

Message from the RCMA Board of Directors

We want to inform you that as of June 4, 2018, Gayane Stepanian is no longer employed as the Executive Director of RCMA. We appreciate Gayane's contributions to RCMA, we thank her for her service, and we wish her well in her future endeavors. Pursuant to our Succession Plan, Isabel Garcia will serve as Interim Executive Director until a permanent replacement is selected. We will provide that information once a decision is made. During this leadership change, we will continue our mission to prepare rural low-income children for leadership in an increasingly diverse and complex world.

Ms. Stepanian took the top job at RCMA in January, 2017. She replaced Barbara Mainster, Executive Director for the prior 28 years. Ms. Garcia has worked for RCMA for 30 years, and has been Associate Executive Director since 2012.



Isabel Garcia
Interim Executive Director/ Head Start Director

For the love of it

Doretha Sylvester works as a kitchen assistant for four hours every weekday. She could make a steady wage doing that almost any place, but she does it as a volunteer at RCMA, with devotion.

Doretha came to RCMA almost 15 years ago, when her grandchildren entered RCMA in Hawthorne, in north Florida. Twelve years later, when she moved to Palatka, Doretha switched to an RCMA center there.

As good as she is to RCMA, Doretha insists that it's she who benefits. Volunteering keeps her going despite her breast cancer.

Back in Hawthorne, two other volunteers carry on. They read children's stories, tie shoes, water the garden and help the children brush their teeth. Maria Velez has been doing this for 15 years; Noemi Santiago for 14.

They are emblematic of the unsung heroes who volunteer at RCMA facilities across Florida. They humbly give up years of their lives just to accomplish little bits of goodness with wide-eyed children.

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Doretha Sylvester



Gabriela Romeri



Miguel Beltre Camilo

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Funded by a grant, sixth-graders from RCMA's Leadership Academy tackle a climbing wall (above) and kayaking (below) at Tampa's Berkeley Preparatory School.

Grant lures RCMA girls outside

WIMAUMA – The program is called “Girls Outside,” and sixth-grade girls from an RCMA charter school have gotten outside Wimauma and outside their comfort zones. They have bowled, climbed walls, tackled ropes courses, kayaked and rolled kayaks over.

“It’s kind of scary at first,” said Rosario Carranza of RCMA Leadership Academy, south of Tampa. “But after you get used to it, it’s really kind of fun.”

RCMA administrators love the program, but cannot claim credit for it. Rather, it landed as a surprise gift from a high school senior in Tampa. Carson Eckhard, now attending the University of Pennsylvania, had founded Girls Outside at Tampa’s Berkeley Preparatory School after she became convinced that outdoor activities raise the confidence of teenage girls.

Then she took it a step farther. Familiar with RCMA, Eckhard proposed a Girls Outside program for Wimauma Academy. She won \$19,000 in grant funding for it – courtesy of the Tampa Bay Lightning Foundation, which declared Eckhard to be a Community Hero of the Future.

So Eckhard devised a three-year program and enlisted younger members of the Berkeley club to implement this year’s sessions. The high-school girls quickly became role models for the Wimauma girls.

“They’re always there for us when we need them,” Rosario said. “They help us make choices.”

Amidst her studies in Philadelphia, Eckhard has kept tabs on her brainchild, and she is pleased.

“I’m so grateful that it has continued,” she said. “I’m really proud of the girls who are leading it. I look forward to expanding it.”





RCMA preschooler Sheila Sanchez shares her doll with Gwen Graham.

New generation

Another Graham visits RCMA children

IMMOKALEE – In 1994, then-U.S. Sen. Bob Graham came to Immokalee to spend one of his famous “work days” with RCMA children. He joined them at a water table.

In March, Graham’s daughter Gwen followed in her father’s path, visiting Immokalee for her own work day as a candidate for Florida governor. Gwen Graham joined preschoolers for breakfast and elementary-school girls for dancing and hula-hoops. She mopped the cafeteria floor.

Visiting a classroom in RCMA’s Immokalee Community Child Development Center, Graham recalled the

years her own daughter, Sarah, attended a quality preschool – while some of her young friends didn’t. Sarah entered kindergarten better prepared than the friends. “They never were able to catch up,” Graham said.

She was impressed by RCMA. “You can tell the loving, caring, nurturing environment that all of you are providing to these kids,” she said.

Graham said her campaign themes could be summed up as “a brighter future for all children.”

Bob Graham holding a girl during his visit in 1994



Continued from front page...

Volunteers

To name just a few:

- Each year, on "Dr. Seuss' birthday," Miguel Beltre Camilo visits our two centers in Sebring to read Dr. Seuss books to the kids. He arrives in full costume and full makeup as "Thing 1."
- Across Florida in Wabasso, Stella Covill arrives each Thursday with books and props for a reading session. For many years, she has been RCMA's leading supporter in the Vero Beach area. "She really, really loves the children," says the center coordinator in Wabasso, Sarah Chacom.
- Gabriela "Gaby" Romeri spent the last year working in Immokalee's legal aid office. Two nights a week, Gaby taught civics classes to immigrants applying for citizenship through RCMA's Immigration Assistance Program.
- South of Miami, volunteer Lizbet Melo was so helpful to the staff – and such a natural with the children – that she volunteers no more. RCMA hired her.

Much bonding happens between RCMA kids and the volunteers who work with them.

Retired pastor Morgan Roberts, who has tutored students since 2006 at an RCMA charter school near Tampa, is rewarded by the hope that a student he tutors will grow up inspired by the memory that Morgan cared; that Morgan wanted him to succeed. Bill Ferrari, an RCMA board member who volunteers at the same school, is visibly moved when he discusses what the experience has meant to him.

Another retiree, Dean Young of Vero Beach, discovered that on most days, at least one preschool child craves individual attention. Patiently lending an ear, or speaking a few calming words, usually solves the problem. Yet it means everything to the child. For Dean, time with the children has been "one of the highlights of my retirement."



Bill Ferrari



Helpers

Demarcus Brown (left) and Da'marion Bullard may be RCMA's youngest volunteers. They visit the South Highlands Child Development Center after school each weekday, and spend 20 minutes patrolling the grounds for litter and meeting any other needs. "We just kind of bonded with them," said Center Coordinator Karen Lowe. "We love having them around."





A load of cabbages and strawberries awaited families at RCMA's Dover Child Development Center.

Bayer grant feeds RCMA families

PLANT CITY – Thanks to a \$10,000 grant from Bayer Crop Science, RCMA families east of Tampa received about 65,000 pounds of free food and other aid during the 2017-18 school year.

The donations were heavy on nutrition: cucumbers, carrots, sweet potatoes, cabbage, strawberries and zucchini, frequently accompanied by extras such as bread.

The grant has involved a team of charitable organizations. The Florida Specialty Crop Foundation linked Bayer Crop Science to Farmers Feeding Florida, a program in which produce that's blemished yet nutritious is salvaged to feed the hungry. Feeding Florida, a network of food banks, provides refrigerated trucks that ship the produce to families.

The food was distributed in multiple trips to RCMA centers in the Plant City area.

"Hunger is always a threat to the families we serve," said Lourdes Villanueva, RCMA's director of farmworker advocacy. "With this great program, Bayer Crop Science and the Specialty Crop Foundation have teamed up with the food agencies to bring us tons of food that's fresh and healthy."



Padilla honored for hurricane response

IMMOKALEE – Gloria Padilla – an RCMA senior staffer who exhausted herself helping fellow Immokalee residents recover from Hurricane Irma – has been recognized for her selflessness in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"Gloria is an exemplary citizen who has chosen to use her many talents in service of those around her," said U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, in a statement entered into the Congressional Record on March 15.

Padilla is an Immokalee native and a former farmworker. She now manages the seven child-care centers that RCMA operates in Immokalee and Bonita Springs.

When Hurricane Irma struck Immokalee in September, Padilla opened the RCMA Immo-

kalee Community School as an unofficial shelter for staff and their families. She and RCMA coworkers commandeered the RCMA school cafeteria and oversaw meals for thousands of people. FEMA set up shop there and accepted more than 1,000 applications for assistance. Padilla worked with Diaz-Balart to open Horizon Village as temporary housing for families who lost their homes.

Diaz-Balart was impressed. He wrote in the Congressional Record, "I find myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to collaborate with such a dedicated individual who cares so deeply about her community."

"This was a team effort for the whole community," Padilla said. "I share this acknowledgement with everybody who helped."

Misery ended after RCMA - and donors - helped

IMMOKALEE – RCMA didn't learn about the Alvarados until December, and by then, all three were suffering severe headaches.

And no wonder: their double-wide trailer was pummeled four months earlier when Hurricane Irma ransacked Immokalee. Yet the Alvarados, plagued by disabilities, lacked the resources and the energy to find another place to live. Over the four months, mold crept in until it coated the trailer. The smell was unbearable.

The Alvarados might have lived in such misery indefinitely except for the intervention of RCMA and generous networks of individuals and organizations in Irma's aftermath.

RCMA had never planned to become a disaster-relief agency. But after Irma struck, staffers instinctively hurried into the neighborhoods where RCMA children lived, and began helping the families with storm-related problems. At RCMA headquarters in Immokalee, the staff served free hot meals to anyone who was hungry. RCMA became the community's focal point. It accepted the role, and appealed for support.

Nancy Gomez of Winter Haven saw the scenes on Facebook and went to Immokalee to volunteer. After five weeks, RCMA was able to use grant funds to hire Gomez as a disaster-relief coordinator. In December, she received a phone call about the Alvarados.

The couple are in their late 60s. Hilario Alvarado wears a pacemaker, and is partially paralyzed. Neither he nor his wife Maria can drive. Their 27-year-old son Larry is mentally disabled.

"FEMA was doing the best they could, given the demand," Gomez said. "But they had not been able to help this family yet."

RCMA provided gift cards that allowed the Alvarados to pay for daily needs and stay in a hotel for two weeks. But that support ran out, and they moved back to the double-wide.

Eventually, RCMA enlisted the support of U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio and his team. Progress resumed. The Alvarados moved into Summer Glen, an apartment complex for the elderly and disabled. The family's Social Security disability payments cover the rent.

"I have nothing but gratitude for everything that was done," Maria Alvarado said.

It was a victory after weeks of improvised social work. And it underscored three sobering facts:

1. People are still suffering from Hurricane Irma.
2. The wheels of government turn slowly; and
3. The FEMA application process is extremely difficult to navigate, and with so many denied assistance, the process of applying must become easier.

RCMA found a new home for (left to right) Hilario, Larry and Maria Alvarado after Hurricane Irma damaged their mobile home.





Staff members in the Indian River area include (left to right): Catalina Bustamante, data specialist, Robert G. Covill center and Children's House; Nydia Guzman, area coordinator; Sarah Chacon, center coordinator, Children's House; Felix Martinez, area maintenance; Lesedi Trotz, center coordinator, Covill center; Yadira Vega, family support worker, Covill center; Margaret Button, early childhood specialist, Covill center and Children's House.

RCMA glows in Indian River

FELLSMERE – On a recent Friday, RCMA celebrated its growing cadre of volunteers in the Vero Beach area. Plaques went to Stella Covill – a champion fund-raiser for RCMA, who reads with devotion to RCMA children; and to Dean Young – who has persuaded his neighbors to give RCMA the proceeds of an annual concert.

Yet beneath the surface, the happy gathering had even more to celebrate.

After a reorganization last year, RCMA's management team in Indian River County has jelled under the leadership of a "not so" new area coordinator, Nydia Guzman. To make the reorganization work, nearly a dozen key staff members rallied to earn management credentials. The new volunteers, meanwhile, are helping children develop language skills.

"You can just feel it when you go into the classroom," said Irma Chappa, who supervises 21 of RCMA's child-care centers through four area coordinators, including Guzman. "The teachers are happy; the children are happy."

Guzman had served for years as the area's second-ranking manager, responsible for maintaining educational standards. In recent years, she watched as other

area coordinators left, several for reasons unrelated to RCMA. Last July, Guzman was given the job – and asked to retain her former responsibilities too.

Larry Salustro, an RCMA board member from Vero Beach, said she has handled the challenges well. "She figured out how to be a take-charge person."

The changes came in the wake of external challenges too. Greening, the citrus disease, has devastated many of Indian River's famed groves. That disrupted the livelihoods of migrant citrus pickers, and many left the area. RCMA responded by retooling one of its Fellsmere child-care centers – which had been funded for children of migrant families – to serve babies and pregnant mothers instead.

The area also received grant funding for a part-time volunteer coordinator, Jessica Salgado. She has recruited and trained new volunteers, making their work satisfying and effective.

Margaret Button, an RCMA and early childhood veteran, moved to the area as an early childhood specialist. "I have never seen the number of volunteers anywhere like we have in this area," she said.



Guests eat as they celebrate diversity among people and foods. Pictures by Christel Yaffe.

Tasty diversity

WIMAUMA – In the spirit of celebrating our differences as well as exploring what unites us, some 50 Tampa-area people gathered at RCMA’s Wimauma Academy for the Recipe United Brunch, held in an open-air pavilion in March. Individuals from various ages, economic circumstances, races, ethnicities, industries, orientations and political views gathered and feasted on diverse cuisines.

The event opened and closed with a traditional Aztec blessing to Mother Earth and the meal. Little ones played clay flutes in the shape of birds. They were led by David Peñaflo. Peñaflo manages RCMA’s adult education program statewide and incorporates folk dance, music, art and history to maintain cultural pride.

Once the feast began, guests tried traditional dishes from India, Mexico, Armenia, Italy, Guatemala and more. Teacher Larissa Tsigrinskaja, a native of Estonia, prepared hakkliha-kapsahautis, a delicious stew with carrots and cabbage. She explained how it’s traditionally prepared in a huge dish to feed an entire village. She further detailed how the top layer is for families and the bottom layer is for farm animals.

Mixtures of fresh fruit juices, a Latino favorite called aguas frescas, were popular.



The guests enjoyed sharing and learning about the history of these dishes. In the end, the Recipe United Brunch succeeded in creating a deeper level of connection among people from very different backgrounds.

The brunch was the fourth in a nationwide series sponsored by UnidosUS, America’s largest Latino advocacy organization. RCMA is a proud affiliate of UnidosUS, and both groups urge Americans to overcome differences and ignite problem-solving around a positive vision of our shared future. Similar meals are planned across the country.

Chuck Tiernan, director of community impact for the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay, brought chocolate-chip cookies, baked under strict standards handed down from his mother. He enjoyed the meal – and the concept.

“I felt the food there was a nice way to get everybody to talk to each other a little bit,” Tiernan said.

RCMA’s David Peñaflo showcases his heritage by performing an Aztec blessing.



RCMA charter schools earn B grades

Capping a difficult school year, all three of RCMA's charter schools celebrated "B" grades based on state-wide testing.

Around Wimauma, a farming community south of Tampa, none of the six other elementary schools or the two middle schools matched the Bs earned by RCMA Wimauma Academy, an elementary school, or by RCMA leadership Academy, a middle school.

Immokalee Community School enjoyed its B for the second consecutive year.

Juana Brown, RCMA's director of charter schools, was pleased.

"The consensus in our schools was that it was perhaps one of the most challenging years due to factors including the hurricane's impact, immigration, and other attending issues around these two areas," Brown said. "Despite this, there was both achievement and growth at all three schools. The strength of the academic programming, teacher commitment, wrap-around services, plus our strong parent involvement and collaboration has proven, once again, to be the catalyst for continued success."



Mandy Johnson, the math teacher who led RCMA Wimauma Academy in a national math competition, leads in the celebration after the school won. Seated in front of Johnson is Barbara Mainster, RCMA's former executive director, and a frequent volunteer at the school. Photo by Matific.

RCMA school wins national math competition

WIMAUMA – Students at an RCMA charter school won a national online math competition in February – along with a \$15,000 prize check for the school.

"I feel like we just won the lottery and an Academy Award at the same time," crowed Mandy Johnson, a math teacher who has pioneered the school's use of memory aids such as chants and body movement to help students remember math techniques.

RCMA Wimauma Academy, located south of Tampa, is one of three charter schools operated by RCMA. All are customized to serve the needs of low-income farm families.

In February, Wimauma Academy entered the US Matific Math Games, a free, online math competition aimed at improving American students' confidence and math skills. For a week, students completed Matific mini-games, competing to complete the most games, with the highest scores.

Enroute to winning the top prize, seven of Wimauma Academy's classrooms placed among the top three nationwide, and two of the students placed in the top three.

The school plans to use the \$15,000 as seed money toward an open-air sports pavilion.



Team effort

The Lipman team studies a long putt at 19th Annual Lipman Golf Classic on May 5. The event attracted 92 golfers and 27 RCMA staff volunteers. It raised nearly \$63,000 for RCMA operations.

Capitol tour



State Sen. Rene Garcia of Hialeah became an impromptu tour guide when four students from RCMA's Leadership Academy visited the Florida Capitol in January during Children's Week. They met with several legislators and discussed issues important to immigrants. Outside the Capitol, the students visited a museum and the Florida Supreme Court. Posing with Garcia, the students are (left to right) Israel Gamez, Melissa Moran, Edgar Murillo, and (seated) Yulisa Garcia.

RCMA parent leaders ascend to state, national roles

A mother and grandmother of RCMA children have been elected to high-level leadership posts in parent organizations that support Head Start programs.

In January, Malena Cuahutenango was elected secretary in the Parent Affiliate to the board of the Washington-based National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association.

In April, Felecia McClendon was elected to a similar parent affiliate serving the southeastern U.S.

Cuahutenango has a young son at RCMA's Mulberry Child Development Center, south of Lakeland. McClendon has a grandson at RCMA's Walker Child Development Center near Palatka in north Florida.

"These ladies started out participating in the parent programs, and they earned so much respect that they now speak for thousands of Head Start parents," said Isabel Garcia, RCMA's Interim Executive Director.

Collectively, Head Start programs are RCMA's leading funder, accounting for some \$40 million, most of RCMA's operations money.

Head Start regulations insure that parents have influence over their centers' operations. The parents form committees at the center level, and send representatives to a statewide executive committee that participates in RCMA board functions.

Meanwhile, parents also are involved in state, regional and national organizations that support Head Start. The National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association, where Cuahutenango serves on the parent affiliate, supports migrant programs in Head Start. The Region IV Head Start Association, where McClendon serves, covers Florida and seven other southeastern states.

"I wanted to learn about RCMA," Cuahutenango said, "and about bankers and lawyers and how they help RCMA. I've been learning so many things."

McClendon was a Head Start child and enrolled three of her four children in Head Start. Now, as a Head Start grandmother, she sees how her parent activism cured her shyness.

"It sharpened my leadership," she said. "It's empowered me to be that up-front person and to be an advocate for Head Start."



Felecia McClendon



Malena Cuahutenango

'Big and sweet'

Strawberries help raise \$100,000 for RCMA

PLANT CITY – The annual Strawberry Picking Challenge in February brought in nearly \$100,000 for RCMA.

"The Picking Challenge continues to grow year after year," said Gary Wishnatzki, owner of Wish Farms and the creator of the event. "The berries were big and sweet, and the turnout was our best yet. I love that our industry shares a close bond with the community.

"Bringing folks together to recognize our dedicated farmers and field workers, as well as RCMA's unwavering commitment is what this day is all about."

Wishnatzki, an RCMA board member, has raised money to help educate the children of migrant farmworkers since 2006. For eight years, he staged a pro-am tennis tournament in Tampa. Then, he conceived

an event to simultaneously raise funds for RCMA and also to celebrate the work of strawberry pickers – the Strawberry Picking Challenge.

Funds are raised through corporate sponsorships, primarily in the strawberry industry, and admissions fees to a dinner and the picking competition. The lead sponsor this year was Monte Package Co., a maker of produce packaging, which contributed \$10,000. Since the event began in 2014, the Strawberry Picking Challenge has donated a total of \$423,000 to the children of RCMA.

"Monte Package, Wish Farms and Gary put on another wonderful event for RCMA," said Isabel Garcia, RCMA's Interim Executive Director. "They are enhancing the future of thousands of RCMA children, and of RCMA itself."

Students from RCMA's Wimauma Academy lead the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance at the Strawberry Picking Challenge.





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Once a farmworker, now a scholar

Fernando Rodriguez, an RCMA baby, began work in Florida's tomato fields at age 13. But his father never let him forget that a better life was available.

"Get to studying because manual labor is not easy," Federico Rodriguez would say.

Yet studying was difficult too, as the family followed the annual tomato harvest from Florida to Tennessee. "I would find myself going to three different schools all within the year," Fernando said.

A decade later, Fernando is firmly out of the fields. In May, he received a master's degree in architecture from Florida International University. Fernando made the Dean's List for the last six semesters. He plans next to study for a master's in arts in architecture, then a doctorate, then open his own architectural firm.

RCMA played a role in Fernando's story. As a preschooler, he attended the RCMA center in Quincy, in the Florida Panhandle.

Later, Fernando volunteered at RCMA in Immokalee to earn service hours required at Immokalee High School. Over three recent semesters, he received \$6,000 from the RCMA-linked Krome Educational Fund.

Now, he won't celebrate success without recognizing the challenges that migrant children face. At graduation, he wore a stole with a color pattern representing the Mexican culture. He posed for a photo with the Mexican flag, and for another in a tomato field.

"It's a time for a lot of celebration and happiness," he said. "But it's important to remember the struggles and where we came from."

