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Spring News

## RCMA students chosen for 6-year pre-college program

TAMPA – Seventeen RCMA sixth graders have earned an extraordinary opportunity to top off their educations for the next six years. They will be the first students in a new, free program aimed at helping highly motivated, low-income students reach their potential and attend college.



The program, Berkeley Academy, is being launched by Berkeley Preparatory School, one of Tampa’s leading private schools with 1,300 pre-K-12 students. Kim Lawless, director of the new program, said it is the brainchild of Berkeley Prep’s headmaster, Joseph Seivold, as he pursues the school’s vision: Berkeley puts people in the world who make a positive difference.

Berkeley Academy is accepting up to 40 students each year. In addition to the 17 RCMA students accepted this year, another five were on a waiting list as of mid-April, meaning up to half of the first class could come from RCMA.

All those currently attend RCMA Leadership Academy in Wimauma, a farming community south of Tampa.

“This is just hugely ambitious and generous on Berkeley’s part,” said Mark Haggett, director of RCMA’s two charter schools in Wimauma. “But I’m also proud of our sixth graders. These students demonstrated high motivation, and they made a six-year commitment to their educations.”

For each of the next three summers, Berkeley Academy students are to attend six weeks of classes. During the school year, they are to attend a Saturday session each month. The curriculum has been designed by Berkeley, to be taught by college and high-school students hired as part-time teachers. In the final three years, the help will become more personal, as the Academy students are guided through quests for summer internships, college admission and scholarships.

(above) A ninth grader visiting from Berkeley Preparatory School reads to an RCMA child earlier this year.

**“I’m proud of our sixth graders. These students demonstrated high motivation, and they made a six-year commitment to their educations.”**

see **BERKELEY ACADEMY** continued on page 3

## When hearts, and a home, opened up

LaBELLE – Three years ago, a brave 4-year-old girl named Yadira pulled her teacher aside on an RCMA playground. Yadira confided that she was being abused at home by a family friend, and she was tired of it.

Pursuant to law, RCMA promptly triggered a whirlwind of investigations by local police and the Florida Department of Children & Families. The DCF concluded that night that Yadira should not return to her home.

A DCF representative exchanged glances with the four RCMA employees gathered around her. “Do any of you want to take her home?” she asked.

To work for RCMA, all employees undergo background checks and fingerprinting; each was qualified to take Yadira home as soon as the following day. Nobody was in a position to answer. Yadira spent the night in a foster home.

Delma Gonzalez, manager of Yadira’s child-care center, cried as she drove home. She had wanted



**Delma and Carlos Gonzalez, with Yadira**

see **YADIRA** continued on page 3

# Committee widens search for Mainster successor

The search for RCMA's new executive director continued to make progress in March as the search committee of Board members interviewed

four candidates. Meanwhile, RCMA retained a consultant specializing in not-for-profit organizations to help the committee attract additional candidates for the position.



Barbara Mainster

Mike Stuart, president of the Board, suggested that Barbara Mainster, the current executive director, consider a one-year retainer, to keep her involved after her successor takes over.

"Our goal is to find the best possible candidates that can effectively lead this outstanding organization," Stuart said. "The search committee and the full Board are fully committed to finding the right person for RCMA, as well as for the children and families we serve."

Mainster, 74, has been a staff leader at RCMA for 43 years and executive director for 28. She notified the Board last June that she intended to retire this summer. But Mainster has made clear that she is flexible about the timing.

"I am very pleased with the sensitivity of the Board and respect they have for the current staff," Mainster said.

The initial four candidates included Isabel Garcia, Mainster's Associate Executive Director and top-ranking staff member. Garcia described the interview as a valuable learning experience, but concluded that her current family commitments would not allow her to devote sufficient attention to the job.

Besides Stuart, the search committee consists of Board members Steve Price, Medora Krome, Bill Ferrari, Cipriano Mejia, Michael Bayer, and Weeda Mae Williams.



The street hockey champions from RCMA Leadership Academy toured the locker room of the Tampa Bay Lightning ice hockey team at Amalie Arena and met the mascot, Thunderbug. The players attended their first Lightning game that night, and the team was featured on the Jumbotron.

## RCMA team wins street hockey championship

TAMPA – Last fall, few students at RCMA Leadership Academy had ever held a hockey stick. Yet on Feb. 18, a team of RCMA students assembled during the winter won the first Tampa Bay varsity Street Hockey Championship sponsored by the Tampa Bay Lightning.

They were featured guests at a Lightning ice hockey game and brought a trophy, the school's largest yet, back to their farming community of Wimauma.

The team won the championship game of the Central Florida Charter Athletic League by 3-2 over LLT Academy of Tampa.

***"All three of our goals were scored in the first period, and that took the wind out of the sails of the Falcons, who had an undefeated season going into the finals," said Mark Haggett, director of Leadership Academy.***

***"What an amazing accomplishment!"***

The Lightning hockey organization is teaching street hockey as part of a long-term program to generate ice hockey interest in Florida. The Lightning set out to distribute 100,000 hockey sticks and balls to area children and to train 500 physical education instructors. In Wimauma, the RCMA team practiced in the parking lot.

## BERKELEY ACADEMY

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“Helping students get to college is something we do really well at Berkeley and we are excited about the opportunity to use that knowledge to help others,” Lawless said.

The relationship between Berkeley Prep and Haggett’s schools has been blossoming for years. Every Christmas, RCMA children in the Wimauma area welcome a caravan with more than 1,000 gifts from Berkeley Prep students. Berkeley ninth graders have visited Wimauma to read to RCMA’s younger children. And for the last two years, Berkeley’s

senior class has devoted its “Senior Buddy Day” to hosting and entertaining several busloads of RCMA students.

A key link between the schools has been Linda Adams, an RCMA board member whose three children have attended Berkeley Prep, and who learned last year about the Berkeley Academy plans.

“I just thought it would be an awesome connection,” she said.

Adams asked: Are Wimauma students eligible? Yes, she learned. But Berkeley could not offer transportation between Wimauma and Tampa.



**A senior at Berkeley Preparatory School collaborates on an art project with an RCMA student during Berkeley’s “Senior Buddy Day,” devoted to RCMA’s Tampa-area charter schools.**

RCMA could, Haggett decided. He estimates it will cost about \$100 per day, for an unbudgeted, yet worthwhile, expense of \$2,800 this summer.

**Berkeley Prep has been impressed by RCMA, Adams said. Haggett’s staff had demonstrated a willingness to make the schools’ collaborations work, and RCMA’s children had behaved well, and shown appreciation for Berkeley’s outreaches, Adams said.**

“That’s super-important in my experience,” she said.

## Staff wins honor for Tampa-area schools

WIMAUMA – The Academies of RCMA in April were named for the first time to

Tampa Bay’s Top 100 Workplaces.

Bestowed by the Tampa Bay Times, the honor was based on surveys completed by 56 employees of the two charter schools, which share a campus south of Tampa.

“I can’t tell you how proud I am of this and how privileged I feel to be part of such a wonderful organization and amazing schools,” said Mark Haggett, director of the two schools. “What a feather in our cap!”

The schools are the elementary level RCMA Wimauma Academy and the middle-school RCMA Leadership Academy. Based on survey responses, they ranked 29th out of the 50 employers selected in the small-business

category. In total, 178 workplaces were surveyed and 100 were selected.



**Mark Haggett**

## YADIRA

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to say “yes.” Delma and her husband Carlos had wanted children, but had none. She hoped he would agree to open their home. When he heard Yadira’s story, Carlos was angry – angry that a child would suffer like that.

“Go get her,” he said.

Delma went to a court hearing in Fort Myers the next morning, and offered to take Yadira. The judge sent a note: “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Delma replied.

“I thought the most we might keep her would be six months maybe,” she said. “I really didn’t know what I was getting myself into.”

Today, the Gonzalezes still have Yadira, but there is much more certainty. They are within weeks of adopting her.

RCMA teaches its preschool-age children about keeping their body parts safe, about respecting another child’s “space” and about places where you shouldn’t touch someone else. Simultaneously, RCMA requires teachers to be loving and trustworthy to the children.

So when Yadira approached her teacher on April 11, 2013, she was doing two things she had been taught – protect her body and trust her teacher. Today, she is candid about her decision.

“I felt like I needed to speak to them, and they were the best ones to help me solve the problem,” Yadira said. “If I didn’t tell them, it was going to get worse.”

During her first year with the Gonzalezes, Yadira showed signs of a young life in turmoil: anger, defiance, frustration and few behavioral boundaries. She was a restless sleeper.

“Her life was changing, and she was wanting to get control of it,” said Delma.

In first grade, Yadira made Cs, Ds and an F. Now, in the second grade, she earns As and Bs. She was named Student of the Month for September. Yadira is spunky, confident and determined to become a doctor.

The Gonzalezes, she says, are “fabulous.” She’s excited about her impending adoption. “For me, it’s taking too long.”

# RCMA begins offering immigration help

## RCMA IS UPGRADING ITS ABILITY TO DISPENSE LEGAL ADVICE TO IMMIGRANTS.

With grant funding, RCMA hired attorney Diana Castro in January to head a new immigration counseling program based near Tampa.

Meanwhile, some 20 other RCMA staff members have taken a 40-hour immigration law training course required by the federal Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA) in pursuit of accreditation, allowing the 20 staffers to represent and provide legal advice to immigrants.

RCMA's Immokalee area office – and its immigration assistance program specialist there, Kristina O'Hern – achieved accreditation and recognition from the BIA last October. Next in line are three Tampa Bay offices: Ruskin, Plant City and Mulberry.

Barbara Mainster, RCMA's executive director, applauded the changes. "I'm thrilled to welcome Diana to our staff, and I'm super proud of our staffers who have completed the 40-hour course," Mainster said. "We know that we help children by helping families, and immigration is an important challenge in many of their lives."

### The goals of the RCMA Immigration Assistance Program are to:

- Educate RCMA families about immigration benefits and policies,
- Help Legal Permanent Resident parents and staff pursue citizenship,
- Help young-adult immigrants pursue "deferred action," a federal program that allows noncitizens to stay in the country if they meet certain qualifications,
- Connect families to trusted private-sector immigration lawyers, and
- Increase public awareness of the issues facing immigrants.

While RCMA keeps no records on the immigration status of the families it serves, RCMA staff members know that many RCMA children are U.S. citizens born to immigrant parents.

"Harmful immigration policies and programs continue to separate children from parents and keep immigrants from participating fully in society," O'Hern said. "At RCMA we experience first-hand the negative impacts our children and communities suffer as a result of parents being deported."

Over the years, government policy changes – and discussions of changes – have galvanized RCMA parents to seek protection from deportation. Many were exploited by dishonest "notarios," which inspired RCMA to create a trustworthy alternative.

The RCMA Immigration Assistance Program became active after President Obama in 2012 created deferred action – which lets young adult immigrants, who were brought into the U.S. by their parents – hold jobs or attend college without fear of deportation. As of last year, nearly half of the 1.6 million immigrants eligible for deferred action had obtained it.

Also last year, Obama widened the program to include parents of those 1.6 million. But judges in Texas and Louisiana blocked the change, and it now is pending before the U.S. Supreme Court.

If the new deferred action program is revived, RCMA plans to expand its Immigration Assistance Program to accommodate the interest.

Castro, the new RCMA attorney, moved from her native Puerto Rico to Plant City with her daughter. She is helping to develop RCMA's assistance program for RCMA parents and other immigrants, while coordinating with local partners.

Castro's job is being funded through a \$50,000 grant from the Catholic Legal Immigration Network and a \$9,990 grant from the National Council of La Raza.



## Grant will support volunteerism

VERO BEACH – The John's Island Community Service League of Vero Beach awarded RCMA a \$20,000 grant in April to hire a part-time coordinator of volunteers in Indian River County.

### Through the volunteer coordinator, RCMA hopes to:

- Expand the number of volunteers in RCMA's three centers in the county;
- Ensure that volunteers are matched to children or activities that will result in both happy volunteers and more individualized attention for children, specifically expanding their vocabularies;
- Develop a systematized approach to recognizing and thanking volunteers.

"We want to build a stronger connection between RCMA and Vero Beach," said Barbara Mainster, RCMA's executive director. "We want to spread the word about the importance of quality early-childhood experiences and how volunteers can help increase the children's brain development."

Vero Beach has been extraordinarily generous to RCMA over the years. Children's House, RCMA's closest child development center to Vero, has operated for nearly 15 years in a series of donated facilities.

# Once tearful, she is a bundle of laughs

HAWTHORNE – A human being could hardly be more uprooted than 3-year-old Vivian Lin, when she arrived at RCMA’s Walker Child Development Center east of Gainesville in 2013.

The object of an international custody dispute, little Vivian was plucked from her mother’s family in China and brought to her father’s family in Interlachen. The two families speak different Chinese languages, so Vivian understood nothing -- and nobody – in Florida.



**Vivian Lin**

At RCMA, Vivian didn’t play or socialize. She stood at a window and cried, even through naptime.

“It was hard to watch,” said Christina DeFord, Vivian’s teacher. “She would cry so loud that she could not even hear what people were saying to her.”

Teachers visited Vivian’s home and her family’s Chinese restaurant in Interlachen. They mingled with the family, to show unity. Vivian’s dad visited RCMA to tell his daughter’s classmates about Vivian’s former culture in China.

Teachers learned Chinese greetings, bought Asian dolls and displayed symbols of Chinese culture on the RCMA walls. They found songs in Vivian’s Chinese language.

The little girl softened. She began joining in songs and playing with toys. She became affectionate at home about six months after arriving, and interested in school activities around nine months, DeFord said.

By then, Vivian was delayed in all areas of childhood development. But that would change as she began to participate in class activities.

“Her social-emotional development started skyrocketing at that point,” said DeFord.

**Vivian will soon depart for kindergarten, where her prospects are bright. She has advanced beyond her peers, learning the full alphabet and counting to 100, said DeFord. Vivian recently read a book to her classmates.**

Vivian, who once felt utterly alone, is a bundle of laughs and hugs today, DeFord said.

“Now, she runs to us.”

## Construction near on Lake Placid center

LAKE PLACID – Contractors were scheduled to break ground in April on a new, long-awaited, RCMA child-care center.

The \$810,000 building will allow the return of RCMA’s South Highlands Child Development Center to Highway Park, a predominantly African-American neighborhood surrounded by citrus groves. The center operated in the neighborhood from 1981 until 2008, when RCMA lost its lease, and moved the center to a community-college campus in a suburban area of Lake Placid.

***“This will be a beautiful new building, but it will feel a lot like coming home,” said Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s executive director. “We’ve known for 25 years that we belong in Highway Park.”***

With 4,700 square feet, the center will accommodate up to 60 children. It is scheduled to open next January.

RCMA never vacated the neighborhood entirely. Across the street from the future child-care site, RCMA has maintained a community resource center, where community groups meet and visitors use computers, apply for social services and search for jobs.



Parents of first graders at Immokalee Community School learn how to record greetings for their children on iPad Minis.

## Parents tackle homework, and iPad minis

IMMOKALEE – A first-grader steps into his family’s mobile home with an iPad Mini tucked safely in his book bag.

Within hours, the iPad will play a central role in an audacious learning project. It will convert immigrant farm workers – many of whom suffer low literacy in Spanish and no literacy in English – into tutors for their children.

The project is under way this year at Immokalee Community School, a K-6 charter school operated by RCMA. It involves all of the school’s 37 first-graders and embodies a concept that RCMA tells every parent: You are your child’s first teacher. You must advocate for your child’s education at all levels.

“Immigrant parents face a series of challenges as they try to remain involved parents,” said Juana Brown, RCMA’s director of charter schools. “There are language, culture, and education issues the school must help address to make this collaboration possible. The iPad facilitates this process.”

Thanks to \$55,000 in grants from the Southwest Florida Community Foundation, Immokalee Community School can take on the challenge with technology.

Each first grader takes home an iPad Mini once a week along with a homework assignment on paper in a mix of English and Spanish. Parents and children turn on the iPad and video themselves collaborating on homework.

**Later, teachers pull rich insights from the videos:**

- **How the kids are doing when they answer orally instead of on tests.**
- **How the children are progressing through the school year.**
- **How well the parents are pushing their children, as instructed by the school, toward higher-level thinking.**
- **How the parents are adapting to the iPads.**

Zach Fodor, the school’s technology curriculum specialist, has been evaluating the videos.

He sees parents exhausted from a day of field work yet happy to be contributing to their children’s education. He sees siblings joining the discussions. He believes the iPads are making families smarter and closer.

“I believe it’s creating a more language-rich environment,” Fodor said. “And it’s truly exciting to see how technology brings people together.”

## Immokalee school earns 5-year charter

IMMOKALEE – The Collier County School Board has granted a five-year charter – and a vote of confidence – for RCMA’s K-6 Immokalee Community School. The 15-year-old charter school previously had functioned under three-year charters.

“This is an affirmation of an education program that does a good job of serving the families in this community,” said Juana Brown, RCMA’s director of charter schools.

ICS schools 245 children from low-income families, operating in a

three-story building on the same block in downtown Immokalee as RCMA’s headquarters building.

**BEFORE THE STATE’S FCAT TESTING AND GRADING SYSTEM WAS PHASED OUT, ICS EARNED A “B” SCHOOL GRADE, THE HIGHEST OF ANY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN IMMOKALEE.**

“I think the School Board has given ICS a vote of confidence because our students have been able to show both achievement and growth,” Brown said. “We have a good track record.”



## An Easter welcome

IMMOKALEE – The Easter Bunny, sponsored by a Rotary Club and several businesses from Fort Lauderdale, visited RCMA’s Immokalee charter school on March 24. The school’s youngest children received doughnuts, juice and school supplies from the Bunny.

## Out of this world

IMMOKALEE – Once again, Immokalee Community School outdid itself in building a float for the community’s beloved Christmas parade. “ICS Space Dragons” was named the parade’s Best All-Around Float. In February, the float placed in the top three of 157 floats in the Edison Festival of Light parade in Fort Myers. The school’s dance team performed on the float in both parades.



**Guillermina Cendejas (right) poses with Linda Barker, her English-language tutor with Literacy Services of Indian River County.**

## Teacher rewarded for studying English

VERO BEACH – Guillermina Cendejas was a migrant fruit-picker for 14 years, then an RCMA teacher for 20. All that time, she has wanted to learn English.

In March, Cendejas was honored by Literacy Services of Indian River County for her diligent work with the organization’s tutors toward becoming bilingual.

“I try to speak more English,” she said, in English. “It’s difficult, but I have tried.”

Cendejas has learned to cut hair by reading a cosmetology book in English. In December, she gave a tour of her work place, the Children’s House Child Development Center near Vero Beach, to English-speaking guests.

Cendejas’ supervisor at Children’s House, Center Coordinator Laura Perez, took photos at the luncheon as Cendejas accepted her award, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Student of the Year.

“She tries to do her best at everything she does,” Perez said. “I have seen her put her English into practice here at the center.”



## Spring News

Redlands Christian Migrant Association  
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You can see this year's card choices at [www.rcma.org/christmas\\_card.html](http://www.rcma.org/christmas_card.html). Check out the new note cards, suitable for all seasons!

For information, call RCMA's Community Relations Department at (800) 282-6540, extension 224.

*On The Move*

## He had fun, and learned more than adults realized



Gibran Nuñez

### Gibran Nuñez fondly remembers his years at RCMA: drinking from juice boxes, having fun, dancing to MC Hammer and having more fun.

"I just remember playtime, and having fun," he said.

Nuñez' parents had brought him from Mexico and enrolled him at RCMA's South Highlands Child Development Center. The center was in Highway Park, a predominantly African-American neighborhood in the midst of sprawling citrus groves. Only English was spoken there.

When Nuñez entered kindergarten, the Highlands County school system assigned him to Lake Country Elementary School, the only area school with a program for ESOL students – English for Speakers of Other Languages.

"I had to start somewhere," he says today. "But I remember that I was taken out pretty quickly."

Nuñez' teachers had realized that he had learned a lot of English in Highway Park. They moved him to a mainstream program. Twelve years later, Nuñez graduated from Lake Placid High School as class president and valedictorian.

He went on to earn an accounting degree from the University of Florida. Since college, Nuñez has worked for the Lakeland-based Summit Consulting, a large carrier of worker's compensation insurance. He is a field auditor, based in Nashville. His English is excellent.