New RCMA Board president extends a legacy

Following the footsteps of her late father, Medora Krome was elected Sept. 19 as the new president of RCMA’s Board of Directors.

“I feel the same passion that so many people here do, because I grew up with it,” Krome said. “RCMA started with a few people, a shoestring budget and passion. Everybody involved has passion.”

Krome replaces Michael Stuart, president of the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, who remains on the board as a vice president. Stuart stepped down from the presidency as his wife Karen battles a severe respiratory disease.

Krome said Stuart’s call to her was the second time a role model in RCMA persuaded her to take on a daunting challenge. “I wouldn’t do it for anybody else,” she said.

Twenty years ago, Krome and her father, Bill Krome, visited Wendell Rollason, the early leader of RCMA and a legendary crusader for Florida’s migrant farm workers. The elder Krome was serving his last years on the RCMA board. Rollason asked Medora Krome to replace her father as a board member.

“I was scared out of my wits,” she said. “But people would do things for Wendell that they wouldn’t do for anybody else.”

Bill Krome had been a pioneering avocado grower in southern Miami-Dade County. He was distressed when he saw children accompanying their parents to work at farms. So Krome became an early supporter of Rollason and RCMA and stayed on the RCMA board for some 30 years.

Today, the legacy of Krome and his wife Phoebe lives on through:

- The Krome Child Development Center, RCMA’s largest child-care center in the LaBelle area.

A Mexican-American takes charge

IMMOKALEE – Zulaika Quintero was 3 years old when she first crossed the Rio Grande with her parents in the middle of the night. She floated on a rubber raft, paddling in the darkened water. It was great fun.

Now 30, Quintero is firmly a Floridian. Yet she bridges the Mexican and American cultures as much as ever, and she has taken over a school that does the same thing.

Quintero became director this summer of Immokalee Community School, RCMA’s K-6 charter school in the heart of Florida’s winter vegetable belt. The school serves 250 predominantly Hispanic children in a town dominated by predominantly Hispanic farm workers.

Quintero’s understanding of Immokalee’s people was a major factor in convincing Juana Brown, RCMA’s director of Charter Schools, to promote her.

“She’s a hometown girl who grew up in a farm-worker family,” Brown said. “She has a very different appreciation and understanding of the families and the work they do.”

see ZULAIAKA QUINTERO continued on page 2
RCMA honored for work with Latino families

ORLANDO – Redlands Christian Migrant Association received a national award in July for empowering Latino families.

RCMA received the Family Strengthening Award from the National Council of La Raza. A co-winner of the award was Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio, the largest nonprofit run by and for Latinos in Minnesota.

“We are honoring CLUES and RCMA at the 2016 NCLR Annual Conference for their tireless work in helping to transform the lives of Latino families,” said NCLR President and CEO Janet Murguía. “Their dedication and success help to strengthen our entire community.”

NCLR is the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. Like RCMA and CLUES, NCLR works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans.

RCMA wasn’t nominated for the award. Rather, it had applied for Affiliate of the Year, the highest award given at NCLR’s annual conference. But in that competition, RCMA was edged out by the Hollywood, Fla.-based Hispanic Unity of Florida.

Natalie Carlier, NCLR’s Florida Regional Coordinator, participated in the points-based scoring system, and said the competition was close. “RCMA had a pretty good score,” she said.

A gift for families of the fields

DOVER – More than 100 children, board members, community partners and assorted well-wishers gathered in June to celebrate RCMA’s completion of a child-care center east of Tampa.

The crowd assembled despite the arrival that same morning of Tropical Storm Colin. That subjected the Dover festivities to an intermittent drizzle and high humidity.

The new $3.6 million, 15,000-square-foot center triples RCMA’s capacity in Dover to 264 children. That includes RCMA’s older center a few blocks away, which this fall is being moved next door. It has served 88 children for years, while compiling long waiting lists.

Just southwest of Plant City, Dover is surrounded by strawberry farms. RCMA has operated there since 1981 – a year after a car fire critically burned a child next to a strawberry field where his parents were working.

“We have a long, happy history in Dover,” said Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s executive director. “But we have regretted for many years having to put so many families on waiting lists. Their kids deserve good early-childhood education.”

At the ribbon-cutting, Mainster was joined by Catrina Southall of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development, which loaned RCMA $1.9 million for construction of the new child-care center. The federal Head Start child-care program paid for the land, site work and the remainder of construction costs with grants of $1.7 million.

Later, the state’s largest newspaper paid tribute to the project.

“The new RCMA Child Development Center in Dover already stands as a symbol of stability in lives that know little of it,” wrote the Tampa Bay Times in an editorial. “The project is the work of a nonprofit network, the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, and it deserves the attention and support of any Floridian who benefits from the labor of seasonal farm workers. All Floridians, in fact – like all Americans – reap these benefits.”
NEW BOARD PRESIDENT
continued from page 1

- The Krome Educational Fund, launched with a $500,000 endowment from the Kromes, which awards an average of $10,000 in college scholarships per semester to RCMA staff members, their children and others with RCMA connections.
- Medora Krome. Krome now is president of Krome Groves, and is in her 17th year on the Board. She marvels at the growth of a nonprofit that was struggling in the early years when her father and Rollason began collaborating.

"We have morphed into a remarkably successful organization," she said.

ZULAIAK QUINTERO continued from page 1

Quintero herself has worked in the fields, migrating with her family since age 11 to pick tomatoes in Georgia and to labor in the cornfields and watermelon patches of Missouri.

Yet school work dominated each winter, and Quintero graduated fifth in Immokalee High School’s Class of 2004. That led to a full-ride scholarship package at the University of Florida, where Quintero graduated cum laude with a telecommunications degree.

She worked at a North Carolina radio station, then a Naples business. But Quintero yearned to return to Immokalee and help her community.

RCMA offered a way. Quintero joined in 2010 as an assistant working extensively with the parents of RCMA children. Yet after a year, she still wasn’t satisfied; she wanted to help children directly. So Quintero landed a position as a Spanish teacher at the charter school. After half a school year, she became a long-term substitute. That was followed by two years teaching fourth grade, then a year as the school’s social worker.

Brown credits Quintero – both as the school’s social worker and new leader – with engaging parents.

"Attendance at our parent meetings has gone from as few as 12 to 70 to 80 per meeting," Brown said.

"Zulaika is the convergence of everything we want in a good leader," she said.

"It takes a village to raise a child," Quintero said. "I feel like we are that perfect village and we are raising the best citizens that this community will ever see."

Quintero’s leadership is getting an early test. In June, the state released scores from the new Florida Standards Assessment, the replacement for the FCAT. ICS received a “D.” During the last several years under the FCAT, the school’s score had risen from an “F” to a “B.”

“We can definitely go back to being a B school, if not an A school,” Quintero said. “That’s the only challenge I’m looking at. But I look at it smiling, because we’re going to do it.”

Volunteer coordinator leads with her heart

SEBASTIAN – For the first time in five years, RCMA has a volunteer coordinator in volunteer-rich Indian River County.

Thanks to a $20,000 grant from the John’s Island Community Service League, RCMA hired Charli Whitmore during the summer to the part-time position.

"Charli is a true people person with a big heart," said Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s executive director. "She is going to have great chemistry with volunteers, and there is a great supply of them in that area."

Whitmore is from Maryland and relocated to Pennsylvania, where she worked at a child-care center for several years. Later, she joined the flooring business owned by her husband. They relocated themselves, and the business, to Sebastian last year. RCMA’s Children’s House Child Development Center is on the outskirts of Sebastian.

She began her RCMA job this summer by doing volunteer-style work in each classroom in RCMA’s three child-care centers in Indian River County. Now Whitmore is recruiting volunteers by searching the web and visiting churches and other local organizations.

“All you need to do is walk in a room," Whitmore is telling them. “Your face will light up, and so will your heart.”

Charli Whitmore, RCMA’s new volunteer coordinator for the Indian River area, joins volunteer Ed Boardman of Vero Beach as he plays with 18-month-old Lizeth Salas at the Robert Covill Child Development Center in Fellsmere.
Reading pays off for fifth-grader

TAMPA – Marbella San Juan, a fifth-grader at RCMA’s Wimauma Academy, won a Kindle Fire, school supplies and a visit with Tampa’s mayor – thanks to her avid reading last summer. Marbella read 22 books during the summer, qualifying her for two entries in prize drawings sponsored by myON, a literacy software company. Among 9,182 entries, Marbella’s was one of 15 chosen. She posed with Mayor Bob Buckhorn on Sept. 12, along with her mother, Sylvia Gonzalez, and Heather Hanson, Director of Professional Development and Data Analysis at the school.

Destined to advocate for migrants

While Luis Aguilar was a baby at RCMA, his mother learned to be a leader in behalf of migrant farm workers. Now, 21 years later, Aguilar is closing in on the same goal.

Aguilar, a junior at the University of South Florida, just finished an inspiring summer working in Washington, D.C. for Farmworker Justice, a nonprofit that seeks to end discrimination against farm workers and to help them improve their lives.

“I’m more motivated and passionate than ever about continuing down the path,” he said.

Aguilar’s internship was funded by the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association, which brings four young adults – each the child of migrant farm workers – to Washington each summer to help boost their educations and careers.

This was the third summer in a row in which one of the interns was an alumnus of an RCMA child-care center. Yesenia Calderon, now a law student, worked at the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund in 2014; Ilda Martinez, another USF student, interned at the U.S. Dept. of Education in 2015. They are the first Floridians honored in the history of the internship program.

Their RCMA connection isn’t surprising: RCMA is one of the nation’s largest provider of Head Start services to migrant families.

Aguilar was an infant when his mother, Irma Cano, first brought him to RCMA’s Palmetto Child Development Center near Bradenton. She participated in the policy council, the parent governing committee organized at each RCMA Head Start center, and she became president.

“RCMA just did an awesome job of getting families involved,” Aguilar said.

Today, each of Cano’s five children is either a college student, a college graduate, or college-bound. Aguilar intends to continue into law school and a career as an advocate.

“We aren’t statistics,” he said. “Your upbringing doesn’t define who you can become.”

RCMA adds Board members from Arcadia, Miami

Gloria Kendrick has been the face of RCMA in Arcadia for 38 years. Minerva Jaimes, head of a university campus in Miami, organized a clothing drive for RCMA that took on a life of its own.

In September, Kendrick and Jaimes became the two newest members of RCMA’s Board of Directors.

Jaimes has been familiar with RCMA since her younger brothers attended RCMA centers in Florida City. After Jaimes graduated from high school, she volunteered for a summer at RCMA centers in Florida City. Jaimes has led NSU’s student recruitment and community outreach efforts in the Homestead and Florida City areas during the last 11 years, crossing paths frequently with RCMA.

She organized a campus clothing drive two years ago for RCMA children. After the drive ended, her coworkers have continued to occasionally offer clothes, and Jaimes shuttles the donations among RCMA’s six child-care centers in south Miami-Dade County.

“My parents were farm workers and I used to go to the fields to help them when I was young,” she said.

“I have witnessed RCMA’s mission and have myself been on the receiving end through my little brothers,” she said. “I believe in the mission myself.”

Kendrick was initially recruited to RCMA in Immokalee in 1975. Two years later, she became RCMA’s point person when it expanded to Arcadia in 1977. She led RCMA’s growth in the area to three centers, serving a multicultural rainbow of nearly 400 children each year.

“There are no big people and no little people,” Kendrick insisted. “We treat everybody the same.”

KENDRICK HAS BEEN ENGAGED IN COUNTLESS COMMUNITY EFFORTS, SERVING AS GRAND MARSHAL OF ARCADIA’S CHRISTMAS PARADE. SHE MAINTAINED HER COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT EVEN AFTER RETIRING AS AREA COORDINATOR A YEAR AGO.

“It’s wonderful to join the Board,” she said. “It’s been like missing your family. It feels good to still be involved in the community and to represent RCMA voluntarily.”

Gloria Kendrick

Minerva Jaimes

Luis Aguilar
First RCMA, then snorkeling

CENTERS NEAR TOURIST ATTRACTIONS BENEFIT FROM HELPFUL VISITORS

FLORIDA CITY — With little effort, RCMA has become a regular stop for tour groups with a social conscience.

Led by Appleseed Expeditions and Joshua Expeditions, groups of energetic, affluent young people arrive at RCMA child-care centers ready to read to toddlers, wash windows, play games, plant gardens, paint parking spaces or perform any other service requested of them. They furnish supplies.

“The visits allow our clients to take a step away from their trip and realize that there are more important things in life than spending their day at Disney World or sitting on the beach,” Chad Cutting, domestic coordinator for the Texas-based tour organizer, Joshua Expeditions, wrote in an email.

“It gives them the chance to see that there are thousands of people in Florida that come from different backgrounds and that all have their own stories to share.”

The tours have gone on for more than a decade, and involve five to 15 trips a year. To a lesser extent, RCMA centers in Immokalee and Miami-Dade County also are visited by college groups.

Appleseed’s John Bartlum said tour leaders ask their clients each night to reflect on the day’s experiences, including the highs and lows. “It’s really mind-blowing how many of the highs go back to RCMA,” Bartlum said.

RCMA’s Homestead centers are the first stop on a five-day tour of the Florida Keys offered by the Panhandle-based Appleseed. After volunteering at RCMA, the travelers move on to snorkeling, kayaking and a dolphin encounter in the Florida Keys.

Appleseed’s three-day “Manatee Adventure” starts at RCMA’s Dade City child-care center, northeast of Tampa, then continues to Crystal River. Another trip starts at RCMA’s Fellsmere operations, near Vero Beach, before continuing to Kennedy Space Center.

RCMA managers said tour groups generally call months in advance and develop plans for their service at RCMA.

Groups have arrived with gifts ranging from paint and mulch to hula hoops and crayons, said Lorena Quiñones, who manages RCMA’s Centro Villas center in Florida City, near Key Largo.

If the projects don’t keep visitors busy, they always are welcome to help create a fun, stimulating learning experience for RCMA children.

“They incorporate themselves into what we’re doing,” said Beatriz Coronado, who oversees RCMA’s four centers in Florida City.

A summer in the limelight

Summer usually is a slow period at RCMA, when the migrant families have left Florida and RCMA’s services for them go into hibernation. But this summer was not slow for RCMA in the media. At least five different topics earned RCMA front-page or statewide coverage, all positive:

• Florida’s largest newspaper, the Tampa Bay Times, profiled five high-achieving graduates of Leadership Academy, RCMA’s middle school south of Tampa, as they push themselves toward college degrees and graduate-level successes. The article anchored the front page on Sunday April 10.

• The Times followed that with an April 15 editorial saluting the students. “They are shining examples of what can happen when determination meets opportunity,” the newspaper said, adding, “the students are all products of the well-regarded charter school program run by the Redlands Christian Migrant Association.”

• The Naples Daily News anchored its front page on June 19 with a profile of RCMA’s 26 Immokalee-area child-care homes – child-care centers run by women in their homes for an average of five children per home.

• On Aug. 17, the Florida stations for National Public Radio broadcast a feature on the use of iPads at RCMA’s Immokalee Community School. First-graders at the K-6 charter school take the iPads home and collaborate with parents on homework.

• The Plant City Observer published two front-page articles in June stemming from RCMA’s ribbon-cutting at the new $3.6 million Dover Child Development Center, near Plant City. The first article focused on RCMA’s presence in Dover; the second, a week later, profiled Ilda Martinez, who attended the center as a tot, and today is an RCMA board member and a scholar at the University of South Florida.

• CentroTampa, the all-Spanish weekly newspaper published by the Tampa Bay Times, profiled RCMA’s Lourdes Villanueva on its cover on Aug. 18. Villanueva is RCMA’s long-time Director of Farm Worker Advocacy.
Share Christmas, RCMA-style

Growing up poor limits your possessions – but not your imagination. It doesn’t restrain what you can do with paper and a magic marker.

RCMA’s kids prove that every year with their Christmas art. In their Christmas spirit, gifts nestle under palm trees. Florida produce such as tomatoes, strawberries and oranges herald the holiday.

You can support RCMA’s children by buying Christmas cards with their art. To order, visit www.rcma.org, and click the link for Christmas cards.

SHE SHARES BEARS

Cindy Swador of Port St. Lucie gave RCMA her collection of more than 100 teddy bears in August. RCMA’s Immokalee-area managers plan to distribute the bears as door prizes in parent meetings.

Teacher knows soccer

IMMOKALEE – Manuel Preciado, a teacher aide at Immokalee Community School, is a successful soccer coach outside of school.

He was an assistant coach last summer for the Immokalee Soccer Pit Cobras, a 17-and-under club team that plowed through a regional tournament, then lost a final game 3-1 in Tulsa, Okla. for the national championship. In the regionals, held in College Station, Texas, the Cobras outscored five opponents 15-3.

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NAPLES – The Lipman Golf Classic raised $72,000 for RCMA’s operations in late April.

Twenty-one foursomes competed in the 17th annual tournament, held this year at the redesigned Naples Heritage Golf & Country Club. A team sponsored by Tropicana won.

Proceeds from the tournament, one of RCMA’s largest fundraising events, help the agency provide matching funds required of an operating grant from the Florida Office of Early Learning. Each dollar raised by RCMA is matched by $16 from the state.

Next year’s tournament is scheduled for May 6 at Naples Heritage.
A lesson on poetry

IMMOKALEE – A year ago, the literacy coach at Immokalee Community School taught a lesson on poetry. Then she challenged the students to submit poetry to Creative Communication, an organization of educators who publish three books annually of children’s poetry, essays and art.

Submissions from nine fourth graders and one sixth grader were published. In the winter, another 20 students entered their work; seven of those were published.

“So word started spreading about this,” said the teacher, Louise Reid. “Then the first books arrived, and poetry caught on like wildfire.”

By spring, the creative work of nearly 60 students at the school was in print, or scheduled for publication this fall. A first grader submitted a poem from home, and it was published. A fourth grader, Genesis Turrubiartez, submitted two poems and an essay, and they were chosen for publication in three different editions.

The children’s successes have been personally rewarding to Reid. “It’s common for kids this age to get excited at PE, or in music class or during a science experiment,” she said. “But we have gotten them excited about writing. How great is that?”

A global day of giving

RCMA will participate on Nov. 29 in Giving Tuesday, a global day of support for charities and other community causes. The 4-year-old movement is timed to follow Thanksgiving, Black Friday and Cyber Monday.

You can kick off the giving season on Giving Tuesday with a tax-deductible gift to RCMA. Each dollar donated will qualify RCMA for $16 in matching funds through a contract between RCMA and the state’s Office of Early Learning.

You can donate online at www.rcma.org or mail a check to RCMA, 402 W. Main St., Immokalee, FL 34142.

IMMOKALEE – When Leticia Casseus began her freshman year at the University of Florida, she had “an alarming ah-ha moment.” She realized that, compared to other students, she lacked background experiences from exposure to a broader world.

“It was tough for me,” she said.

The daughter of migrant farm workers, Casseus had grown up in Immokalee, except for three years in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Now 28, Casseus vows to help Immokalee kids gain the awareness she once lacked. Immokalee Community School, an RCMA K-6 charter school, hopes Casseus will be a model for Haitian children.

The school’s director, Zulaika Quintero, believes Casseus is an important addition as the first Haitian-American on the ICS faculty.

“She’s someone who will help bring more of our migrant working Haitian families to our school,” Quintero said. “She’s very enthused to be able to promote our school in her community. She’s also an Immokalee native, which gives us hope that she could stay long term.”

Since Casseus first left Immokalee, she has been anything but settled. She has studied in Munich, Salzburg and Paris. She has worked in Little Rock, Philadelphia and Detroit. But she also has been a teacher and a youth minister in Immokalee.

“I just wanted to come back here and maybe serve as an example that your circumstances don’t necessarily keep you in the situation you’re in,” she said.
SEBRING – Daisha Shannon never benefited from RCMA as a child, but she did as a young mother.

Shannon said RCMA’s Teen Parent program at Sebring High School was a godsend to her – and her son Favid, today a thriving fourth-grader.

“He’s been in all advanced classes all through school,” she said. “I think a lot of it has to do with the teaching at RCMA.”

Shannon’s pregnancy with Favid had posed a dilemma, she said. To care for him, either Shannon would have to drop out of high school, or one of her parents would have to leave a paying job.

RCMA erased those problems, Shannon said. It arranged for Shannon and Favid to travel to school on a handicapped-only bus, needed because it accommodated child seats. RCMA linked Favid with a speech pathologist when a need was detected.

Shannon could visit Favid during school, but when she wanted to skip a class to linger with him, the RCMA staff pushed her to return to class. Ditto, when she wanted to leave school early.

“They cared, and they wanted to make sure I finished school,” Shannon said.

It all paid off. In 2013 Shannon graduated from the University of South Florida in elementary education. She has been a fifth-grade teacher at Sebring’s Fred Wild Elementary School ever since.

Meanwhile, Favid fondly remembers his RCMA days, especially the bounty of toys to play with and the breakfasts of bacon and eggs. Shannon wishes Favid’s 3-year-old brother, Theo, could attend RCMA. But he can’t. His mom is too affluent now.