

Hub of help

Kindness at its purest p. 2

The "curse" that saved this family p. 6

A message to Congress p. 11



Five days after Irma struck, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began accepting applications for aid in Immokalee. At Immokalee High School, where immigration officers had been seen, 45 applications were submitted. At RCMA's Immokalee Community School (above), more than 450 were submitted. On the cover: photo was taken as staffers for Sen. Marco Rubio and FEMA processed some 1,500 aid applications inside the building.

“KINDNESS AT ITS PUREST”

I just experienced my first hurricane with RCMA. Wow.

As the winds from Hurricane Irma ceased, our staff in the hardest-hit areas went door to door to check on children and families. We cooked and brought food, ice, water and supplies to anyone in need. Stranded elderly felt this kindness.

RCMA has a wide reach, yet so did Irma. Among our 66 child-care centers, 65 lost power. But all over our 21 counties, veteran managers and teachers took charge with instincts honed from Andrew, Wilma, Charley and others. RCMA reached out to Florida's most vulnerable and, day after day, did the right thing. I felt honored to be part of it.

Jemy Hinton, a volunteer from Plant City, said it best when she texted: "I am just blown away by the compassion of the RCMA staff."

Yet I am also haunted by disappointment. Big aid organizations you would expect to see arrived late, if at all.

Reports of damaged trailers in Immokalee, LaBelle and Mulberry were most alarming. It was clear: Recovery would take months, likely years. With disaster recovery agencies late on the scene or invisible in most of rural Florida, we called on friends.

Dave Lawrence, former publisher of the *Miami Herald* and a crusader for children, offered to engage media. Within 24 hours reporters came to Immokalee to show the damage. Media stories drew volunteers in droves. They donated supplies and brought gas grills to cook on street corners. Trucks arrived in fleets. Immokalee became a donation hub and distribution point for other areas.

A volunteer from Winter Haven, Nancy Gomez, stayed for weeks in Immokalee helping RCMA coordinate other volunteers. "I saw kindness at its purest," she said.



Gayane Stepanian
RCMA's executive director



Making New Friends

Countless friendships are forged in the aftermath of disaster.

World Vision International, a Christian humanitarian organization, arrived in Immokalee only days after Irma, and broke its normal protocol for giving. Accustomed to aiding third-world nations, World Vision saw the vast impact of Irma in Immokalee and acted quickly to distribute food, water and a variety of other necessities.

"We were told that if we wanted to help those most in need, we needed to visit RCMA," said James Orlando, program manager of World Vision.

RCMA and World Vision quickly teamed up. During World Vision's second week in town, it prepared 9,000 hot meals for families, and distributed \$75,000 in Walmart gift cards in Immokalee, LaBelle and Mulberry.

Also quick to the scene was Save the Children, an international non-profit based in

Connecticut that aids children in 120 countries. Save the Children distributed \$22,500 in gift cards in LaBelle and made long-term commitments of training and resources to the tune of \$250,000 to help RCMA centers recover from the storm. Similarly, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation met with RCMA managers about Immokalee's needs thanks to Collier County Commissioner Penny Taylor. Tzu Chi distributed gift cards ranging in value from \$200 to \$800 to 378 families in Immokalee, and gave much needed help in the Florida Keys, Everglades City and Naples.

"With so much action, our only regret was not capturing the names of all the generous people, groups and churches who cooked and donated supplies - even a camper," said Gayane Stepanian, RCMA's executive director. "On behalf of all of those who have been helped, we are infinitely grateful."

Low-income residents wait outside RCMA headquarters, as World Vision distributes \$500 gift cards.



OPENING DOORS

Only days after the storm, RCMA staff members began checking on centers and schools to assess damages. Within 10 days, most RCMA child-care centers were re-opened and filled with children.

RCMA's two charter schools south of Tampa opened five days before the rest of the county's schools did. The mission: to rescue children - many of whom live in trailers - from the September heat, feed them a hot meal and get them back to "normal." As soon as the school's power was restored, school-bus drivers scouted road conditions. Then the school texted parents that classes would resume the next morning. Staff was amazed when the buses rolled in: Of the 323 students, 251 were back. Mission accomplished!



HOPE for displaced farmworkers

Three days after Irma tore through Florida, Mike Stuart, President of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, asked RCMA "What can we do?" So the FFVA mapped out a fund-raising drive for Florida farmworkers who lost wages or dwellings or faced eviction. In a few weeks, FFVA members had contributed \$120,000.

These groups contributed \$10,000 or more:

- The FFVA itself
- The FFVA's philanthropic arm, the Florida Specialty Crop Foundation
- Monsanto Company
- The Florida Tomato Committee/Exchange
- Farm Credit/AgFirst/CoBank

"Despite huge losses to agriculture from Irma, leaders from the industry were the first to let us know we could count on them to help," said Gayane Stepanian, RCMA's executive director.

When the drive among FFVA members surpassed \$100,000, that triggered pledges from three foundations in Naples, including the Schulze Family Foundation, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and The Halstatt Charitable Foundation.

The Community Foundation of Tampa Bay also provided relief.

The Naples Children & Education Foundation responded on many levels — through agency coordination, volunteers, and by increasing meal distributions. With its staff serving as community advocates, NCEF also worked with its partners to develop temporary jobs so parents could generate an income since many businesses were damaged or destroyed.

From individuals, corporations and organized groups, help came in many forms: cash, furniture, supplies, meals, tarps, storage, and more.

"We experienced a huge wave of compassion," Stepanian said.

"But the need still outstrips the resources. There's much more to do."



Michael Stuart
President of the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association

Cash to the RESCUE

Donors of \$10,000 or more in hurricane aid

- Church World Service
- Community Foundation of Collier County
- Community Foundation of Tampa Bay
- Farm Credit
- Florida Fruit & Vegetable Assn.
- Florida Specialty Crop Foundation
- Florida Tomato Committee/Exchange
- FoodSource Plus National Inc.
- Eileen M. Forde
- Halstatt Charitable Foundation
- Immokalee Non-Profit Housing
- Lipman Family Giving Fund
- Monsanto Corporation
- Naples Children & Education Foundation
- Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation
- SouthWest Florida Community Foundation
- Save the Children
- Tzu Chi Foundation
- United Way of Central Florida
- United Way of Collier County
- United Way of Lee, Hendry Glades
- United Way of Miami-Dade
- World Vision



Sen. Marco Rubio visits RCMA's Immokalee Community School after Hurricane Irma blew through Immokalee

Trust factor

Earlier this year, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio visited RCMA in Immokalee. He learned about RCMA's work and the trust RCMA earns from families. Concerned about the hurricane's impact on RCMA families, Rubio reached out before and right after the storm to ask "What can we do?" "How can we help?"

RCMA asked for support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Rubio made it happen. Five days after Irma hit, he brought his staff to help file FEMA applications. Immigrants were wary, because immigration officers had been seen before the storm. At Immokalee High School, which had served as a Red Cross shelter, only 45 FEMA applications were completed. But the community showed up in mass at RCMA, and filled out 450 applications that same day. Trust made the difference.

Rubio invited FEMA to RCMA headquarters a week later. Again he brought his staff and again RCMA staff helped with translation. Almost 1,500 applications were filed.



HOUSING CRISIS

Housing was RCMA's top concern after the hurricane. Many families in farm work live in rundown trailers that did not hold up to hurricane-force winds. A champion of rural and migrant families, U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, soon arrived in Immokalee to help. Barbara Mainster, RCMA's retired executive director, reached out to the congressman and to the Collier County Housing Authority. Diaz-Balart arranged for the early restoration of electricity to a farmworker apartment building run by the Housing Authority. Displaced families promptly moved in. More permanent homes required repairs, but as soon as homes were ready, they were turned over to displaced families. RCMA served as the referral entry point and provided case management to help with start-up rent and utilities.

In the weeks that followed, farms took stock of their ruined fields. Jobs that farmworkers had expected didn't materialize.

Loss of income loomed for months. RCMA took a lead role to help families pay for rent and utilities. RCMA received donations from agricultural groups, international groups, churches, foundations and individual donors near and far. Evictions were stopped and families have moved into safe places to live.

"Despite all the financial help, there is simply not enough housing available in some communities, said Gayane Stepanian, RCMA's executive director. "These issues require much greater investment and planning from government and the communities."



U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart

Seminole support

The College of Medicine at Florida State University operates a satellite school in Immokalee. After Irma struck, Regional Director Elena Reyes urged faculty, staff and students to support RCMA – "the heart and

soul of the community in terms of resources for these families."

RCMA promptly heard from 17 first-time donors from the Tallahassee area, and uncounted others from the Immokalee area.



The "CURSE" that SAVED this family

Hugo Morales poses with his son, Asarisas; daughter, Ereigy, and wife, Ofelia.

In many poor societies, albinos are seen as cursed from birth. In his native Guatemala, Hugo Morales was called "Son of the Devil." Children threw rocks. Teachers were unsympathetic to his partial blindness. Often, Morales wanted to just die.

Years later, Morales fled to the U.S. in search of a better life. Morales and his wife Ofelia, each with a child, walked through a desert area into the U.S. and gave themselves up at a U.S. Border Patrol checkpoint. Because of the children, the couple was allowed to stay in the U.S. during deportation proceedings. Morales reached Florida and enrolled his two young children in RCMA's Palmetto Child Development Center, south of Tampa Bay. Ofelia wore a painful ICE ankle

monitor for months.

When RCMA began its immigration program, the agency never envisioned going to court for an albino farmworker from Guatemala. But RCMA did just that. The center's family support worker, Rebecca Rangel, asked all the right questions about the Morales' immigration issues, and determined they might qualify for legal help.

Meanwhile, Diana Castro, an immigration attorney from Puerto Rico, had joined RCMA, thanks to a grant from the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. Castro joined only a few weeks after an immigration judge issued an order for the deportation of Morales. Morales had missed a hearing. Rangel reached out to Castro, and RCMA's new

attorney had her first case. Castro first persuaded ICE to remove Ofelia's ankle monitor. Next she realized Morales's life of persecution in Guatemala should qualify him for asylum. However, his deportation order could not be appealed. Castro reviewed his file and discovered Morales had never received the court system's mail. His letters were stamped "Return to Sender" because the address had been wrong. Castro persuaded the judge to reopen his case.

Asylum is available to an immigrant who has suffered persecution in his home country and reasonably fears that it would recur if he went back. It protects the asylum seeker's entire family, giving all of them a six-year path to U.S. citizenship.

So Castro prepared a very guarded Morales for

court. Castro told him he would have to speak from the heart. Morales testified about his tears every day, his nightmares every night. He described his bewilderment that first, God made him different, and second, people despised him for it.

The ICE prosecutor asked no questions, and didn't object to the asylum request. "Hugo," said Judge Rafael Ortiz-Segura, "I welcome you as a refugee to the United States."

Lately, Morales and Ofelia have been busy at work. Morales cleans construction sites; Ofelia picks strawberries. "Thanks to RCMA, we can move forward," Morales says. "I don't know what we would do without them."



An okra harvester explains his work to visitors on May 29, during a tour staged by RCMA.

Connecting Miamians to farmworkers

MIAMI –RCMA joined Connect Miami’s 10 Days of Connection along with other local non-profits this past May as an effort to urge Miamians to step beyond their comfort zones and connect with people different to them. RCMA invited South Floridians to get an up-close look at farm life. Hundreds viewed inspiring photography of migrant farmworkers in the fields, in the camps and of their family life. Others toured a nursery and visited an okra farm, speaking to workers and farmers about the labors of agriculture.

“I watched the folks on the tour look at the okra pickers and realized that what I’ve known most of my life was completely novel to them,” said RCMA board chair Medora Krome, an avocado farmer. “So I told a small group nearby that these workers had been in the field since 5 a.m., wearing headlamps in the dark. And they would earn less than \$3 for a three-fourths-bushel box of okra. It was an education for all of us.”



BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL NETS \$ 18,000

UMATILLA – A blueberry-picking benefit raised \$18,066 for RCMA in May.

The 7th Annual Gleaning Festival was hosted by RCMA Board Member Chuck Allison and his wife, Vesna at their picturesque Wild Goose Farms north of Orlando. Hundreds of friends came for a picnic, buckets of blueberries and to support RCMA.

“Vesna and I are thrilled to support RCMA because we believe so strongly in what you are doing to help those in need,” Allison said.



RCMA Board Member Gloria Kendrick, who was area coordinator when RCMA first arrived in the low-income Highway Park neighborhood in 1979, cuts the ribbon to a new child-care center in the neighborhood. She is flanked by other RCMA board members and managers.

RCMA is back in Highway Park

LAKE PLACID – In 1979, RCMA opened the doors to the first Highway Park center to serve children of farmworkers. The first building operated in a former school building, but lost its lease in 2008. Fast-forward 29 years, the landscape has changed a bit. The first area coordinator, Gloria Kendrick, is now retired, but faithfully serves on RCMA’s board of directors. This July, Kendrick was asked to cut the ribbon to a new

beautiful \$1.1 million dollar Highway Park facility that now serves 52 children of working poor families. The area doesn’t have many farm working families anymore.

Guests old and new joined in the opening of the center despite tropical-storm force winds that day. “We are glad to be back where we belong, in a neighborhood of old friends,” said Kendrick. “We look forward to making new friends.”



RCMA buys campus near Lakeland

MULBERRY – A farm-working community east of Tampa is home to two RCMA early learning centers that serve children of migrant families. These centers are full, with waiting lists.

This past year, RCMA faced the possibility of having to close the centers as the landlord planned to sell the 34-acre property. RCMA explored other locations with disappointing results. So with Board approval, RCMA negotiated to buy the 34 acres. Last summer, RCMA secured financing and closed on the \$2.1 million complex, which includes the two early learning centers, three other buildings and nine mobile homes.

Previously, the property was home to a Bible college. As owner, RCMA plans to seek permission from the Polk County School Board to open a charter school by 2020. Last June, RCMA’s other charter schools posted some of the highest test scores in their respective communities.

“Our families inspire us every day,” said Gayane Stepanian, RCMA’s new executive director. “All of them – parents and children – see education as a path out of poverty, so they work hard to support their children in school despite long hot days on a field.”



Teacher Mandy Johnson is interviewed by Bryan Gray, of Tampa's FOX 13 news, about "Mandy Math."

Rhythm, motion & chants make MATH memorable

WIMAUMA – Some years ago, teacher Mandy Johnson was introduced to Standout Math, a concept of helping children memorize math formulas using chants, rhymes and body movement.

Consider this chanted definition of a triangle:

- An equilateral is its name
- Has three equal sides all the same

It made sense. Educators know that different people learn best in different ways. Some read, some listen. Some need lists; some need pictures. So at RCMA Wimauma Academy, a charter school south of Tampa, Johnson championed the new techniques. She even began inventing her own chants. Standout Math acquired a nickname: Mandy Math.

During the state testing, quietly and subtly, students' mouths and hands were reciting the chants.

Last spring, every one of Johnson's 36 third-graders passed the math portion of the FSA. No other school in Hillsborough – Florida's fourth largest county – achieved a 100-percent passing rate for an entire grade level. The school's fourth- and fifth-graders surpassed the state average in math – children of poor, Spanish-speaking farm-workers outscored thousands of their suburban peers.

Johnson acknowledges that the secret isn't just incisive math. Johnson pushes students to monitor their learning, look at the assessment data, set goals and use computer lessons. And she works with them outside normal school hours.

"I'm terrible at math," she says.

Parents learn & earn computers

IMMOKALEE – Twelve RCMA parents received far more than a certificate for completing a 9-week computer course last spring. They got a Chromebook.

Parents learned how to email and research the Web. For many, the course was a first introduction to the keyboard.

"They liked the idea that they were doing what their kids are doing," said Juanita Meza, who managed the program as Parent Liaison at Immokalee Community School.

The course was one of two that were funded at the school by a \$35,000 grant from the Southwest Florida Community Foundation.

The highest level of education for 40 percent of the parent participants was sixth-grade. Many came to classes directly from the fields.

"I want my children to see that I support their education," said Josefina Vasquez, a nursery worker and mother of sons in the sixth and second grades at the school. "Our children today use computers in school, and I am happy that I can use the computer on my own."



A message to Congress

Wish Farms owner and RCMA board member, Gary Wishnatzki, is concerned about labor shortages. This has inspired him to collaborate with other farm owners to develop a robotic strawberry picker. In July, Gary testified before the U.S. House Agriculture Committee.



Here are excerpts:

“In Florida the harvest lasts five months and we typically pick a field 40 times. In recent seasons, my farm has had to abandon acreage for lack of labor. Labor shortages have cost us millions of dollars in lost opportunities.”

“Throughout the history of our country, the jobs that Americans don't want to do have been filled by newly arrived immigrants. It is only the newcomers that are willing to do the hard jobs.”

“In the 1960's the fertility rate in Mexico was 6.7. People were coming here because there were no opportunities at home. Twenty years ago it had dropped to 2.9. That shrinking birthrate mirrors the declining farm labor force we have seen over the last 10 years.”

“To be clear: employers in our country support appropriate, necessary enforcement of our nation's immigration policies. But, those policies must reflect the reality of how vital a foreign born workforce is to our nation's ability to produce crops in this country and ensure an abundant supply of nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables for all Americans.”

“Every developed county in the world that is growing strawberries is importing labor from another less advantaged country. I have had inquiries about our robotic harvester from growers in Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Australia, Hungary and Switzerland. Please consider that automation is a long-range solution and we still depend on foreign workers to bridge the gap.”



2017 LIPMAN GOLF CLASSIC results



Sponsorships	\$80,318
Raffle	\$ 7,432
Expenses	\$10,777
Net proceeds	\$76,973



Redlands Christian Migrant Association

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On The Move



Entrepreneurial deejay

TAMPA – Gregorio “Greg” Burgos was 11, migrating with his family to New Jersey, when he insisted that he was ready for a summer job. So Burgos’ father took him to a blueberry packing house.

“Man, I worked so much,” he recalls. “I loved making so much money.”

Today, you can hear Burgos on the air live through Tampa’s most popular Latino radio station La Ley 107.7 FM and on 1550 am, where he broadcasts nationwide. Burgos also owns a busy Latino nightclub in Tampa.

Burgos attended an RCMA center in Ruskin as a baby and attended an RCMA after-school program in Wimauma. He has never lost touch. In high school, Burgos volunteered at RCMA, then

he worked for RCMA after earning a bachelor’s degree in social work from the University of South Florida. Next on his list of goals is to earn a master’s degree in Educational Leadership.

Burgos has faithfully staged free shows for RCMA gatherings. “If they call me,” he said, “I’m there.”

