

A LOT OF OPTIONS

Years ago, when a friend told **Karen Balzano** about the work being done at The Shelter for Abused Women & Children and its fundraising operation, Options Thrift Shoppe, Balzano immediately volunteered to help. Within three months, she was offered the position of store manager. During her 14-year tenure in that role, Balzano and her assistant, Maria Blough, along with a small army of volunteers, transformed a 2,000-square-foot resale shop into an 8,000-square-foot showplace offering premier designer clothing, furniture and accessories. When Balzano took over in 1995, historical sales totaled \$120,000. Upon her retirement last April, they had surpassed \$10 million. —Christina Wells



BUD TASH

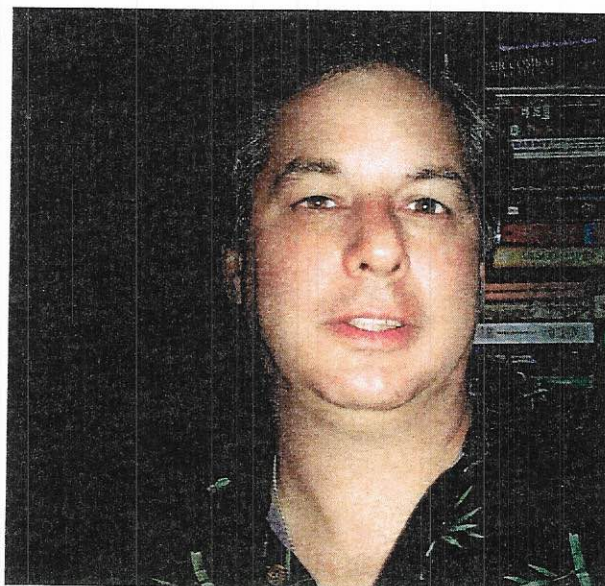
CARING WITH CUPCAKES

Maria Wassef celebrates birthdays all the time. Last year, she implemented Maria's Cupcakes for the Homeless at St. Matthew's House in Naples. The program acknowledges homeless individuals on the most special day of the year—their birthday. Currently, Wassef and 14 volunteers bring thousands of cupcakes every month to 63 shelters in California and Florida. "The meaning behind these cupcakes is a simple but profound message," Wassef says. "It does not take a lot of money or time to help your fellow human, just a lot of love." Wassef hopes to take the program to shelters and soup kitchens nationwide. "Everyone should be remembered and celebrated on their birthday," she says. —C.W.



SHIPSHAPE DIVES

Mike Taworski loves to dive wrecks in the Florida Keys. Because these artificial reefs infuse millions of dollars into the Keys economy while also providing marine life with a long-term habitat, Taworski embarked on a personal mission to acquire one for Naples' coastline. Extensive research led him to the USS *George Philip*, a retired 455-foot guided-missile frigate ship currently being held for scrapping in Washington State. The ship was named after Captain George Philip Jr., commander of the USS *Twiggs*, who died in combat June 16, 1945, during World War II's Battle of Okinawa. In April, Collier County officials began pursuit of legislative support for moving the ship to Collier County, where it will take on its new purpose as a hub for marine life. Taworski's project will be paid for by donations and managed by Collier County's Coastal Zone Management Department. —C.W.



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