

**I am an American We are One Nation**

## **LIZ JOYNER FINDS UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

Pieces of her 'Threads of a Nation' quilt don't match until woven into a whole

**NADA HASSANEIN**

USA TODAY NETWORK

*Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who unites, rather than divides, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit [onenation.usatoday.com](http://onenation.usatoday.com).*



**Liz Joyner's The Village Square is devoted to civic dialogue.**

HALI TAUXE/USA TODAY NETWORK

### **Liz Joyner**

**Location:** Tallahassee, Fla. **Age:** 57 **Profession:** Executive Director, The Village Square **Mission:** Reviving the founding spirit of American democracy by building community across ideological and demographic divides inside hometowns.

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. - Liz Joyner's "Threads of a Nation" quilt is stitched together with red, white and blue squares and patriotic quotes: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" and "Thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears."

It's a quilt that's a tribute to her family who had served in the military and worked in government — her brother a Navy SEAL and her father a Pentagon worker. But it's also, she said, a reflection of the "beauty of the diversity of our people."

Joyner picked and dyed scarlet-, rose- and cerulean colored fabrics that at first glance, wouldn't necessarily match. But when woven together, unified into one piece.

She's the executive director of The Village Square in Tallahassee, Florida. The quilt, created after September 11, was almost a foreshadowing of what she does now through The Village Square: bridge gaps between communities and ideologies through conversation.

Somehow, Joyner's been able to gather both liberals and conservatives around dinner tables and on stages to talk about race, religion and politics. The concept might seem only possible to discuss in a civil way across party lines "when pigs fly" — hence The Village Square's mascot, of sorts: a little pink pig with wings.

The Village Square holds events like Faith, Food, Friday, an interfaith conversation rotating at different faith centers, and film screenings followed by discussions called Race to the Movies: An Unflinching Conversation on Race. Joyner is a fervent believer that “diverse groups make better decisions,” but even if a conclusion or decision isn’t made, “you’ve still changed everything” by gathering people to converse and learn about life from another person’s perspective.

Joyner believes important change starts with relationships fueled by empathy.

“Human beings are capable of amazing feats of empathy,” she said, “when we just get to know each other.”

### **What does it mean to you to be an American?**

The Adlai Stevenson quote, “the steady devotion of a lifetime.” It’s really quite incredible how many people do that. Alexis de Tocqueville said when he came to America that Americans are forever in the habit of forming associations. We’ve gotten used to doing things with people who are more like us rather than unlike us, and we need to get back to the habit of seeking out other people.

### **What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?**

I really feel like I grew up in a place that I know what it looks like — I know what a healthy, civic life looks like. I know what disagreement looks like when it’s vibrant and real and dynamic, and it really was from watching people who had become my friends who were local leaders, who had those kinds of dynamic conversations going on that inspired me. I reached the point in time that my personal frustration was so high that if I didn’t do something, it wouldn’t have been healthy for me.

### **What gives you hope?**

I think that getting the upcoming generations of leaders, people who are millennials and younger, gives me a lot of hope. It gives me a lot of hope that when you guys are my age, it’ll just naturally be better. But — there is a ‘but’ there, and the ‘but’ is: We’ve got to find a way to connect what’s naturally so exceptional about your generation to what is exceptional about the hero arc of American democracy.

### **What concerns you?**

That having fallen into our like-minded silos, as we have, that we’re not going to have the will to climb out. And I think if we have the will, it’s there — but we’re going to have to see the reason to find what we share.

### **What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?**

What I hope to accomplish with what we do is revive the old idea, repackage it in a way that works for a new environment. I describe The Village Square as being a very new, very old idea. It really is just the whole idea that we had from the very beginning of American democracy. We’ve just got to punch it up a little bit.