



**2023 Peace in the Pages  
Presented by David and Monique Miller**

**Ashley Szczukowski, Host Committee Co-Chair**



Ashley Szczukowski grew up in a large family (five children and two foster children) in Charlotte, North Carolina. “Our house was filled with commotion,” remembers Ashley, “and, although my mother was a reader, I was not.” The fact that Ashley was not a strong reader posed some challenges for her in school, but she was not going to fail. “I always read to the bottom of the page and as I got a bit older, I discovered that reading was a wonderful way to escape from reality.” One of the books she found inspiring was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach.

Since moving to Jacksonville in 2001, Ashley has distinguished herself as a passionate community leader both in business and philanthropy. She is the Director of Business Development for Danis Construction, vice-chair for Gateway Community Services’ Board of Directors, vice-president of the Jax Chamber Health Council Board, and an active Chamber Trustee member. She was a Founding Member of the Healthcare Business Round Table, Jacksonville Business Women’s Group, and the Ladies Executive Golf Society, and is a member of the Leadership Jacksonville Class of 2022.

In recognition of her community leadership and volunteerism, Ashley received a full-ride scholarship to the University of North Florida through the Scheidel Foundation. She majored in public relations and minored in community leadership, graduating Magna Cum Laude in 2013.

While pursuing her successful career, Ashley Szczukowski was also raising her daughter Alexis. “I always encouraged Alexis to read books and excel at school, and she has done that,” says Ashley, proudly. “Alexis attended La Villa and Douglas Anderson School of the Arts, focusing on stagecraft, and she is currently a Junior at the University of South Florida majoring in applied behavioral analysis and working with children on the autism spectrum.”

Last year, Ashley was a member of the Host Committee for READ USA’s Peace in the Pages and this year she has stepped up to leadership of the Host Committee with Sheila Cribb. “I’m excited to be leading this special effort to raise funds and awareness of the great service READ USA is doing for the children of Duval County,” said Ashley, who has been a READ USA volunteer since its beginning, working at book fairs and at the BEAM Back to School annual events.

Ashley is especially impressed with the growth of READ USA’s outreach, which, through partnering with Duval County Public Schools and the private sector, now includes year-round teen tutoring and teacher development in addition to book fairs in all Duval County elementary schools. “And now, READ USA has added another component ... its own Jeremy’s Journey book series about leadership!” declared Ashley. “READ USA is stepping up to close the reading gap brought on by the pandemic and continues to target poverty through promoting literacy. I’m thankful to God that I am privileged to be an instrument of this great work in our community!”

## Laura Phillips Edgecombe, Host Committee Co-Chair



Laura Phillips Edgecombe is a third-generation Jaxson, having grown up in Mandarin, the daughter and granddaughter of Jacksonville natives. Her dedication to this community runs deep and, as the Director of Development for Build Up Downtown (BUD), she is a champion of positive change.

With a degree from the University of Florida and a proven career in community development, event production, and fundraising for the past decade, Laura is uniquely qualified to conceptualize the “Big Picture” leading BUD, a privately funded, nonprofit resource and supporter of the Downtown Investment Authority (DIA) and Downtown Vision, Inc. (DVI). In facilitating and advocating for preservation, smart development, and great public spaces in Downtown Jacksonville, Laura Phillips Edgecombe is following her heart and working toward her lifelong goal. “Our Downtown is the heartbeat of the city,” Laura says, “and I am committed to doing something for Jacksonville that will be impactful 100 years from now.”

Laura serves as a JAX Chamber Downtown Council Board Member and as the organization’s Speaker Programming & Engagement Liaison, for which she was recently honored by the Professional Women’s Council with the “Engagement Award.” A JAX Chamber Hightower Emerging Leaders Fellow, Class V (2021), she is a member of the Jacksonville Women’s Network, an Urban Land Institute Urban Plan Facilitator, and a UNF Taylor Institute of Leadership Mentor. She is also an actively engaged member of NEFBA, ULI, and Gator Bowl Sports. She donates her time and support to local organizations such as Riverfront Parks Now, James Weldon Johnson Park, READ USA, the Child Guidance Center, The Jacksonville Zoo & Gardens, UF Health, the Cultural Council of Greater Jacksonville, and others. Her husband, attorney Adam Edgecombe and their teenage son, Holden, are equally committed to this community.

As to co-hosting READ USA’s Peace in the Pages event, Laura is enthusiastically supportive! “I was the kid who had a book at the dinner table,” she recalls. “Literacy is pivotal in the success of our future. Everyone deserves the same opportunities, and READ USA is working to make that happen.” Laura’s favorite book to this day is one

she read as a girl, titled *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. A 1977 novel that won the Newberry Medal, it was the story of the struggles of African Americans in the 1930s in Mississippi, written from the perspective of a little black girl named Cassie Logan. “It was my first understanding of racial prejudice and the truth about history. It was one of the reasons I strive for diversity, inclusion, and equity today,” says Laura, noting that READ USA’s culturally sensitive programs, which include book choice and teen tutoring, are essential. “I believe we have to rally around READ USA and help them promote liberty through literacy in our schools.”