

We need immigration reform – and immigrants

On March 21, 2003, gunfire ended the life of 22-year-old Jose Gutierrez – an illegal immigrant.

But Gutierrez did not die in Mexican drug wars, which have been cited so often to justify Arizona’s immigrant crackdown this year.

A Guatemalan orphan, Gutierrez had hopped freight trains to Los Angeles for a childhood in foster care and public schools. He finished high school and joined the U.S. Marines as a way to pay for college.



Barbara Mainster
Executive Director

Lance Corporal Gutierrez wasn’t a citizen, but he was our first combat death in the Iraq war.

In my experience at RCMA, the illegal immigrants we encounter are far more like Gutierrez than the criminals described in election-year rhetoric. They are earnest, salt-of-the-earth people. They aren’t here to steal, but to earn – to lift their families out of poverty through relentless labor.

RCMA knows them, of course, through their children, who are loving, bright and brimming with potential.

Nearly all are U.S. citizens, well on their way to forming the nation’s largest ethnic group. Their parents intend for them to excel.

Florida’s agriculture leaders are grateful for the work ethic of these immigrants. The jobs are open to U.S. citizens, but rarely do they take them and even more rarely do they last. The reaching and stooping labor is torturous.

Immigrant labor always becomes controversial when the economy is stressed, but life in the fields never changes.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that at least half the people who pick crops in the U.S. are undocumented; the number probably is much higher here. Without all those pickers, U.S. food prices would soar and much of our safe and secure food supply would leave the U.S. to stay competitive, growers warn. That would not be good for the American consumer.

We know the leading growers well, because they support RCMA. They’re hardly liberals; they’re pragmatists. And they want immigration reform.

They know Arizona’s approach not only would be unfair, but would be unwise here.

Since 1964, there have been no “legal” ways to come into the United States unless you’re a highly specialized, well-educated worker. We have an immigration system that largely bans unskilled laborers – and an economy that requires millions of them.

So we need our immigrants, and we need a comprehensive federal immigration bill to replace the legal cloud under which they live. A new law should protect our northern and southern borders and require the immigrants already here to register, pay penalties, obtain work permits and learn English.

Congress could do this if it had the political will. We should let our representatives know we are counting on them to make it happen.

Barbara Mainster, Executive Director

Immokalee kids help Haitian kids

IMMOKALEE – It’s tricky business, beading, threading a thin elastic band through tiny bead holes. One slip of the grip, and beads escape across the floor.

But 10 students at Immokalee Community School persevered with the beads as an honor and a charitable service all in one.

It was an honor because students of counselor JoAnn Blumenthal had to earn the right to become beaders. They had to help someone every day, and record it in their journal.

“They have to write why they performed the act of kindness,” Blumenthal said.

The journals told of helping tired moms with housework, of caring for baby siblings, of helping classmates in math, of holding doors for people with burdens.

“Made dad’s bed because I love him,” read one entry. “I helped my mom carry my sister because she was crying,” reads another. Another: “I felt happy when I helped my teacher pass out the papers.”

Miss a day in the journals, and you were out of beading.

The kids sold 100 bracelets for \$3 apiece. They used the \$300 to buy decorated Crocs for children in Haiti. With all the earthquake debris, Blumenthal’s class reasoned, Haitian children must be especially careful to wear shoes.

This was a turnabout of sorts, because these fourth-graders also come from low-income families with their own limited wardrobes.

Through the project, Blumenthal has been teaching them a blend of lessons:

- Working as a group
- Starting a business
- Financial math
- Helping others makes you happy



Fourth-graders from RCMA’s Immokalee Community School show off Crocs they bought to donate to Haitian children.



Christina Velasquez, 11, (right) gives a pair of crocs to Elizabeth Davison, executive director of Hope for Haiti for donation to Haitian children. In the background, Yahaira Caceres, 11, presents more crocs.

In late May, the children delivered the Crocs to Hope for Haiti, a Naples-based charity that collects funds for established schools, clinics and nutritional services in Haiti. They unpacked 30 colorful pairs of the shoes and presented them to Hope for Haiti staff members.

“It was just amazing what all those kids went through to do that,” said JoAnne Kuehner, the organization’s founder. “This wasn’t just a frivolous thing. I was very impressed.”

Fabian Venegas fishes for a bead as he makes a bracelet to benefit children in Haiti.



Redlands Christian Migrant Association
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Retired teacher Eileen Patterson, a volunteer at RCMA’s Gargiulo Education Center, tutors 6-year-old Evelyn Martinez.

After-school volunteers win statewide award

NAPLES – RCMA’s Gargiulo Education Center, an after-school program next to a tomato packing plant, was honored in April for the dedication of its volunteers.

The Florida Migrant Interstate Program named the Gargiulo center its Migrant Community Volunteer of the Year. The statewide award annually is given to an individual volunteer, but in this case went to Gargiulo’s entire group.

The nomination came from Mary Ellen Cash of Collier County Public Schools. Cash has worked with migrant education programs for years, yet was stunned when she visited the Gargiulo center.

“I saw about 30 little guys,” she said, referring to the center’s after-school students. “And I saw about 20 volunteers.”

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

- Read more about RCMA at our website, www.rcma.org.
- Sign up for news and other updates from RCMA by sending a “sign me up” email to Judy Brill: judy@rcma.org.



Reading at RCMA, sprinting at Stanford



Shataya “Taya” Hendricks is a sprinter for the Stanford University track team. She is studying to become a psychiatrist. Photo by Spencer Allen/Stanford University.

PALO ALTO, Calif. – Shataya “Taya” Hendricks doesn’t remember her years at RCMA’s Lake Placid Child Development Center; she was too young. But others remember.

“She stayed in the library,” recalled Sonja Judge-Wilson, Center Coordinator at South Highlands Child Development Center, who was a teacher at Lake Placid. “She loved to pretend she was reading.”

“She would make sure we would take books out to the gazebo, and she loved to read on the playground.”

Another side of Taya surfaced at home, said her mother, Diedra Hendricks. “She was always running through the house.”

Since then, running and reading have remained central to Taya’s life. At St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale, Taya became a two-time state champion competing in the 100 meters. Now, at 21, she is a member of the 4 x 100-meter relay team at Stanford University.

In June, that foursome reached the nationals: the preliminary round of the NCAA Outdoor Championships at the University of Oregon.

If they had advanced to the finals, each team member would have been classified an All-American. Taya ran the second leg well, but the third and fourth runners dropped the baton.

Sprinting at the major-college level has been a challenge. Taya tore her left hamstring as a freshman and her right hamstring as a sophomore. The following summer, she underwent arthroscopic surgery on a knee. She still is rehabilitating her sore legs.

“I’m running hurt,” she said.

Academically, Taya still is a reader. She is an “A” student with a 3.6 grade-point average. In her senior year, she is taking pre-medicine courses in hopes of becoming a psychiatrist someday.

“I just like to help people,” she said.

She accomplishes all this next to San Francisco Bay, with fond thoughts of Florida, RCMA and Lake Placid.

“It’s a special place in my heart,” she said. “When I go back, it’s like home to me, and I never left.”

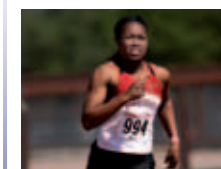
“Growing up was a good experience.”



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REDLANDS CHRISTIAN MIGRANT ASSOCIATION FALL NEWS 2010

A federal siege, then a glowing report

AFTER A WEEK, 21 GOVERNMENT REVIEWERS HAVE ONLY PRAISE.

In some ways, it seemed that RCMA in late April was under siege.

Two federal government teams totaling 21 auditors came to Florida for a week. Each day, they fanned out to RCMA offices and child development centers. Collectively, they inspected 40 locations, observed dozens of teachers working with children and requested thousands of documents.

The occasion was a review, required every three years, of any agency that delivers federally-funded Head Start services.

RCMA does that in a big way. Migrant & Seasonal Head Start, Early Head Start and Head Start account for \$35 million of RCMA’s revenues, more than half the budget.

The federal report arrived on Friday, July 23. Missing was the typical list of detailed “corrective actions” required following such inspections. The reviewers had found nothing wrong.

RCMA had received the equivalent of a perfect score.

Director of Operations Charlene Edwards dashed off an email to all child care centers and offices.

She wrote, “I am so proud to be a part of RCMA and work with so many wonderful, smart, intelligent, clever, gifted, knowledgeable, brainy, brilliant, magnificent – I could go on and on – people!”

In the 16 Migrant & Seasonal Head Start classrooms visited, RCMA teachers excelled at giving their children feedback, scoring more than double the national average.

“At least 85 percent of the grantee’s staff were hired from the communities served ... most of the staff was bilingual as well as bicultural and had a complete understanding of the migrant way of life, resulting in high-quality services for the families enrolled.”

FROM THE MIGRANT & SEASONAL HEADSTART REVIEW OF RCMA

“A negative climate can really do damage to kids,” said Judy Burleson, RCMA’s Director of Education. “We are building children’s self-esteem, their confidence in what they do and who they are.”

During the visits, one reviewer told an RCMA leader, “These classrooms should be where all Head Start staff come to learn how to care for children.”

Another plus cited by the reviewers was RCMA’s longstanding policy of hiring child-care teachers from the community and culture of the families served, sometimes directly from the fields.



Maria Luisa Gonzalez, a teacher at RCMA’s Dade City Child Development Center, congratulates Gerardo Ortega, 2, for assembling Mr. Potato Head.

The reviewers wrote: “At least 85 percent of the grantee’s staff were hired from the communities served ... most of the staff was bilingual as well as bicultural and had a complete understanding of the migrant way of life, resulting in high-quality services for the families enrolled.”

The Head Start/Early Head Start reviewers devoted long paragraphs to RCMA’s culture of continuing education and training, noting that employees from top to bottom are encouraged to grow professionally.

“The impact of the investment in professional development and personal growth resulted in less staff turnover,” the reviewers wrote. “The grantee reported 25 percent of its staff was with the agency between 11 and 38 years, and 27 percent was with the agency between five and 10 years. Many staff were former parents, and expressed commitment and loyalty to the vision of the agency.”

The Migrant & Seasonal Head Start reviewers praised RCMA’s cohesion. “The grantee served over 8,000 children and families across 21 Florida counties with over 1,700 staff members in 95 centers,” reviewers wrote. “With such a vast service area including remote rural locations, communication was determined to be a strength.”

“We did ourselves proud,” says Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s Executive Director.

SINKS & SEMINARS

RCMA parents learn how to protect kids from pesticides



Farmworker families learn how to protect their children from pesticides in a grant-funded training meeting.

Hugs and kisses – gestures of love – can spread poison.

That’s an unfortunate side effect of field work, if farmworkers bring pesticide residue on their bodies and clothes when they reunite with their children at the end of the day.

But now, a preventive education program is under way. More than 1,100 parents of RCMA children have participated over the past year in an educational program funded through a \$37,500 grant from Bayer CropScience and the Florida Specialty Crop Foundation. Classes have been conducted and some 20 sinks have been installed outside RCMA child development centers.

“It is so wonderful to see parents walking in and heading right for the hand-washing sinks before they pick up their kids. There is definitely a new level of understanding,” said Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s executive director.

“Families who work in agriculture receive some basic training regarding pesticides from their employer,” said Lourdes Villanueva, RCMA’s Director of Farmworker Advocacy and coordinator of the pesticide training. “But there is little covered with regard to the importance of hand-washing before greeting their children and being careful that possibly contaminated clothing does not come in contact with very young children.

“These parents are like all others, happy to see their children after a day’s work,” Villanueva said. “So there is usually hugging and kissing.”

“After having our pesticide training, we realized how important it is to wash our hands before carrying our children, said Marcelino Velasquez, a parent who participated in one of the sessions. “Being that we live far, washing our hands before picking up our children is sometimes impossible.”

The centers also distribute clean men’s shirts collected from charities. Additionally, the importance of hand-washing and washing work clothes separately from children’s clothes is emphasized.

The educational sessions are offered in Spanish and include a meal and babysitting services. Materials were developed by the Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and others, and were customized to fit the needs of workers employed by producers of various commodities.

“What is presented to those working in citrus may be different from those working in vegetables, strawberries or melons,” said Villanueva.

The Bayer grant covers three years. Its goal, two years from now, is to reach 2,500 parents in 33 RCMA centers.



An RCMA mom uses a new sink installed at the Rollason Child Development Center.

RCMA is family friendly

NAPLES – For the 12th year, RCMA was named a Family Friendly Business by the Naples Alliance for Children. The honor, announced in April, recognizes personnel and benefit policies that enhance parenting and help employees’ children.

GROWING PAINS

Freeze causes upheaval on farms, surprises for RCMA

After shocks of the January freeze plagued Florida farmers throughout last spring, while producing episodes of feast and famine for consumers and RCMA.

By summer, shortages in many crops had evolved into gluts. Farmworkers who lost work in the winter because crops died lost work again in spring because the gluts made harvesting unprofitable. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sent emergency food supplies to farm towns like Immokalee. Many charities, including RCMA, scrambled to help families that had lost income.

Finally, RCMA was on the receiving end of a pair of surprise fund-raisers in the spring, thanks to growers who invited people to harvest berries and donate to RCMA.

Like the crop devastations, the gluts were rooted in January, when a cold front brought 10 straight nights of freezing temperatures to South Florida and colder weather farther north. Crops that survived were nevertheless delayed. So instead of ripening before competing harvests occurred in Georgia and California, Florida crops ripened simultaneously.

Strawberry prices plunged so low that growers couldn’t afford to harvest them. That was controversial east of Tampa, because farmers trying to protect their crops under a coating of ice in January had pumped sufficient well water to cause the underground aquifer to drop 60 feet. Nearly 750 wells failed and 140 sinkholes opened.

Now the berries protected in the winter were allowed to rot in the spring.

That’s when Gary Wishnatzki, an RCMA board member and Florida’s leading strawberry grower/shipper, broke from the pack. On Saturday, March 27, amid much media attention, Wish Farms opened fields near Plant City to the public. Pickers that day were urged to donate to RCMA.

“We were expecting a pretty good turnout that day, but nothing compared to what we got,” Wishnatzki said. “We estimate that we had close to \$5,000 people come by.”

Local RCMA staff members collected some \$6,100, and used it to aid 200 RCMA families that had lost work in the glut.

Later, in Umatilla, east of Ocala, growers Chuck Allison and Steve Bocchino planned a U-pick festival on their 75-acre blueberry farm. They invited 250 of their



Caroline Powell, 7, of Orlando, interrupts her blueberry picking for a snack at Spring Valley Farms.



Some 5,000 people converged on Wishnatzki Farms’ strawberry fields after grower Gary Wishnatzki invited the public and urged them to donate to RCMA.

friends, and RCMA, to Spring Valley Farms on May 29. The guests picked blueberries by the gallon, and donated some \$2,000 to RCMA. The Allison and Bocchino families donated matching money and so did Driscoll’s, their California-based berry distributor.

“Understanding the needs of the migrant work force, we decided we wanted to try to help,” Allison said.

The total: another \$6,100.

The best news of all: Both Spring Valley Farms and Wish Farms decided to make U-picking an annual community-service event – regardless of weather.

Two charter schools graduate 48 students



Graduation has become a festive tradition at RCMA’s two charter schools, founded ten years ago.

(ABOVE) Immokalee Community School, which shares a campus with RCMA’s headquarters, graduated 35 sixth-graders in June. (RIGHT) Wimauma Academy, south of Tampa, graduated 13 fifth-graders, including Elibeth Jose and Yadira Luviano.



Ground-breaking, fundraising in store at Wimauma Academy

WIMAUMA – RCMA’s expansion of Wimauma Academy is approaching a ground-breaking this winter.

That means the charter school’s current class of 40 fifth-graders can look forward to rejoining their old school – but in new facilities – a year from now. It’s a dream they share with RCMA’s leaders.

Wimauma Academy currently contains grades kindergarten through fifth grade. It has established a record for consistent, sweeping improvements among its children, a group that suffers a raft of immigrant disadvantages, including poverty.

Based on FCAT scores, these children have earned Wimauma Academy an “A” grade in six of the last eight years.

But just as they enter adolescence, they also enter the culture shock of middle school. RCMA intends to give them three more years in culturally comfortable Wimauma Academy.

“Nationwide, the high school dropout rate for migrant students is 60 percent,” said Maria Jimenez, RCMA’s Director of Charter Schools. “That shows the challenges these students will be facing. We want to help them through some really tough years.”

Last spring, the Hillsborough County School Board renewed Wimauma Academy’s charter without discussion. In July, RCMA applied for the middle-school charter.

A \$1.8-million expansion is planned.

It will include a science lab and five other classrooms, a cafeterium and kitchen, a media center and an administrative area.

By August, RCMA had obtained donations or pledges for \$860,000 of the expansion cost.

Board members and Executive Director Barbara Mainster have been contacting foundations and other potential benefactors for financial support that may help RCMA avoid borrowing.

“It’s a good cause,” Mainster said. “We’ve shown that kids respond well to our small classes and nurturing within their own culture. They just need to stay for three more years.”

RCMA

You can donate online to RCMA’s Wimauma Academy Capital Campaign at www.rcma.org. Or you can mail a check to Wimauma Academy Capital Campaign, Redlands Christian Migrant Association, 402 West Main Street, Immokalee, FL 34142. Feel free to use the enclosed envelope and designate your check for “Wimauma Capital Campaign.”



Wimauma Academy’s middle-school expansion will add six classrooms, a cafeteria and a media center at the eastern end of the current campus.