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***It takes a village***

Lotus Village, the innovative Overtown shelter for women and children experiencing homelessness, plans to build a five-story Children's Village focusing on mental health and education.

*In 2006, Constance Collins began Lotus House, a Miami shelter for women without a home that didn't feel like a homeless shelter. Now she is leading plans to build a complex to serve children in need.*



Lotus Village founder Constance Collins, far left, poses in the facility's hydroponic farm with director of guest services Georgette Madison, who initially came to the shelter for help.

hydroponic farm, where kids and their mothers harvest vegetables, herbs and lettuce used in the kitchen, which serves 365,000 made-from-scratch meals per year.

All of that makes Lotus Village different, but so does this even more critical measure of success: Collins cites an impressive exit rate of 80 percent. Of the 9,000 people who have stayed at Lotus Village, 7,200 have left the shelter system and made a home of their own.

Given that impact on so many lives and the surrounding community, Collins has adopted an even more audacious goal: The prevention of homelessness.

The majority of homeless adults experienced episodes of homelessness as children, research shows. Collins wants to break that intergenerational cycle. Her belief is that it can stop if children receive the therapeutic and educational support they need to overcome the trauma and stress they have endured.

"We can change the direction of their lives at the most formative stage," Collins said. "We're investing in their future and the future of Miami."

The Children's Village will fill a gap in the Lotus Village continuum of care — for kids from age 3 to 18, preschool through high school. Collins realized during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many kids were not attending in-person school but were essentially home-schooled at Lotus, that Lotus was not equipped to address the needs of kids beyond daycare age. Lotus needed more space, more programs, more staff. The Children's Village will be the next step in the evolution of the original Lotus House.

## The next step in a woman's bold rescue mission

BY LINDA ROBERTSON  
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Lotus House began as one woman's personal mission to rescue women who had nowhere else to go. Back in 2006, there were just 34 beds in a decrepit Overtown apartment building that founder Constance Collins bought and renovated with her own money.

It didn't look or operate like a homeless shelter. For those who came to the doorstep desperate, scared and hungry, it felt like a home.

Since then, Lotus House has grown into Lotus Village, a five-story complex on Northwest 15th Street with 500 beds for women and children. Now, she and the non-profit Lotus Endowment Fund have announced plans for another expansion with the construction of a five-story Children's Village focused on education and mental health. They aim to raise \$20 million to build it.

Collins' revolutionary philosophy hasn't changed. She's always been committed to an

audacious goal: The elimination of homelessness.

At Lotus Village, those seeking refuge are called guests, because here, there are no homeless people, only people experiencing homelessness — a tempo-

rary setback.

Here, nobody sleeps on the floor. There's a family room and a playroom and a playground and a library full of books and computers. There's a meditation, yoga and dance room, next

to the Zen garden. There's an arts and activities lab for painting, crafting and ceramics. Walls and spaces are adorned with world-class art and sculptures, donated by a preeminent collector. There's a

### A CAREER SHIFT THAT STUNNED HER FRIENDS

It started 15 years ago when Collins, 63, gave up a lucrative career as a real estate investment company executive and attorney to buy a rundown building in Overtown. Her friends called her crazy. She chose the name Lotus and the motto "where hope blossoms" because she was inspired by the spirit of hope that flourished in her guests despite their hopeless circumstances.

"Our mission is to heal, strengthen and uplift," said Collins, a full-time volunteer. "These women and children have suffered unimaginable terror and deprivation, and struggled to survive as invisible members of our society."

"We're giving them the resources and compassion they need in a safe, shared community to rebuild their lives and recapture their aspirations."

Lotus Village, which opened in 2018, is the largest shelter in the country dedicated to women and children. Inside, the vibe is welcoming and the design is anti-institutional. There's a serenity zone. There's a health clinic and a wellness center with daycare classrooms and therapy offices. A recording studio, where kids made a "Wash Your Hands" video that went viral during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Healing Hands Salon, "where, coming off the streets, everyone can feel human again," said stylist Scarlett E. Miller, who teaches classes on skin, hair and nail care.

There's a clothing closet and baby supplies; Lotus Village goes through 100,000 diapers per year. Lots of strollers in the



CARL JAYNE / QUOTEGRAPHIC.COM

Darwin Lopez, 2, looks toward his mother, Teresa Lopez, 19, during parent-child interaction therapy. The leaders of Lotus Village plan to raise \$20 million to add a five-story Children's Village focusing on education and mental health.

SEE LOTUS, 6A



Photo Gallery:  
Overtown's  
Lotus Village  
planning  
expansion

Lotus Village is an Overtown shelter for homeless women and children, that plans to build a 5-story Children's Village focusing on mental health and education.



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halls.

"How are you?" said one mom greeting another with twins.

"Blessed," she replied.

At the farm, located inside a freight container, kids learn gardening skills.

"Is this science?" asked a first-grader planting seeds with tweezers.

"Yes, this is science," said Jackie Roth, director of innovation and programming, explaining how arugula grows.

### 580,000 HOMELESS IN U.S. EACH NIGHT

On any given night, the homeless population in the United States is about 580,000, according to the most recent full point-in-time census by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Estimates vary depending on methodology, but another count by the National Homelessness Law Center reports that 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness in a year. Seventy percent of homeless Americans are individuals and 30 percent are people living in families with children.

In Miami-Dade County, about 3,355 people are homeless, according to the county's Homeless Trust census on Aug. 19, 2021.

The affordable housing crisis — Miami surpassed New York this year as the most expensive market for renters or buyers relative to income — as well as increased rates of domestic violence during the pandemic drove the number of people seeking assistance at Lotus Village higher than ever, Collins said. In 2021, the village sheltered 1,550 people. It's up to 800 through the first third of 2022.

"Homelessness is an intractable problem if we

convince ourselves it's an intractable problem and lack the will to solve it," she said. "What isn't effective is clinging to stereotypes, then giving those with the least the least and blaming them when it doesn't work. We've created a standard of care that actually works."

What works at Lotus Village is time: The average stay is six months. Some guests stay up to a year. Many shelters that are chronically short of beds operate as revolving doors. According to HUD, 60 percent of people stay less than a month and 33 percent stay less than a week.

"You can't heal in a rush, you can't heal putting a Band-Aid on a deep wound," Collins said. "You can't treat children like baggage in tow. You need sanctuary, your own bed, time to reflect. Think about losing your home. How do you even begin to recover? It's complicated."

Repeated exposure to trauma — violence, sexual abuse, neglect, addiction, crime, bullying, separation from a parent, death of a relative, friend or neighbor, homelessness — has a cumulative effect that drains resilience, and 75 percent of children cannot put it behind them without therapy, said Florida International University psychology professor Paulo Graziano, who has conducted groundbreaking studies at Lotus Village. Unresolved trauma can lead to cognitive impairment, mental illness, substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships and violent behavior.

"It's easier to build a strong child than to repair a broken grownup," said Georgette Madison, 35, a Lotus House alumna. She was homeless as a child with her siblings in Little Haiti, sneaking into a school at night to sleep,

eating food out of dumpsters. She found herself homeless again as an adult. Fleeing domestic violence with her 6-year-old daughter, she got their lives back on track at Lotus, where she now works as director of guest services.

"Children need to process the pain, fear and shame so that they are not carrying around anger and frustration that can wreck you forever," Madison said. "Imagine a child always seeing mom get beat up. Our kids have to navigate this world with self-belief and self-confidence, not feeling like they have to hide or fight."

Madison praised the therapy sessions she and her daughter, Alana Johnson, had at Lotus, and the tutoring her daughter received. She showed a photo on her phone of her daughter's straight-A report card.

"I remember my childhood being out of control, uncertainty from day to day," Madison said. "Kids need routine and stability to thrive."

Sharonée Delevante arrived at Lotus Village "big and pregnant and on the run from a dangerous domestic violence situation." Today, she and her 3-year-old son, Jonathan Jackson Jr., live in Little Havana and she is the Village's operations director.

"That was not my first shelter experience. There is nothing like Lotus out there," she said. "I needed Lotus badly and they welcomed me with open arms. It gave me everything I needed for my baby and then I was able to put him in daycare so I could get a job."

The Lotus Endowment Fund, of which Collins is president, purchased five lots a block south on Northwest 14th Terrace for \$3.5 million where the

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*It's easier to build a strong child than to repair a broken grownup.*

*Georgette Madison, a Lotus House alumna and current director of guest services at Lotus Village*

75,000-square-foot Children's Village will be built to collaborate with other community organizations to serve not only Lotus Village guests but also children from the surrounding neighborhood. A capital campaign is underway to raise \$20 million.

The building — which will feature exterior digital screens projecting photos of children — will have rooms for vocational education to supplement the training that takes place at Lotus Village and its thrift shop on Northwest Seventh Avenue for people who want jobs in the retail, culinary, barista, hospitality, child care or security fields.

There also will be rooms for after-school care, homework, tutoring, art, music, creative writing, computer learning. A much larger outdoor playground. There will be offices for social service agencies, nurses and what Collins says is the largest team of child and family therapists in the country — 18 professionals trained to address the needs of homeless people.

### THERAPY A KEY PART OF OVERALL PLAN

Therapy is at the core of the Lotus healing strategy. When Collins discovered that no substantive research had been done on what she calls the "forgotten population" of homeless children, she asked Professor Graziano at FIU to use Lotus Village as a real-world, real-time lab-

oratory to study which treatments are most effective.

"We want kids to play again and not worry about if they're going to eat, where they're going to sleep, if mom is safe from harm," Collins said. "One day at intake, a little boy was holding his mother's hand and she was crying. He said, 'Please give my mom a bed tonight.'"

Graziano, director of the Center for Children and Families at FIU and an expert in early intervention, has been working with Lotus for five years. He conducted the first and largest trial in a shelter setting evaluating two parenting programs, with 144 children aged 18 months to 5 years.

His second study, involving 321 children aged 6 and up, involved 10 weeks of teaching coping skills that substantially reduced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms such as insomnia, nightmares, flashbacks, irritability, sadness, jumpiness.

At Lotus, Graziano found serious behavior problems in 38 percent of the children (uncooperative, disruptive, impulsive, temper tantrums, hitting, biting, throwing toys) and developmental delays in 35 percent of the children (speech, toilet training, using a spoon, going to sleep). Both rates run four times higher than in the regular population.

"We know that by age 3 if those behavior problems

SEE LOTUS, 10A



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*I remember when we walked on the moon. There is no problem we cannot solve.*

**Lotus Village founder  
Constance Collins**

said. “It’s phenomenal to have the national leader in Miami. Thanks to Constance, her creativity and her commitment.”

When Sumberg first drove to the apartment building, “I told Constance, ‘This is going to be a disaster,’ ” he said.

“It was in horrible condition, the area was unsafe and the people in the neighborhood were skeptical, asking, ‘What does this white lady know?’ Nobody wants a homeless shelter nearby,” he said. “But she was right. She said everyone would see we were contributing something good to the community. And Lotus has really changed the neighborhood.”

Collins renovated a second apartment building and added mothers and children to the Lotus family. But when she proposed building Lotus Village for \$25 million, there were pessimists again. Some said she’d never raise the money. She did.

She tapped her connections and enlisted local firms to do work for free — such as the architects at Behar Font, the engineers at m2e, the builders at Civic Construction, the lawyers at Bilzin Sumberg. She sought out Miami’s philanthropists and found new donors. She used her financing knowledge. The village was finished on time and on budget and was named the Urban Land Institute’s 2018 Project of the Year.



## Lotus Village's founder gave up her successful business career: 'If I truly cared I had to act'

BY LINDA ROBERTSON  
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When she was a young girl visiting New York City, Constance Collins came upon a homeless woman bundled up against the cold, digging through trash in a dumpster for food.

"I thought, 'How can any one of us be happy when so many of us are suffering?'" she said.

Years later, when Collins was a high-powered real estate investment firm executive and attorney in Miami, she was inspecting a high-rise construction site when she came upon a homeless woman bathing in the building's new fountain.

"I knew if I truly cared I had to act," she said. "I would actually have to do something myself."

She decided to build a homeless shelter for women. She quit her job and with her own money bought a dilapidated, 50-year-old, three-story apartment building in Overtown. Somehow, with her characteristic attention to detail, pink and periwinkle paint and art donated by an art collector friend, she made it homey, inviting. Women living on the street, fearful of shelters primarily occupied by men, sought out Collins' safe space.

She named it Lotus House, "where hope blossoms."

Since then, 34-bed Lotus

House has been replaced by the 500-bed Lotus Village for women and children. The five-story complex on Northwest 15th Street is considered a national model given that 80 percent of its 1,550 guests in 2021 successfully exited the shelter system. The village offers daycare, medical care and therapeutic care and job training and placement. There are parenting classes and art, music, yoga, meditation and gardening programs.

Collins is now expanding again. She and the Lotus Endowment Fund announced plans to build the \$20 million, five-story Children's Village a block away where Lotus can devote more space and staff to education, enrichment, therapy and counseling programs for youth staying at Lotus and living in Overtown.

"Our kids and moms have experienced the impacts of racism, gender-based violence, disparities in access to education, healthcare and social justice," she said. "This is an opportunity to address those disparities and enable people to thrive."

Collins, 63, never imagined how big Lotus would grow. There's even a popular thrift shop. She points to her dedicated staff, her donors, her supporters in Miami and Lotus alumni who return to tell her about their college degrees, their jobs, their children, their homes.

They point to her, her vision, her compassion, her one-on-

one interactions, her mentorship and her genius for collaborative work.

Collins dislikes attention, deflects praise. She's a full-time volunteer, takes no salary. She would tell you her life is richer today wearing sneakers and a pink Lotus Village T-shirt while counting diapers than it was wearing business suits and cutting multimillion-dollar commercial real estate deals. She would tell you "there is no greater gift than to be in the service of people who need help."

Her approach to homelessness is typical of her no-nonsense style: "I remember when we walked on the moon. There is no problem we cannot solve."

John Sumberg, vice chair of the Lotus board and a Miami attorney, met Collins when she transferred a client to his firm. He asked her what she was doing. When she said she was leaving her lucrative career to build a homeless shelter, he was swept away by her dynamism. He was struck by her idea of calling women "guests" and creating an art-filled environment where skills training would accompany mental health treatment and meditation classes. He immediately volunteered to handle the land acquisition and zoning applications.

"You could call her an idealist, but she's made the Lotus approach work in the real world for the most vulnerable, underserved people," Sumberg

"So many cities think homelessness is an overwhelming problem that will take huge amounts of money to fix. But Constance has proven there is enough money to solve it," said Martin Margulies, the developer and art collector who has been Lotus' biggest benefactor. He and Collins were married briefly. They remain friends.

Collins is a hands-on leader, says her staff. It was her idea to conduct studies at Lotus Village comparing different types of parent-child and trauma therapies. She was appalled that no such research had been done with homeless children, so she contacted FIU psychology professor Paulo Graziano and offered Lotus Village as the perfect setting to do it.

"Constance was involved in every step, every sentence. She's even an author on it," Graziano said.

"Sometimes we had disagreements — no, the data doesn't say that so I can't write that — but always in a good spirit of teamwork. Most shelters won't cooperate on trials; it's too chaotic or their clients don't stay long enough. Constance understands how important it is to develop evidence-based treatment that works."

Born in Detroit, Collins graduated from Trinity College in Connecticut and earned her law degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder. When she's not at Lotus Village, she enjoys cycling, hiking, kayaking, beachcombing and "all things wilderness."

She stays centered via her daily meditation, which "is my refuge and reminds me to rest on the firm ground of emptiness."

Collins is driven by the hope of her guests and the generosity of Miami.

"I believe we exist to love," she said. "Being in service, ending homelessness, supporting, nurturing and uplifting women and children is simply about love."

## These women came to Lotus Village for help. Now, they're paying it forward

BY LINDA ROBERTSON  
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Three nights a week, Georgette Madison walks the streets of Miami and talks to homeless women. She knows where to find them because she was once among them.

Madison hands out food, shoes, hygiene packs and encouraging words. Her message is clear: "Come to Lotus Village. It will transform your life, as it did mine."

Madison, 35, checked into the original Lotus House with her 6-year-old daughter in 2013, fleeing domestic violence in her home. Today she is guest services director at the 500-bed Lotus Village in Overtown, the largest homeless shelter in the nation dedicated to women and children. She is one of two dozen alumni employed at the village and living on their own.

"We needed a safe place to go," she said. "I'd heard about Lotus. I'd seen their pink van. I didn't want to expose my daughter to a shelter for men. And I found out they had a culinary program."

Lotus provided everything Madison and daughter Alana Johnson needed, from homemade food to mental health therapy to after-school care to job skills training.

"I wanted structure to

restart my life," she said. "I wanted to work toward the goal of being a better person and giving a better future to my daughter."

Madison survived a harrowing childhood in Little Haiti.

"My mom was abusing drugs and had to give up her five kids," she said.

"Me and my twin brother were only 3 months old."

The children wound up in foster care, shuttling between different relatives' homes and then, for several years, on and off the streets.

"Sometimes we lived in motels or we slept in a school, always running from security," she said.

"We were dumpster diving, taking clothes out of collection bins. I remember being hungry and all we had to eat was baby food. We were constantly on the move."

An older sister managed to keep the siblings together until their mother got clean and regained custody. Life was stable until eight years ago, when she found herself at the threshold of Lotus House.

"It's a horrible, sickening feeling when you have no other options, when you've hit bottom and can't see a way out," she said. "I'm connected to these women and children on the street because I'm connected to my past. That's why I have a lot of

passion for outreach.

"There are so many wrong assumptions about people experiencing homelessness — that they choose to be homeless or it's their fault. They are overlooked or looked down upon. Everybody has a story. I want to know their stories."

Like Madison, Sharon Delevante escaped a domestic violence trap. She arrived at Lotus Village nearly eight months pregnant.

"I had contractions in my room, and after I gave birth, Lotus Village provided a crib, bottles, clothing, parenting classes, even therapy because my baby was premature," she said.

When she was hired months later as Lotus Village operations director, she placed her son, Jonathan Jackson Jr., in the village daycare center. He's now 3 years old, they're living in Little Havana and she hopes when the new Children's Village is up and running that he will be able to attend after-school programs there.

"To be a homeless child is so damaging. It's worse for them than the moms," Delevante said. "The Children's Village is needed to focus on kids' health and education."

Delevante, 34, had stayed at other homeless shelters before Jonathan was born. She chose Lotus



Lotus Village

— which has an 80 percent success rate for thousands of alumni who have exited the shelter system — for its stellar reputation.

"There's no comparison," she said. "I wanted to turn things around and do better. I've worked hard. I love my job and our team. We're making a difference."

Sharon Delevante was pregnant and fleeing domestic violence when she arrived at Lotus Village a few years ago. She later became the facility's operations director.





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The director of Lotus Village, Isabella Delloca, stands at far right with a young boy during an art class. A new building is being planned that will include additional rooms for subjects including art, music and creative writing classes for kids.

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are not treated, they will affect school readiness, and the children will not do as well in class, they're not following rules, the teacher doesn't like them, they have an immediate negative attitude toward school, and a downward trajectory of academic issues gets set by second grade," he said.

"So we work on self-regulation, your ability to control your emotions and behavior, to listen and focus and learn.

"Trauma is trickier to treat because the impairment gets worse as they get older but sometimes they are not ready to process it until they are teenagers."

Graziano also teaches parenting skills to Lotus mothers who may have had a rough childhood.

"Their reference points are not positive, so we

want to reverse those habits and show them a different way," he said. "If parents hit, then the kids are aggressive. If parents are negative, so are the kids."

At one recent interactive session at Lotus, a therapist guided young mother Teresa Lopez, 19, as she played with son Darwin, 2. She was encouraged to describe to him how they were going to build a tower out of blocks together, to say his name, talk about colors, give positive reinforcement. Darwin, withdrawn at first, was soon building in tandem with his mom. They smiled and hugged.

Graziano and Collins want to apply what they have learned and share it. Now that they have concrete data, they can tailor treatment and programming to be most effective. Graziano is preparing to embark on another study at Lotus Village, where — unlike at other shelters where he has inquired and

been turned away — participation by guests is mandatory.

## A NATIONAL NETWORK OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS

Collins has organized the National Women's Shelter Network and is developing a database on which she plans to disseminate Graziano's findings. The whole point of the network is to exchange ideas and find solutions.

"Lotus Village has become the leading national model showcasing best practices that other shelters look to as an example," said John Sumberg, a Miami attorney and vice chair of the Lotus board who has been involved with Collins from day one. "Lotus took a long-term, holistic approach to our most vulnerable people, not a holding-facility approach. And we've done it with innovative funding in a city without major corporate sponsors. If Miami can do it, Los Angeles and New York can do it."

Cities and states cite cost as the biggest barrier to eliminating homelessness. Often they build more barracks-style shelters — unappealing because they are crowded and unsafe — instead of transitional or affordable housing. New York City, which has 60,000 people in its homeless population, spends \$2 billion annually. California, with 160,000 people experiencing homelessness, spends \$5 billion. Miami-Dade County's Homeless Trust has a \$66 million budget.

Collins wants to demonstrate how to pay for it more efficiently. Lotus Village, through its foundation, private donations and government grants, was built for \$25 million and runs on a \$10 million budget. Collins has become a master of fundraising, grant-writing and collaborating with other nonprofits. She's persuaded local firms to lend expertise and manpower for free.

Martin Margulies, developer of luxury projects and the art collector who owns the Margulies Collection in Wynwood, has been Lotus' biggest benefactor, donating \$47 million, consulting on every detail of construction and contributing dozens of pieces from his collection to make the buildings feel warm and spark creativity. He sold two of his prized sculptures at auction to help purchase and renovate the second apartment building at Lotus House.

"I knew the money was going to the right place. It's an exceptional place and you can see it," said Margulies, delighted to watch young artists working in a room named after him. "Other cities say they don't know what to do about homeless people on their streets. All they've got to do is ask Constance. We do have enough money in this country to solve homelessness. We need conviction and we need our politicians to step up."

## COLLINS MAKES AN ECONOMIC ARGUMENT

Investing in Lotus House makes economic sense, Collins said.

"The cost to the government and the taxpayer of not providing resources to those who are struggling is paid in other ways — through hospital bills, the judicial system, the school system, police and fire," she said.

So far, the Children's Village exists only on paper but Collins has already raised \$1 million.

So even as Lotus expands, Collins, always the visionary, can see the day when it will be empty. Or converted into permanent housing.

"It is heartwarming and heart-wrenching to be in the presence of so many brave women and children," Collins said. "I could not have imagined a greater gift than to be in the service of their healing and growth. Every day I come in and I'm surrounded by love. I may sound crazy but never underestimate what you can accomplish with the power of love."