



REDLANDS CHRISTIAN MIGRANT ASSOCIATION

Fall News 2018



EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

Immokalee Community School fifth-graders (left to right) Alejandro Rodriguez, Jennifer Arriaga and Ady Calmo Domingo perform in May's end of year recital. Their school - currently with grades K-6 - is considering expanding through grade 8. Story, page 2.



Students Ava Lynn Losolla, Diana Sanchez Diaz, Belen Ramirez Murillo and Isabella Rios enjoy a recent fall festival at Immokalee Community School.



ELIZABETH RUIZ,
manager of RCMA's Dover 2 childcare center

Immokalee school may be expanded

IMMOKALEE

RCMA hopes it can add seventh and eighth grades to Immokalee Community School by the fall of 2020, fulfilling years of requests by parents.

That would make ICS an alternative to Immokalee's only middle school, which teems with 1,000 students. The new grades at ICS would serve 72.

“Parents have always expressed some apprehension about their children not having the same kind of structure, the same level of support, at Immokalee Middle School,” said Juana Brown, RCMA’s director of charter schools.

RCMA's charter schools are customized to meet the needs of farmworking families, with longer hours, individualized instruction and deep family engagement. In recent years, the schools have out-performed most neighboring public schools on standardized tests.

Immokalee Community School opened in 2000, along with its sister school, Wimauma Academy, south of Tampa. RCMA added a middle school in Wimauma in 2012.

Several steps remain before the Immokalee school can be expanded. The proposal has been endorsed by a committee of RCMA's Board of Directors, but not the full board. RCMA also must obtain the approval of the Collier County School Board when it applies next year to renew the school's charter. School Board staff members have encouraged RCMA to add the two grade levels.

RCMA managers hope to locate the additional classrooms in the existing space in the school's three-story building.

More childcare in strawberry country

DOVER

In a region filled with strawberry pickers, RCMA is expanding its childcare capacity to 240 children.

The Oct. 8 opening of the Dover 2 Child Development Center added 80 positions next door to the 160-child Dover 1 center, which opened two years ago.

“At the end of the day, it is one big center,” said Elizabeth Ruiz, center coordinator of the new Dover 2.

Ruiz' new center actually is a refurbished old one. Consisting of four portable classrooms, it operated for a generation in the next-door San Jose Mission, a complex of farmworker housing and social services operated by Catholic Charities. Most years, the Dover center compiled one of the longest waiting lists among RCMA's 67 childcare centers, and it referred many families to RCMA centers in nearby Plant City. In 2011, RCMA bought nearly six nearby acres from the Diocese. In 2016, the new \$3.6-million center opened.

Ruiz grew up in the Plant City area, and has worked off and on for RCMA since she became a part-time teacher at age 16. In her most recent stint, Ruiz joined RCMA as a

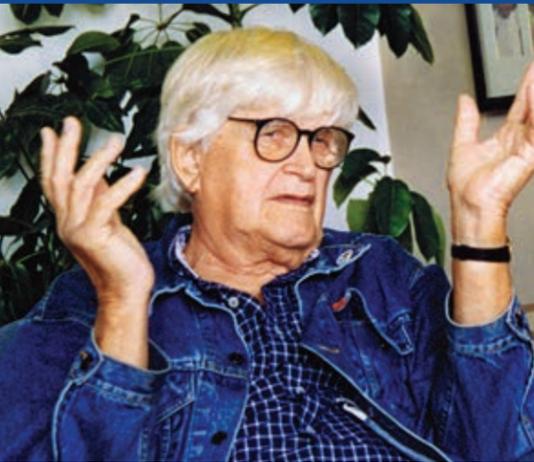
family-support worker in 2013. While working for RCMA, she earned a bachelor's degree from the University of South Florida in 2014.

Ruiz's counterpart at Dover 1 is Elda Cruz. The two have known each other since childhood, when they attended the same RCMA after-school program across the highway from where they now work.

Cruz's Dover 1 center will care for 160 children ages 0-2. Ruiz's Dover 2 will accommodate 80 children ages 3-5.

“I'm looking forward to seeing all those happy faces,” she said.

Together, the Dover centers are planning “Strawberry Saturdays,” a service unique among RCMA childcare centers. This season, they have budgeted to operate on up to six Saturdays during the peak of the strawberry harvest, so parents can return to the fields each Saturday to meet the growing demand for winter strawberries, both nationwide and at the Florida Strawberry Festival in nearby Plant City.



Leading from the heart

Nearly 50 years ago, a vivid moment of RCMA history happened in Miami.

Wendell Rollason was the new executive director of RCMA, and he already had solved a baffling mystery: Why were farmworkers taking their toddlers into the fields with them as they worked – when RCMA was offering to keep the children for free in clean, new childcare centers?

The answer was culture. The farm workers would entrust their babies only with people they understood, people from the same culture as themselves. So Rollason began recruiting farmworkers and transforming them into preschool teachers. RCMA's centers filled with children.

The future seemed set, and Rollason asked the United Way in Miami for funding. But the reviewing committee winced at the lack of education among RCMA's new teachers. Nearly all had dropped out of school in their teens, forced into the fields to help their families survive.

"You don't have anybody even with a high-school education," said a committee panelist.

Rollason paused, then replied: "Ma'am, you keep your money. We're gonna keep our staff."

Yet the United Way soon took a closer look, and was struck by RCMA's compassion. Rollason got the money. After all these years, RCMA continues to bear the consequences, and reap the rewards, of our unusual hiring policy. As educational requirements increase, hundreds of RCMA staff members are taking college courses to keep up. And many of our employees live only a step or two away from farmworker poverty and all its cruel side-effects.

Yet we are better for it. Our teachers understand the shadows hovering over a 2-year-old when the family income could be wiped out by an eviction, a deportation, a cancer diagnosis or a hard freeze just before the harvest. Collectively, RCMA's teachers today are nationally respected experts in the lives of farmworkers. We nurture that 2-year-old child wholeheartedly. We are driven by compassion.

I became an RCMA tutor 30 years ago, as a high school senior. It was a step up; I had spent summers migrating with my family, working in packing houses and picking crops. Over the years, RCMA helped me acquire a bachelor's degree, and a lot of empathy. I learned that if you educate the heart, the brain will follow. Every day, my own heart aches for our children, their families – and our staff.

I recently participated in a grievance

hearing requested by an ex-teacher. RCMA had disciplined her because, during a lunch break, she initiated an altercation with a woman.

In the hearing, we encouraged the teacher to explain herself, and soon, the picture shifted to her abusive husband. The other woman was a rival for his attention and he expected his wife to fight her.

Our compassion took over. We have since offered her resources on how to get out of that abusive situation. Now, she is striving and doing wonderfully. RCMA is a place that offers opportunities not only to our children and their families, but to staff.



ISABEL GARCIA
Interim Executive Director

To RCMA, from a grateful mom

In one of the worst, most helpless weeks of my life, RCMA stepped in. We have been side by side ever since, and RCMA has given me the tools to move forward in life.

I have three beautiful children. The middle child, Marcos, had trouble breathing at birth. When he was two days old, Marcos underwent open-heart surgery at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg. Everything seemed okay afterward. Five months later, I enrolled him in RCMA in Arcadia.

When Marcos was 3, he seemed to get tired easily. We returned to All Children's for a checkup. But I was the one in bad shape. I had packed up all three children, including an infant, for the trip, and my car was smoking by the time we got there. I left it parked on the street.

Marcos underwent a sonogram, and a doctor came to see me. Marcos needed heart surgery again, he said. He couldn't leave the hospital. Before surgery, he had to undergo a week of tests.

I was trapped there with Marcos' two sisters. The first night, we slept in the emergency room. The next day, my husband called. He had gone to Illinois for farm work, and was in jail for driving without a license. There was nothing I could do. I called family members, asking whether anyone could take my daughters for a few days, but nobody could help.

Then RCMA called. They were concerned about Marcos. I spilled out everything about my situation. Later that day, two RCMA staff members showed up with a suitcase

full of children's clothes and diapers. Also that day, the hospital got us a room at the Ronald McDonald House. Things were getting better.

I didn't know it at the time, but we would be at the hospital for a month, with Marcos fighting for his life. RCMA childcare centers have wonderful employees called "family support workers." They made sure someone from RCMA was helping us every day. When we needed transportation, they provided it. They located an attorney who got my husband out of jail.

More important, they supported me by holding my hand all the way through the end. That's when I found out how much love RCMA offers their parents. They treat you as a family member.

All this was four years ago. Time heals everything. Now my son is extremely healthy and is growing fast. He moved to first grade this year. His younger sister is still at RCMA, and I am an active parent.

My mother said girls should never be ambitious. I made the honor roll anyway. I have learned through RCMA and its parent committees that my mother was wrong. I'm proud to be the parent president at the Arcadia center.

Being a leader helped me get a great job with Weirs Farm, which involves training employees.

I never knew what I wanted to do with my life until I got to know RCMA. One day not too far off, I would like to become a family support worker.

- Araceli Zavala



ARACELI ZAVALA
and children Marcos and Ashley Vanegas

Twenty Years of Christmas Cheer

In 1999, staff members at DUDA, the family-owned farming concern, were considering distributing company Christmas cards. Then Donna Duda had an idea: What if we turned it into a fundraiser, to help out one of the nonprofits? She pitched the idea to her co-worker, Susan Howard. "We immediately both thought of RCMA," Howard said. Thus began a two-decade tradition. This is the 20th holiday season in which Christmas art drawn by RCMA children adorns Christmas cards. Then and now, Donna Duda is the midwife of the project, choosing which children's art entries have the best character for marketable cards. "Some of my favorite art is the art that shows the pure simplicity of a child's view of Christmas," she said. As the idea spread in 1999, Howard contacted George Sorn, who was president of the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association and chairman of RCMA's Board of Directors. Sorn was delighted, and called Barbara Mainster, RCMA's executive director. How could she refuse? "I loved the idea that the kids would make drawings using fruits and vegetables in a Christmas theme," Mainster recalls. Howard also broached the idea to friends at other agriculture corporations and associations. All liked it, and many committed to participate. Such support has continued for 20 years.

Corporate farms and farm organizations order cards by the thousands. They write \$500 checks to become "Print Angels," and they lend staff members to the creative labor of transforming children's art into a catalogued product. The first year, the program brought in \$15,854. Internet was just going mainstream at the time, so the committee mailed art to potential customers. Today, a brochure is available at www.rcma.org, and cards can be ordered there. The biggest change over the years may be the participation since 2006 of Sonia Tighe, with the FFVA. Tighe became chairwoman of the program and lead marketer of the cards, recruiting large-volume buyers. "People are almost competing to reserve their art," she said. "They want to be the earliest ones to see the selection." Buoyed by sales in agriculture, the program brought in \$28,023 last year. The funds went to RCMA, where they help to secure state funding at a 16:1 ratio. And through RCMA, Duda notes, the program supports families that work for the farm companies. But it carries more value than money, she says. "As long as it's still bringing positive exposure in the communities where RCMA operates, it's worth continuing."

Success by the numbers

For the first time in the 18-year history of RCMA's charter schools, **all three schools earned a "B" grade during the summer, based on the statewide Florida Standards Assessments.** The students have been notably successful in math.

RCMA Immokalee Community School

89% of third graders achieved proficiency or better on the math FSA, **the third highest passing rate among Collier County public schools.**

82% of sixth graders achieved proficiency or better on the math FSA, compared with Immokalee Middle School's 33 percent. The passing rate at ICS was the fourth highest among 19 Collier County middle schools.

RCMA Wimauma Academy

84% of third graders achieved proficiency or better on the math FSA, with 21 percent achieving a "5" – the highest level. **The overall math passing rate was the eighth highest among 182 public elementary schools in Hillsborough County.**

RCMA Leadership Academy

92% scored proficient in the statewide algebra assessment. **These 24 middle school students successfully completed a course typically taken during the freshman year of high school.**

How to order Christmas Cards

A brochure and order form for RCMA Christmas cards are available at:

www.rcma.org

A completed order form can be mailed to RCMA, 402 West Main Street, Immokalee, FL 34142 or faxed to 321-214-0210. Order by phone at 1-800-282-6540 or online at: www.rcma.org.



DONNA DUDA



SONIA TIGHE



SUSAN HOWARD





Ignacio Resinos-Gomez and his mother, Heberta de Jesus Gomez.

A young heart patient gets help

BONITA SPRINGS

Ignacio Resinos-Gomez was born in Guatemala 13 years ago with a malformed heart. Instead of being located in the left-center part of Ignacio's chest, his heart is to the right. Instead of a large artery pumping blood into his lungs, Ignacio has a few small ones.

He is small for his age. When Ignacio runs or walks fast, his lips and fingertips turn blue for lack of oxygen.

Ignacio's parents immigrated a few years ago to southwest Florida to work in the winter tomato harvest. They enrolled Ignacio's younger sister, Yadira, in RCMA, and began receiving help from RCMA.

Soon, RCMA staff members in Bonita Springs, near Naples, began making calls in Ignacio's behalf. The Bridge Fund, a local all-volunteer charity, donated \$5,000 to help Ignacio obtain a series of tests. A pediatric cardiologist agreed to take on Ignacio as a patient.

RCMA paid for the family and two staff members to visit a Tampa hospital for tests. The staff translated for the family.

The doctor concluded surgery would be too risky. But he plans to continue monitoring Ignacio's condition.

"We were able to make a big difference in the attention that Ignacio received," said Maria Ferri, an early childhood specialist at RCMA's Bonita Springs Child Development center. "That was rewarding."

His parents are happy that this summer, Ignacio gained five pounds and two inches.

"What I admire the most is Heberta's and Ricardo's total dedication to their children," said Luz Elena Sanchez-Vigil, the family-support worker from Bonita who arranged most of the help for Ignacio. "They value every single moment they spend with them and every day is a gift to keep their family together."



Four RCMA middle-school students from Wimauma – plus a non-RCMA teammate from Riverview – celebrate their first-place award in a science competition among 25 teams. From left, they are Kelly Ahuexoteco, Nicole Perez-Flores, Viridiana Guzman, Areli Gonzalez and Stephanie Lazaro. All but Perez-Flores attend RCMA Leadership Academy near Tampa. She is shown holding the "handbot" picking device the team created.

Hope for aching produce-pickers

RUSKIN

Four girls from an RCMA middle school near Tampa won the top prize in July in a science competition.

Their project hit close to home for the four daughters of farmworkers. They designed a device to make picking produce easier – and back pain milder – for farmworkers. Their "handbot" features a prosthetic hand that can grab items, manipulate its fingers, rotate 360 degrees, extend its reach telescopically and recharge through solar energy. "We were assigned to solve problems," said Stephanie Lazaro, a seventh-grader at RCMA Leadership Academy in Wimauma, whose parents pick tomatoes, strawberries and a variety of other produce. "We all have family members who work in the fields and they have back problems.

"The handbot will reach low to pick a tomato, or reach high to pick an orange," Stephanie said. "It will help elderly people who can't bend over."

Handbot was born while Stephanie and three classmates attended a three-week summer camp conducted south of Tampa by Hillsborough Community College and Verizon Innovative Learning. Scholarships were awarded to 100 middle-school girls from low-income families in the southern Tampa Bay area.

At the camp, the girls were divided into 25 four-member teams. Then the Wimauma team acquired a fifth member, Nicole Perez-Flores, from nearby Riverview.

The girls first sketched pictures of the handbot. Then they created a version with cardboard, straws, string and tape. Next came a more durable version. Three judges chose it for the top prize.

The team isn't finished. The girls in the summer camp plan to attend follow-up sessions one Saturday per month during the school year. The handbot needs some work on its solar power.

"When we started, I was shy about getting to know people and going to other groups," Stephanie said. "But later I became more confident."

Lessons from Hurricane Irma

IMMOKALEE

Last year's Hurricane Irma prompted RCMA to extensively update its hurricane plan, now 66 pages.

"Our Irma experience was new in several ways," said Gyla Wise, the senior advisor who led RCMA's hurricane preparations. "So we have added a lot of new material to our hurricane plan."

Irma sideswiped south Florida, ransacked the Florida Keys, then roared ashore in Naples on Sept. 10. From there, the storm continued northward, roughly following Interstate 75. On that path, Irma forced the closure of every RCMA office, school and childcare center that had been open.

That was a "first" in RCMA's 52-year history. In fact, RCMA's hurricane planning had assumed that any hurricane would spare some RCMA operations, leaving their staffs and facilities available to help locations that suffered damage.

"Now we have tweaked the policies to stress that centers may have to be more self-sufficient after a storm," Wise said.

In another first, social media collectively were quicker than traditional media in telling the world where help was needed. Images online included people in long lines awaiting free meals from RCMA in Immokalee. Soon,

charities like World Vision International, Save the Children and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation rolled into Immokalee with portable kitchens and gift cards, soliciting RCMA's insights on where help was needed the most. Individuals brought gas grills and coolers of meat, and started cooking on street corners.

"News used to be published in the newspaper the next morning," Wise said. "Now it's posted online the same day. Social media gives us the opportunity to tell people about the needs much faster."

RCMA operations re-opened two to 10 days after Irma passed, depending on their storm damage and the power supply at each location. South of Tampa, RCMA's two publicly funded charter schools opened five days earlier than the rest of the county's schools, hoping to restore normalcy to the children's lives.

The RCMA hurricane plan affirms that as a top goal in a disaster.

"The most important way we can help the community after a disaster is to resume operations," Wise said. "The children return to the teachers that they know and love, and the parents are freed up from childcare to make repairs and get supplies."



Fishy experience

Sixth-grade girls from RCMA Leadership Academy toured the Florida Aquarium in August. The event was conducted by Girls Outside, a club at Tampa's Berkeley Preparatory School that believes such adventures instill confidence in teenage girls. High-school girls from Berkeley also mentor the sixth-graders from RCMA. The program is funded by a grant from the Tampa Bay Lightning.

High and dry

Children are dry, smiling and scrambling on the new playground equipment at RCMA's Whispering Pines Child Development Center near Vero Beach. A grant from the John's Island Foundation enabled RCMA to repair a serious drainage problem and purchase much needed new playground equipment at the center.





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On the Move

Years later, her RCMA ties are strong

HOMESTEAD

Natalie Rosas has gentle, glowing memories of her childhood days at RCMA’s Fernando Pro center, which she attended from 2000 to 2002. The short blessing before meals. The wonderful, loaded bookshelves. And learning to speak English.

“I remember speaking both of my languages,” she said. “I believe it helped me.”

Rosas thrived at the center, and she thrives now. Her RCMA influence is strong, partly because Rosas’ mother, Yesenia Rosas, is a program specialist in RCMA’s Florida City area, just north of Key Largo.

Natalie Rosas was born in North

Carolina during one of her parents’ seasonal migrations. Her father worked in nurseries; her mother in packing houses. The family settled down in South Florida when she was 6.

Rosas, 21, is on track to graduate from Florida State University in December with a bachelor’s degree in Family and Child Services. She hopes to earn a master’s degree in the same field.

“I’m very interested in the children and family dynamic,” she said.

As she has acquired expertise in the field, Rosas has gained even greater appreciation for RCMA because it goes far beyond the basics of early-childhood education.

“It provides clothing, food – a lot of resources for the people it serves,” she said.

