

‘A collective of beautiful things and beautiful individuals’: Wilton Manors thrift store helps better lives of LGBTQ+ youth

By **SCOTT LUXOR**

SUN SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT |

SEP 30, 2021 AT 3:12 PM



The Wilton Collective store in Wilton Manors is a thrift store, an event space and a safe space for the LGBTQ+ youth community. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Collective wisdom is being put into action at a thrift store in Wilton Manors. Julian Cavazos is the founder of [Julian's Fountain of Youth](#), a group that helps Fort Lauderdale's LGBTQ+ youth discover their abilities and true authentic selves through enrichment, empowerment and education.

ADVERTISING

Cavazos has worked as a volunteer and board member in the nonprofit sector for over 30 years. After participating with LGBTQ+ groups in the area

like [SunServe](#), as well as other philanthropic organizations, Cavazos decided that he wanted to start something on his own.

“What I decided I wanted to do was to help organizations to hold events for youth and to get them funded,” he said. “All they would have to do would be to bring the kids.”

One of the first things Cavazos did was put together a Fort Lauderdale Youth Empowerment Retreat.



Julian Cavazos is the founder of Julian’s Fountain of Youth and he runs the Wilton Collective store as well as the nonprofit youth organization. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“I had taken some experiential learning courses. When I took those courses, I thought that it was really cool. I wish I’d had those when I was younger,” he said.

“With the retreat that I put together in Fort Lauderdale, we had kids come from all over the country. We brought these kids in and it was truly life-changing. We made sure it was free for them. If you made it through the application process, you were in. Flight, food and hotel were all paid for.”

ADVERTISING

Cavazos was able to gather funding from various sources, including fundraising and philanthropists in the community.

“The retreat was a huge success, and our efforts have built from there each year,” he said. “We took our kids to [One Magical Weekend](#) at Disney World in Orlando. It’s the one weekend of the year that Disney is entirely LGBTQ. They loved it. Imagine being a teenager, going to Disney, and all you see is others like yourself in the community. You know you will be accepted unconditionally, so you can relax and just be yourself.”

Fast forward to 2021 and Julian’s Fountain of Youth has been actively holding events on a regular basis throughout the year, with COVID-19 being the only thing slowing them down.

“On a regular basis with JFOY, we have work opportunities, experiential courses and other youth events throughout the year,” Cavazos said. “The ages range between 13 and 23 years old. Normally with JFOY, we have something going on every month with the youth.”

Wilton Collective thrift store

After Cavazos got started with Julian’s Fountain of Youth, he got the idea for a thrift store.

“The idea for the [Wilton Collective](#) came later when I was in Kentucky with my brother-in-law and my sister,” he said. “They showed me a nonprofit thrift store there, and I thought it was cool. I thought that I would love to do something like this in Fort Lauderdale.



The Wilton Collective also serves as a work opportunity for all-inclusive youth in the area. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Six months later, I got a phone call from a friend of mine,” Cavazos said. “He said he bought a store from a friend of his on Wilton Drive. So I went over to the space and he asked me if this building was mine, what would I do with it? I said I would put together a business plan and that I wanted to do a thrift store for youth.

“He said to me, ‘It’s your store. I’m going to donate this to your organization’. So that’s how we started. That was the first store I had. About a year later, I acquired the building across the street that is now the Wilton Collective because I wanted to do something bigger with my vision.”

With the newer, larger building on Wilton Drive, Cavazos set out to turn it into more than just a store. It’s now the center of his work with youth. And he even employs high school youth to work there. Not only does it have a purpose, but

the store also is filled with a quality of furniture, clothes and artwork that a customer would not discover in a typical thrift store.



The items that are sold in the store are not typical of most thrift retail outlets. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“The thrift store has become a true work program for our youth and now our organizational offices are there,” Cavazos said. “Everything now runs through what we call the Wilton Collective. It’s a collective of people and companies who come together to support all-inclusive youth.”

Cavazos said that he tries not to limit the youth involvement at the Collective to just LGBTQ+ because one of the participants who works there now is not from the community, but her family has an alternative structure with two mothers. Another student working there has two fathers.

Camryn Gamez, a junior at Western High School in Davie, has known about Julian’s Fountain of Youth for about two years. Now she works as an employee at the thrift store.



Camryn Gamez, a junior at Western High School in Davie, works as an employee at the thrift store. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“I’ve known about JFOY for about two years,” she said. “I’ve been to previous events they’ve held. Then my friend, who was more involved with the foundation than I was, got a job here and then he recommended it to me.”

Not only do the students who work at the store get to be in the JFOY atmosphere, but they also learn practical life skills, which is part of Cavazos' philosophy to empower youth.

“The job here has been a huge opportunity for me because I get to practice my customer service skills and interact with different people,” Gamez said. “And it’s preparing me for the time when I need to get a real job.”



The Wilton Collective store in Wilton Manors is a retail store, an event space and a safe space for the LGBTQ+ youth community. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Our store is a collective of beautiful things and beautiful individuals,” Cavazos said. “We truly have the support of our community.”

Annual all-inclusive youth prom

The premier event of each year now with JFOY is the high school prom. The difference between their prom and the one sponsored by high schools is the participants. The participants are all members of the LGBTQ+ community. This year, because of COVID-19 concerns, the event took place outside at [Richardson Park](#) in Wilton Manors on Aug. 21. The weather was hot, but the rain held off and the turnout was substantial.

Torin Mujica is a JFOY board member and a passionate activist when it comes to working with LGBTQ+ youth.



Torin Mujica is a board member of JFOY. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“For the youth, the prom definitely is one of our major events,” he said. “We do a couple of other ones throughout the year, but because of COVID last year, we had to cancel it. But we were able to have the prom this year, which was perfect timing because school just started.”

Mujica even does performances at the prom.

“I do lip-synching, so it’s not as a drag queen,” he said. “It’s more like a drag king performance.”

One reason he is enthusiastic about working with today’s youth is that acceptance had a long way to go for him when he was in high school.

“I didn’t go to prom when I was in high school back in the early 2000s. I was one of the very few who were ‘out’ in school, so I was never comfortable,” Mujica said.

“I think it’s absolutely incredible to have a community where you can be yourself, dress how you want and not have any issues with teachers telling you that you can’t bring a significant other because they’re not the right gender,” he said. “It’s unfortunate that some of these kids have to deal with such hatred.”

Having a prom without any bigotry or even simply a fear of it is a big deal to Mujica. “That’s why we’re here to make them comfortable and feel like they’re home. They can be whoever they want to be with their friends and enjoy themselves, without any other problems.”

Cricket McCrater, a trans youth, was a participant at the prom.

“The prom event is really cool because I know a lot of people aren’t accepted at their high school proms,” McCrater said. “I go to a bigger school where I could possibly face discrimination there because of my gender identity and sexual orientation. So it would be scarier for me to go to my prom, but here, I know that it’s an accepting place.”



Cricket McCrater, a trans youth, was a participant at the prom. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“Working with JFOY has helped me immensely,” McCrater said. “I’ve been connected with other people my age. I’ve been connected with older trans people. So I can see a future for myself because it’s really hard being a young

trans kid, not seeing anybody who is like you. They've given me so many opportunities and really helped me to grow.”

Law enforcement as an ally

The prom got a boost in 2021 because of a grant from the Broward County Sheriff's Office. Its [Law Enforcement Trust Funds](#) are aimed at supporting nonprofits that give opportunities to youth in the county. This year, Cavazos found out about it in time for the prom.

Recent history with the gay community and the Broward Sheriff's Office and the Fort Lauderdale Police Department has undergone a notable shift to the positive, Cavazos said.

“BSO has come a long way,” he said. “When you think about the history of BSO in regard to the LGBTQ community, it's not good. Not good at all. But there's been such a big shift in the BSO leadership and their acceptance of our community. In fact, they have sheriffs who are openly gay, even transgender. It's amazing.”

As a matter of fact, law enforcement has taken on a friendly face, particularly at the prom events.



Officers from both Broward Sheriff's Office and the Fort Lauderdale Police are supporters of the JFOY-sponsored youth prom. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)
"BSO and the Fort Lauderdale Police have always been at our proms," he said. They show up in force, just to let kids know they support them in a very positive way. The officers just want to let the kids know that they're here to support the LGBTQ+ community."

Lt. Paul Auerbach, an openly gay Broward Sheriff's officer, said he sees law enforcement support of the community as essential, both for the youth and for the department.

"About 12 years ago, life was a lot different," he said. "We had parents who were dropping their kids off for the first time at the prom who were worried. They asked why the police were there. We told them that we're all part of the LGBTQ community, so we're here to support and protect. A couple of parents even started crying because they were just so happy, and they were able to leave their kids and they would be safe. It just snowballed into the big participation that it is today."



Lt. Paul Auerbach, a Broward Sheriff's officer, is a supporter of the JFOY-sponsored youth prom event. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

Within the sheriff's office, things have changed dramatically as well.

"At BSO, about a year and a half ago, we started an LGBTQ+ outreach-inreach group," Auerbach said. "We now have a committee within the department that can focus on community issues outside the department, and also community issues within the department itself. I joined the department 18 years ago, so we are really talking about a different place now than it was then. But they have always been very welcoming to me."

Capt. Bill Schultz is an officer from the Fort Lauderdale Police Department. He said he also feels it's essential that law officers stand in support of the LGBTQ+ community.

"I'm a patrol captain, but I also have an ancillary duty as the commander of our LGBTQ Liaison Unit," he said. "We've actually been involved since the very first prom event, which was organized initially by SunServe. Now we

come to every JFOY prom. They invited us to be volunteer chaperones in uniform, to show the kids that they could be completely safe at the prom, as well as to show that we support them as well.



Capt. Bill Schultz, a Fort Lauderdale officer, is a supporter of the JFOY-sponsored youth prom event. (Scott Luxor / Contributor)

“For me, personally this outreach is important,” Schultz said. “I’ve also done work with after-school programs and outreach in middle schools, as well as high school kids. We talk to the kids about bullying, feeling out of place not feeling a part of what they consider to be the normal or average school experience.”

The Wilton Collective is at 2365 Wilton Drive. It’s open from noon to 7 p.m. seven days a week. Call 954-594-3473 or visit jfoy.org/donate.html.