



## RCMA RE-OPENS THIS FALL WITH CARE AND CAUTION

This spring and summer, as COVID-19 and its economic fallout bore down on our communities throughout the state of Florida, we at RCMA faced a daunting array of decisions. With RCMA's 1,700 employees, 66 child development centers, two charter schools, and partnerships with 19 family child care homes and various after-school programs in 21 counties - you can imagine the challenge that came with responding to the crisis as we strove to balance safety, finances, and RCMA's mission.

Attending to the well-being of our families has always been the driving force behind our efforts to seek donations after an emergency - whether it's in the form of supplies or funds to help them recover from job losses or other financial hardships. We have a history of coming together with donors, finding ways to connect with, support, and advocate for our families. As the crisis unfolded this spring, our staff created learning packets for our children to use at home, they provided computers and WiFi for students that needed them, launched distance learning, and distributed food and

supplies at schools, centers and homes - overall ensuring that families and students continued to feel connected to their teachers at RCMA.

Now the fall has brought a new round of challenges as we prepare to reopen.

RCMA prides itself on hiring from within the communities we serve, and we are not taking the threat of COVID-19 lightly. It has hit too close to home, with RCMA staff and our families having fallen ill and many even losing loved ones. We care deeply about all the people under our care, and in our community just one person having complications due to COVID-19 because of a nonchalant attitude towards the virus would be unacceptable. We can't control how politicians handle the crisis, but we certainly can take reasonable steps in our facilities to mitigate the spread in our communities, and we are doing so.



After a grueling spring and summer, I sleep better knowing that our hard work is paying off and that our staff across the state continue to make our children and families a priority. Our charter schools are up and running with a majority of children in the classroom and others being taught virtually – as all students, no matter where they are, continue to receive the same level of high-quality bilingual education that the schools provided before the pandemic. RCMA’s early child development centers around the state are slowly reopening, with our hope of serving all children once peak season arrives for RCMA in November when all migrant families return from agricultural work up north. It gives me peace of mind, because I know that the children under our care will have a safe and enriching place to be while their parents work.

In developing reopening plans, the safety, as well as the mental health of our children, teachers and staff remains our top priority. We strive to reassure all our families and staff members of their importance. To that end, throughout the state, we’ve stepped up our sanitation procedures and created entry checkpoints where anyone who enters has their temperature checked, answers screening questions, and sanitizes their hands. Those who ride the bus go through the same process even before they step onto the bus. We are of course requiring masks and also being smart about minimizing the commingling of classes. In that way, if someone in one classroom should become infected, a single classroom can close while we continue to maintain the operation of other classrooms that have not been exposed.

This is not going to be easy. We are prepared for scenarios where an entire center may need to close. We’ve strengthened RCMA’s home learning programs, and our early childhood programs have implemented Home Connect – keeping our constant support and contact flowing to our families. Our teachers are becoming well versed in providing engaging materials to families, and our families are more connected to our programs than they were prior to COVID-19. Of course we keep a watchful eye on COVID-19 trends and the safety of our staff and our children. We have confidence in our staff and their efforts to follow through on the strong safety policies and procedures put in place while still providing a warm environment that our children love.

We are grateful for our partnerships. To date, our funding sources have remained steady, and our private donors have been very generous. Funding is critical in keeping our staff and facilities strong. As the nation and the state come to terms with the financial impacts of COVID-19, political leaders must consider the central role that schools and early childhood education providers play in our economy. We provide priceless services to the essential workers on whom our country’s food supply depends. We understand that cuts might be made. But everything should be done to preserve the funding for education, which will be crucial for long-term economic recovery.

Regardless of the situation and fallout from COVID-19, as long as politicians do the right thing and don’t interrupt our funding, RCMA will continue to respond in every way possible as a beacon of support for our families and communities.



**Isabel Garcia**  
*Executive Director*





## Donor Spotlight: Bill and Phyllis Coats

# A DESIRE TO CONTRIBUTE DRIVES SPIRIT OF GIVING

Bill Coats was leaving his office late on the first day of his new job at RCMA about a decade ago when a sound stopped him in his tracks.

“I heard the voice of this child, at the top of her lungs, singing the ABCs,” Bill remembers. “I looked and there was this cute little munchkin of a girl following her mom out of the school, with the mom sort of giggling as the child sang. I thought, ‘I’m beginning to see what this place is about.’”

Long before that joyful moment on his first day at RCMA, Bill had started to take an interest in the agency for its deep commitment to early childhood education and immigrant families.

The road that would lead him to RCMA can be traced to the early 1990s. By then Bill, a long-time reporter, was an editor at the *St. Petersburg Times* (now named the *Tampa Bay Times*), supervising the coverage of local news.

Bill was noticing story subjects who were living their lives for the good of others in contrast to people who used their positions of power for personal gain.



“I began to come across preachers doing good stuff. Reaching out, helping people in emergencies,” Bill recalled. “Just being positive movers and shakers in their small towns. At some point, I began to think I should be positive too. I should be donating.”

Bill and his wife, Phyllis, decided to do just that. As part of the Tampa Bay community for half a decade by then and parents to two young sons, Will and Paul, they made donations to United Way.

Then after Bill retired from the *Tampa Bay Times*, he thought he had more to offer. Practical in his approach to life and inspired by his Christian faith, Bill was drawn to RCMA’s mission. He applied for its position of Director of Communications and Marketing, coming out of retirement to fill it in early 2010.

“First, Jesus Christ teaches us to reach out with compassion to the poor, the sick and the otherwise disadvantaged. Immigrant farmworkers belong in that group,” Bill said of his attraction to RCMA’s work. “Second, it’s hard to think of anything wiser than an investment in the mind of a child, in his or her peak years of brain development.”

Once at RCMA, Bill grew deeply impressed with what he witnessed – from that first day hearing the little girl gleefully belt out the alphabet, to routinely observing the fierce dedication of the staff. The commitment to learning and education was palpable.

“There had been a lot of pride and loyalty at the *Times*, which I liked,” Bill said. “But at RCMA, the devotion of the staff was just total, probably because at RCMA, the job had changed these people’s lives in many cases. To have an organization that big, with a staff that enthusiastic is just unique.”

After nearly 10 years, Bill left RCMA. He and Phyllis are now continuing their commitment to the children and families of RCMA with planned gifts through the next 16 years. Instead of an annual donation, the long-term giving plan matches the level of admiration Bill had acquired for RCMA, he said.

"I wanted to say to RCMA, this is how much respect I have. I wanted to say that to God, too," Bill added.

With an insider's view through the years at RCMA, Bill had a chance to see up close how philanthropy like his helps raise RCMA's stellar programs to an even higher level. He knew well that private donations fund enrichment programs at RCMA's child development centers and charter schools. How the programs offer children the safety and individualized care they need to be fully prepared for the next step in their schooling. At the child development centers, this may mean new health screening equipment, extra funds to support families through various types of crises, the installation of stimulating playground equipment or bringing in a partner organization like Kinder Music to engage the children. At RCMA's charter schools, private donations also help attract and keep highly qualified teachers to implement a dual language curriculum. In addition, the donations ensure that there is one teacher's assistant in every classroom; to help provide before- and after-school care; and put learning devices, books, and materials into every child's hands.

Following nearly 30 years of giving, Bill and Phyllis were thrilled to establish a long-term relationship as donors to RCMA. They trusted that the impacts of its mission – providing opportunities for success to its families and children – endure long after learning the alphabet, spanning children's entire educational careers and through the rest of their lives.



## FACES OF CHANGE

# FARMWORKER ADVOCATE LOURDES VILLANUEVA RECOGNIZED FOR HER TIRELESS WORK



Lourdes Villanueva, RCMA Director of Farmworker Advocacy, was recognized by the Mexican Consulate in Orlando with the prestigious Ohtli Award for her tireless work helping Mexican families in Florida's rural communities. "Ohtli" is a Nahuatl word meaning "path," and the award is given to those who have aided, empowered or positively affected the lives of Mexican nationals in the United States and other countries. Once a farmworker herself, Lourdes' first contact with RCMA was as a parent. Since she officially joined the staff in 1980, she has held multiple positions within the organization. Her experience as a farmworker and natural sense of empathy have allowed her to connect with the families RCMA serves and help her to excel in her current position. These qualities and her decades of dedication and love are what led to her receiving this award from the Mexican Consulate in September.

# RCMA CELEBRATES 55 YEARS OF SERVICE AND GROWTH



This year, RCMA celebrates its 55th Anniversary. Starting from two loaned spaces near Homestead back in 1965, RCMA is now Florida's largest non-profit provider of early childhood education, operating 66 child development centers and two charter schools, serving 6,500 children and their families in 21 counties throughout the state.

RCMA's greatest asset has always been the women and men who work for the organization. Without the love and dedication they have for our families, the organization would not have lasted 55 years. Because personnel is recognized as the most valuable part of our organization, we sometimes overlook a very obvious piece of what allows us to provide the services we do: our buildings.

RCMA began more than five decades ago with only two centers in loaned space. Over the decades we have grown to now occupy 69 sites spanning the entire state of Florida. In addition to serving as a space where children grow and learn, RCMA facilities serve a vital role within the community.

The community rooms found at many RCMA locations allow us to hold workshops and meetings where important information can be provided to our families. Parenting skills workshops, immigration screenings and social service application assistance are just a few examples of how our community rooms are used. Recently, due to the pandemic, such workshops have moved to virtual platforms. But community rooms have been essential in the storing and distribution of the food and supplies on which our families depend.

RCMA locations are also a place where less formal information can be exchanged – with parents gathering and mingling at child development centers twice per day, five days per week.

“We always see parents chatting outside of our center,” says Ma De Jesus Bautista, RCMA Area Coordinator based in Plant City. “Though these quick little chats may be informal, they serve an important role in community building. Scheduling a playdate or extending an invite to a birthday party strengthens the bond of the community, and RCMA centers offer a physical space where these interactions can occur.”

The centers not only provide information for families. In turn, they benefit from community feedback. As Policy Council members, parents are deeply involved in the center administration. They have input on issues ranging from how new employees are trained and who is hired to the criteria children and families must meet to attend the center. They also elect the leaders who will represent parents as members of our statewide Board of Directors. The influence that parents possess over center operations gives them the chance to learn and practice leadership skills to help act as an advocate for their children in situations unrelated to RCMA.

RCMA is always growing. We already have plans to open at least five new child development centers in the near future, and in the longer term we will be expanding our charter schools. The opening of each new location offers an opportunity to address needs and fortify the strengths of the community. As we move into our sixth decade and beyond, RCMA facilities will continue to serve as a physical manifestation of our holistic approach toward education. It will do so by not only meeting the needs of children in the classroom, but also by attending to broader priorities in the surrounding neighborhoods, towns and cities we serve.



# COMMUNITY SUPPORT HELPS BUILD PATH TO SUCCESS

**Maria Espinosa Rodriguez**

*RCMA Alumnus  
University of Florida Student*



At RCMA, we work closely with families and other organizations in the Immokalee community to help nurture well-rounded children, and a shining example of that cooperation is Maria Espinosa Rodriguez.

Maria, the youngest of seven children, was born in South Carolina at a time when her parents were working on a tobacco farm. Soon after her birth, her parents returned home to the small town of San Pablo in the Mexican state of Guanajuato. Maria spent her first three years in San Pablo with her grandmother and siblings while her parents returned to the United States to work in the fields.

When Maria was three years old, her parents moved the family to Immokalee, Florida, where Maria was enrolled at RCMA's Farmworker A,B,C Village Child Development Center.

"Not only was it my first time in formal education," Maria remembered about her first days at RCMA, "but it was my first exposure to numbers, the English language, American culture... everything!"

From that point forward, Immokalee would be home for Maria. But like many RCMA children, she would continue to move constantly with her family, which needed to migrate for work. Depending on the season, Maria could find herself in other parts of Florida or somewhere north along the East Coast.

During their travels, her parents kept a look-out for educational opportunities for Maria. But many centers of learning were unable to accommodate the difficult schedules of migrant farmworking families. This made Maria's time at RCMA that much more precious.

"It was great to be able to start my education in a place with other kids who shared my background and teachers who were compassionate and empathetic," Maria recalled. "I definitely credit RCMA for starting my love of learning."

From there, Maria thrived through elementary, middle and high school, encouraged by her family. Her parents in particular, instilled in her the idea that college was a possibility.

"I think the importance my parents placed on education really pushed me to look out for opportunities that would allow me to continue going to school."

Other key players in her future development were Immokalee community organizations. While still in middle and high school, Maria was a tutor at Guadalupe Center and worked with the Immokalee Foundation. Her experiences at these agencies, she says, were vital in her next step toward higher education. Not only did mentors there help her apply for student aid and scholarships; they also aided her emotionally and mentally to prepare for that next stage of her life.

“My parents always supported me going to college, but since their education didn’t extend past elementary school, we didn’t know what college was – what it meant to be in college,” Maria said. “The Guadalupe Center and Immokalee Foundation showed me that. Getting me into college really was a community accomplishment.”

But there were other ways that her work with Immokalee’s community organizations would mold her future career. Her experiences as a high school intern with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers – coupled with her upbringing – greatly influenced her interest in social issues and choice of major.

Now at the University of Florida (UF), Maria is currently pursuing a double major in criminology and agriculture education. In criminology, she is interested in exploring the workings of the criminal justice system, particularly the definition of deviance and how society decides what is lawful and unlawful.

The selection of her second major – agriculture – evolved from a more gradual acceptance of her connection to the topic. At first, starting a new chapter of her life, Maria wanted nothing to do with agriculture, an issue that had dominated so much of her childhood.

“I’d had enough of it,” she said.

But soon the pressing experiences endured through her family history made their way into her field of study. Before long she understood how bound she was to them.

“So much of my life revolved around agriculture,” she added. “Where I was at any given time was determined by the harvest, and I didn’t realize how much it impacted my life. It kept showing up in my research and the classes I chose, so I gained a new appreciation for it.”

At the moment, Maria is researching the historical relationship between the penal system and agriculture, such as prison farms.

In addition to her classes and research, she recently was accepted to two prestigious internships. This past summer, she participated virtually in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute internship, gaining legislative experience, learning about lobbying, and establishing her own connections in Washington, D.C.

She was also accepted to the National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Association internship, but it was postponed until next summer due to COVID-19. With the NMSHSA internship, Maria will spend a month in Washington, D.C., where she hopes to gain more knowledge about the legislative process while deepening fresh relationships and cultivating new ones.

Maria expects to graduate from UF in May of 2021. She envisions taking a year off from school while planning her next move and says graduate studies are a possibility. Whatever she decides, her story is a credit to all of the organizations in Immokalee as well as her family – all of which worked together to help shape her path. RCMA is proud to have played a part in that journey, laying the early stepping stones to what Maria is building into a road to success.





OPENING DOORS TO OPPORTUNITIES

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## HOW TO HELP

As RCMA prepares to reopen centers, we find ourselves feeling grateful that we are in a strong financial position with relatively minor expenses in each county that our major funding sources won't cover but are critical to ensure a safe environment in which our teachers can help our children and families thrive.

Items like masks for parents and children who don't have them, thermometers, hand washing stations and costs of installation, additional custodial staff, additional staff to cover in case a teacher gets sick, the cost of deep cleaning, and more technology to help bridge the technology gap our families experience.

We appreciate you giving as generously as you can to support the children and families RCMA serves as we move to open our centers safely.

## SUPPORT US WHEN YOU SHOP



We bet you're ordering online a lot these days! You can contribute to RCMA every time you shop on Amazon, and it won't cost you a penny! Visit Smile. Amazon.com and select Redlands Christian Migrant Association as your charity beneficiary. Amazon donates a percentage of each purchase to us. It's an easy way to make a difference.

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