blvd., Suite 203, Port St. Lucie,*



**Photo courtesy of GNF**  
Gus the dragon, mascot for the proposed Sanctuary4Kids, meets with members of his staff.

*FL 34986. Businesses wishing to donate items can email Debbie Butler at [dbutler@gfnf4kids.org](mailto:dbutler@gfnf4kids.org) or call her at (772) 359-2824.*