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OP-ED

Miami-Dade must stop trying to erase nonprofit behind Biscayne Nature Center | Opinion

By Theodora Long

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Marjory Stoneman Douglas arriving at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center with Dr. Sharon Richardson, left, national secretary of Friends of the Everglades, and Harvey Rubin. Albert Coya

It is bewildering that a county led by a self-proclaimed environmental champion, Miami-Dade Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, is overseeing a pressure campaign to marginalize and, apparently, ultimately replace the nonprofit that environmental legend Marjory Stoneman Douglas created in Crandon Park.

For forty years, I have watched Miami-Dade's children fall in love with the natural world there. Every day, students waded through the seagrass beds, cradle sea urchins, marvel at the flick of a seahorse's tail and discover what Marjory called "the miracle of the world around us."

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center is not a park amenity. It is the living embodiment of Marjory's final public project — founded to ensure Miami-Dade's children would grow up knowing, loving and defending Biscayne Bay and our natural resources.

The center has survived recessions, hurricanes, bureaucratic reshuffling and five county mayors. But we have never faced a threat like the orchestrated effort by county government underway now to apparently take over the center from the nonprofit that has run it for four decades.

The county misleadingly insists that everything is resolved because it claims to have rescinded its Aug. 22 unlawful eviction attempt. But for months it refused to formally withdraw the eviction notice, refused to correct misleading public statements and continues to behave as if our legal rights do not exist.

Even the Miami Herald Editorial Board questioned Miami-questioned Miami-Dade County's conduct, calling it what it appears to be: a power grab. The Board also highlighted the county's unexplained plan to expand programming at the center by taking over our work and projecting — without publicly available documentation — that it could generate \$1 million annually.

For decades, our nonprofit has provided these programs at low or no cost to students. The Herald Editorial Board asked the obvious question: Would the county truly run this better, more efficiently and with greater public benefit?

Earlier this year, the county Parks Department released a glossy publication promoting future “environmental programming” at Crandon Park. It showcased seagrass walks, coastal exploration and hands-on marine science — using images taken directly from programs our nonprofit created and has operated for decades, giving us no mention in their printed credits. Other partners, some only loosely connected to Crandon Park, were highlighted instead. This exclusion hardly looks accidental, but an early step in a quiet rebranding effort — normalizing the idea that our programs, assets and mission are county property and that the nonprofit Marjory founded is expendable.

Levine Cava's latest public statement written in an email last week claimed "The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center at Crandon Park is here to stay" and that environmental programs would continue. But the wording was carefully crafted: she avoided saying that the nonprofit Marjory created will remain. Worse, the statement erroneously implied our rights expired in November 2025. To be clear, our rights extend through 2039 — the full term of the binding lease between the Miami-Dade School Board, which owns the building that houses the center, and the county.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center serves nearly 20,000 students annually, half from low-income schools. Teachers now ask whether trips will be canceled. Donors inquire if the county intends to replace us. Foundations hesitate to provide grants.

If a nonprofit founded by Marjory Stoneman Douglas — one that built its own facility, has rights through 2039, and has served over a million children — can be targeted or erased, no nonprofit is safe. This is not just about us. It is about a climate where nonprofits survive not by law or mission, but by political whim.

Our goodwill has been mistaken for weakness. That ends now. We are not fighting the county. We are defending children, Biscayne Bay and one of Miami-Dade's last natural classrooms. We are defending Marjory's mission — and the promise this county made to protect Crandon Park from commercialization, political manipulation and government overreach.

Marjory said, "Be a nuisance where it counts, but never give up." We will not give up — because Miami-Dade's children and her legacy deserve nothing less.

Theodora "Theo" Long is executive director of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center on Key Biscayne.

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