

Lots to learn on the Hill

There we stood – in snow flurries at 7:30 a.m. – outside the locked door of a congressman’s office in Washington, D.C. Things were bound to improve, right?



Barbara Mainster Executive Director

By golly, they did. By the end of that late January day, two groups from RCMA had visited 14 congressional offices. We had walked off enough calories for a week. And we had spread the word about one of the government’s best-ever social programs, Head Start.

The occasion was a Head Start Leadership Institute held by the National Head Start Association in Washington, D.C. I joined six other RCMA staff members, plus Migrant Head Start parents from Plant City and Wahneta, at the institute.

Part of learning about government and policy included time to meet with members of Congress.

The two parents, Francisca Tovar and Elena Cabrera, were eager to experience what a “Hill visit” meant and to be part of educating their elected officials about both Head Start and RCMA. I wanted to tell those officials about the significance of stimulus money, which enabled us to open our doors for an additional 300 children. And of course, I wanted to pitch for immigration reform.

So what were a few snowflakes?

The 7:30 a.m. meeting was with newly elected Rep. David Rivera of Miami, a Republican whose district contains the RCMA headquarters in Immokalee.

Rivera was intensely interested in what migrant families experience in their travels. He asked many questions about how traveling affected the educations of their children. Both Elena and Francisca were comfortable sharing their stories.

And then, a total surprise: the new congressman told us that he not only knew what Head Start was, but he had been in Head Start as a child! We knew we had one strong supporter!

We next attended a Head Start breakfast, joining staff members for Reps. Bill Young of St. Petersburg, Connie Mack of Fort Myers and Kathy Castor of Tampa.

As the day unfolded, we became shocked to realize how little congressional staffers on the “Hill” know about Head Start. “That is some education program, right?” asked one.

Yet others surprised us by being supportive, voicing the realization that early childhood education was critical to later school success. Everyone was interested, and that was encouraging.

We learned how important it is to educate, to invite our elected officials and their staff out to our childcare centers to see for themselves what learning occurs with children every day.

We are going to make that happen! Stay tuned.



RCMA’s move to the former Hopewell Public School brought office manager Geneva Hayes back to scenes of her childhood.

A beloved school gets a new life

HOPEWELL – After 19 years with RCMA, Geneva Hayes’ career has brought her home.

When RCMA moved its Highlands County regional office from downtown Avon Park to the former Hopewell Elementary School, Hayes moved as office manager. But for her, the move was loaded with sentiment. At Hopewell, she was returning to the neighborhood where she grew up and the school building where she spent first- through fifth grade.

“I was happy to come back to where I started from,” she said.

A piece of the past also was restored for the Hopewell neighborhood, which through RCMA is partly reclaiming a focal point for community life.

Hopewell School is surrounded by an African-American community dating to the days a century ago when Avon Park banned black residents from living anywhere else.

The book, *African American Sites in Florida*, by Kevin McCarthy, quotes local historian Leoma Bradshaw Maxwell as writing that “Hopewell” came from the children’s refrain, “Hope we’ll win, hope we’ll win,” when they entered exhibits at a local fair.

Hayes recalls that Hopewell school originally opened in military barracks left from World War II. Books and other supplies were worn hand-me-downs brought from the white schools. Yet Hopewell cherished its school, Hayes says. Residents donated food to supplement the school’s lunch program. Community dances, plays and other social events were held there.

“They loved the school, and its faculty members,” she says. “Everyone was well known; it was just like family.”

Hayes attended Hopewell in the mid-1960s. Her last year there was her last year in a segregated school. Integration finally had arrived, and the school eventually closed.

Community college classes were held in the buildings. Later, the Boys and Girls Club moved in. Then a charter school was formed.

RCMA bought the four-building, 12-acre campus two years ago. After some \$530,000 in renovations, an RCMA childcare center opened there in September and RCMA’s regional offices moved there from downtown Avon Park in January.

Neighbors were pleased, Hayes says. “They wanted to see it being used for children again.”

Now, RCMA is providing a meeting space to the NAACP and other community groups that request it. With access to the school’s ball fields, a former teacher is working to organize baseball and softball leagues.

Planners of Hopewell’s annual Martin Luther King Day parade also have taken note of RCMA’s arrival, Hayes said. For years, the parade formed and started at the Hopewell site.

“Now, they’re thinking about coming back,” Hayes says.



Spring News

Redlands Christian Migrant Association
402 West Main Street
Immokalee, Florida 34142

Mainster named to “Women of Distinction”

SUN CITY CENTER – Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s Executive Director since 1988, was named a “Woman of Distinction” in February by the American Association of University Women, Sun City Center Branch.

At a luncheon celebrating the awards, Mainster joined two other honorees:

Jane Castor, who has presided over a significant crime reduction as Tampa’s Chief of Police.

Karen Mincey, Vice President for Information and Technology for Tampa Electric Company.

“What an honor!” Mainster said. “I always have considered AAUW to be such a distinguished group. I was flattered to hear from them. I had no idea they knew I existed!”

AAUW is a nationwide network of more than 100,000 members and donors and 1,000 branches. AAUW advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education, philanthropy, and research.



The faces looked vaguely familiar

PALATKA – In August of 2009, Lanika Robinson graduated from the University of Florida with a sociology degree. She began looking for a job as a social worker. Responding to an online ad, she landed work in her hometown of Palatka. RCMA hired Lanika as a family support worker.



Lanika Robinson

Then – during Lanika’s first day at work – things got a little eerie. Two ladies in the Palatka regional office looked vaguely familiar. *I think I know them*, Lanika thought.

“I remember you,” one said.

Lanika had been an RCMA baby, and didn’t know it. Her mother told her only that she had attended a Head Start program.

Lanika remembered the days at the James A. Long Child Development Center. She remembered the playground, and frolicking with other children.

“I recognized her face,” says Dorothy Crowley, who joined RCMA 26 years ago and today is the food service specialist for north Florida. “I remembered that she was well-mannered. She was shy, but she was very respectful.”

“They taught me how to behave in the classroom setting,” Lanika says. “They taught me how to behave with other kids, just how to have manners.”

Years later, Lanika graduated cum laude from Palatka High School, and moved to Gainesville for college. She would like to earn a master’s degree in social work, preferably while continuing with RCMA.

Lanika’s job involves helping the children’s families tackle an array of personal problems. She’s hooked on it.

“It’s making me want to get even more involved with helping families,” she says.

“It’s nice to know you helped mold a person,” Crowley says. “She’s turned out to be a good, productive person.”



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The winner! 2 Wheels for Isabel 3 Grant aids teachers 1, 4

REDLANDS CHRISTIAN MIGRANT ASSOCIATION SPRING NEWS 2011

Spring News

A children’s book, *Sonia Sotomayor*; a judge grows in the Bronx, inspired an exchange of letters between Immokalee students and the Supreme Court justice. (see letter below)



SUPREME SURPRISE Justice urges RCMA kids to “Dream Big”

IMMOKALEE – The children’s book, in English and Spanish, told the biography of Sonia Sotomayor, a Puerto Rican girl from the low-income Bronx who studied her way through the Yale Law School, and worked her way onto the U.S. Supreme Court.



Third grader Sonia Domingo holds her autographed photo of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor

Second- and third-graders at Immokalee Community School were inspired. Under the guidance of teacher Manny Tourn, they sent letters to Sotomayor.

“I will be unstoppable,” wrote Rodis Miranda. “Just like you.”

“I know you like the book, Nancy Drew,” wrote Matthew Arevalo.

“When I found out that you had diabetes, I felt sad for you,” wrote Esmeralda Cisneros.

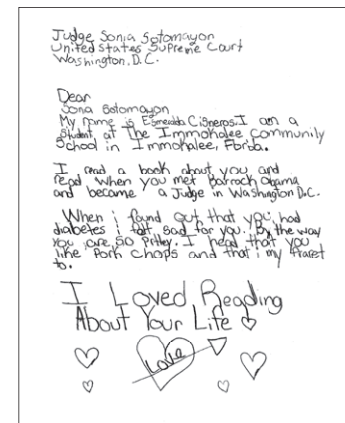
“By the way, you are so pretty.”

Tourn tried to dampen expectations.

“I told the kids not to be disappointed if we didn’t get a response,” he said. “Judge Sotomayor was a very busy person.”

Yet the response came. Sotomayor sent each child an autographed photo of herself, urging them to “Dream Big!” She also sent a letter to the class.

“In the years to come,” Sotomayor wrote, “I wish you the joy of dreaming big, working hard and succeeding in all that you do.”



Major grant aids teacher education

LAKELAND – More than 100 RCMA teachers will receive specialized counseling toward earning college degrees, thanks to an RCMA board member, the University of South Florida Polytechnic and the Helios Education Foundation.

The Phoenix-based Helios foundation in February awarded \$771,000 to fund a teacher training program developed by Dr. Smita Mathur, an assistant professor at USF Poly specializing in early childhood learning. Mathur has conducted extensive research in Florida’s migrant communities, often collaborating with RCMA. She joined RCMA’s Board of Directors in 2009.

Karen Ortiz is the Helios foundation’s vice president and director of early childhood education.

“We’re reaching teachers, most for whom English is not their primary language, in rural areas and helping them earn their credentials and degrees in early childhood education,” she said. “Those same teachers will also acquire the kinds of knowledge and skills they need to better prepare children to succeed during their kindergarten year.”

“USF has stepped outside the box in this grant,” said Barbara Mainster, RCMA’s Executive Director. “They’ve recognized that education has to adapt to meet demographic changes and respect students’ contributions. And the Helios Education Foundation has recognized that such innovations need to be funded. We’re excited and pleased.”

Throughout its history, RCMA has hired teachers from the farm communities and cultures it serves, so they will understand the lives of the children and their parents. Therefore, many of its beginning teachers have a work history in the fields rather than in the classroom. That means all their academic training must occur while they are working as teachers.

Over RCMA’s 45 years, thousands of its teachers have

NEW MENTORS SUPPORT 26 TEACHERS

PALATKA – Thanks to a \$225,000 grant, a trio of experienced preschool educators is quietly circulating among 26 RCMA classrooms in Putnam and Flagler counties, offering advice to teachers.

RCMA was one of two agencies in Florida to receive the mentor-coach grants from the U.S. Office of Head Start.

“It is an honor that we were chosen for this grant,” said Penney Norton, the grant’s RCMA project director.

The mentors were funded for 17 months, and they began work early this year. Each has several years of experience and at least a 4-year degree in early childhood education. They visit each RCMA teacher at least once every two weeks.

“Some of the teachers were uncomfortable at first,” Norton said. “But that’s changing. I had one tell me, ‘This is good. I realize she’s there for me.’”

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BUILDING ON SUCCESS

December is target for Wimauma groundbreaking

WIMAUMA – RCMA has postponed construction of its middle school at Wimauma Academy until December, to allow more time for fundraising.

The decision does NOT mean that the school’s current fifth-graders will have to leave Wimauma Academy for a middle school. Only 37 currently are enrolled, and the school can accommodate a class of sixth-graders next fall with some minor adjustments.

BARBARA MAINSTER, RCMA’S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, GAVE SEVERAL REASONS FOR DELAYING GROUNDBREAKING OF THE NEW MIDDLE SCHOOL:

- The delay should position Wimauma Academy to qualify for up to \$225,000 in state-provided “start-up costs” which can pay for non-capital items such as library shelves and \$114,000 in kitchen equipment.
- A December groundbreaking will allow time for a stronger fundraising push, accommodating higher-than-expected construction costs.

RCMA’s capital campaign for the school has raised \$1 million, including \$350,000 in pledges. Construction and renovation expenses are expected to total a little over \$3 million.

MEANWHILE, A BLUE-RIBBON WIMAUMA ACADEMY CAPITAL CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE IS TAKING SHAPE:

Alex Sink, who narrowly missed being elected Governor of Florida last November, joined the committee in February. Other members are:



Alex Sink

- Strawberry grower Gary Wishnatzki, an RCMA board member, whose annual tennis tournaments have raised nearly \$200,000 for the campaign.
- John Kirtley, Chairman of Step Up for Students, who has pledged to donate \$100,000 to the campaign and obtain another \$100,000 in grant funding;
- Morgan Roberts, a retired Presbyterian minister, volunteer at the school and donor.
- Evelyn Lunsford, former chairman of the Community Foundation of Greater Sun City Center, which has donated \$25,000 to the campaign.
- Linda Adams, an RCMA board member, and civic activist and donor.
- Bill Ferrari, an RCMA board member, former Tropicana executive, school volunteer and donor.
- Jay Taylor, a donor, former tomato grower and former RCMA board member.

The campaign’s motto is **Building on success**. That refers to Wimauma Academy’s record of student achievement including six “A” grades on the FCAT over eight years.

RCMA wants to extend that success into middle school, where children encounter adolescence and their most volatile, vulnerable years. For too many Wimauma Academy students, accustomed to RCMA’s culturally cozy charter school, public middle school has created culture shock.

“Middle school is when many kids decide, consciously or not, whether they’ll continue their educations through high school and college,” says Mainster. “We want to keep them under our roof during those years, and keep them ambitious.”



Wimauma Academy students (left to right) Josue Peraza, Rocio Santiago and Noirian Mendez sing *Put a Little Love in Your Heart* at a dinner the night before the tennis tournament.

PHOTO BY RON O’CONNOR – FARM CREDIT.

Tennis tournament raises \$70,000 for Wimauma Academy

TAMPA – The annual tennis tournament staged by RCMA Board Member Gary Wishnatzki generated an estimated \$70,000 last month toward building a middle school at Wimauma Academy.

“I thought it was a great success,” said Wishnatzki, one of Florida’s leading strawberry growers and shippers. “We had some new sponsors, which was exciting. We had a great turnout; I think we had close to 250 people there at the dinner.”

The tournament’s dinner Feb. 11 featured some 20 students from the Academy, singing *Put a Little Love in Your Heart*.

The next day, about 15 teams competed in the Sixth Annual Strawberry Pro-Am Tennis Tournament. The winning team consisted of professional Milos Koprivika and amateurs Chris Feeney and Sandra Lamas.

In the parking lot, 50 flats of gleaming red Wish Farms strawberries sold out.

“Gary Wishnatzki has a heart as big as his business,” said Barbara Mainster, RCMA Executive Director. “He staged a wonderful tournament, from beginning to end, and many future middle-schoolers at Wimauma Academy will benefit.”

How to help:

You can help RCMA build a vital middle school in Wimauma.

Donate online at www.rcma.org, or mail a check to:

Wimauma Academy Capital Campaign
Redlands Christian Migrant Association;
402 W. Main St.;
Immokalee, FL 34142



Chris Feeney, the winning men’s amateur, returns a volley.



(L-R) Milos Koprivika, pro on the winning pro team; Chris Feeney, amateur on the winning team; Gary Wishnatzki, RCMA board member, and tournament organizer.

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Great course, great cause

RCMA’s 12th annual golf tournament, our principal fundraiser, will be held on Saturday, April 30 at Lely Golf & Country Club in Naples.

Registration costs \$225 per golfer. Sponsorships up to \$25,000 are available. Some 200 door prizes will be given away.

You can register online at www.rcma.org (From the homepage, click on “How you can help”). Or you can call Judy Brill at 800-282-6540, ext. 242

Wheels to the rescue

On March 2, the Sanibel Bicycle Club brought 130 restored bicycles and tricycles to the RCMA complex in Immokalee, where they were distributed to local charities and parents of RCMA children. Bikes are a leading form of recreation in affluent Sanibel Island, which has 27 miles of bicycle trails. In low-income Immokalee, they’re often used as transportation by people who can’t afford cars.



Gloria Padilla of RCMA helps fit a new helmet for Guadalupe Gonzalez, 4, after she received a used bicycle from the Sanibel Bicycle Club.



Isabel Parra, 2, celebrates the used tricycle she received from the Sanibel Bicycle Club. Isabel attends an RCMA childcare center.



Volunteers unload 130 bicycles that were collected and repaired by the Sanibel Bicycle Club and distributed free in March to low-income people in Immokalee.

Coaching the coaches

PARENTS LEARN TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN’S EDUCATIONS

Did you know that 90 percent of a person’s brain development occurs before age 6? Have you thought about how your parents’ successes and failures affect you today?

Those are some of the topics pending for parents whose children attend RCMA centers in the Tampa area. The parents are taking a unique, grant-funded course called Opening Doors, which coaches Latinos to better support their children’s educations.

The stakes are high. Most of the parents are Hispanic laborers, workers in the strawberry and vegetable fields due to their lack of English. But their toddlers are in their most formative years, with the opportunities of American public schools ahead of them.

Opening Doors (or, in Spanish, Abriendo Puertas) has begun at a half-dozen RCMA childcare centers, thanks to the Los Angeles-based Families in Schools, which developed Opening Doors; and to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which awarded a \$160,000 grant for training and materials. The classes are to be offered at some 20 RCMA centers this year.

RCMA is one of three locations where Opening Doors is being launched. The nonprofit Families in Schools also is reaching Latino parents through groups in New Mexico and the Washington D.C. area.

Research has long shown that parental support is a key ingredient of a child’s educational success. That can be a special challenge in immigrant families, where the child’s education includes a new culture and language different from those of the parents.

“Engaging parents is a fundamental part of the way RCMA teaches children,” said RCMA Executive Director Barbara Mainster. “That’s why we were so thrilled to be chosen by Families in Schools for this program.”

Last October, 30 RCMA managers received Opening Doors training. Now, they are holding classes with parents in four centers in Plant City, plus centers in Nocatee, Ruskin and Dover.



RCMA’s Tony Valdivinos leads a group of mothers in a parenting discussion at a childcare center south of Tampa.

Villanueva appointed to civil rights committee



PLANT CITY – Lourdes Villanueva of RCMA has been appointed to the Florida Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Villanueva, RCMA’s Director of Farmworker Advocacy, joined the 12-member committee last year.

The Commission on Civil Rights investigates voting rights complaints and studies other discrimination issues. Its state advisory committees assist the commission in its fact-finding and public education responsibilities.

Peter Minarik, the Commission’s southern regional director, said Villanueva was nominated because of her insights into Florida’s growing Hispanic subculture, and particularly, migrant farmworker life.

In her teens, Villanueva migrated with her farmworker parents.

GRANT continued from page 1



Dr. Smita Mathur

learned English and earned their GEDs. Many have earned 2-year college degrees. But bachelor’s degrees have proven daunting.

Mathur’s research identified an array of challenges, ranging from family and work responsibilities, to cultural inhibitions, to language difficulties. She designed a training and counseling program to help the teachers overcome those.

The Helios grant made it possible.

The 40-week program began April 1. It runs parallel to credit-bearing education courses at USF Poly. Objectives include promoting language and literacy, ensuring college success, and enhancing self-esteem and personal empowerment. The RCMA teachers meet literacy experts weekly, alternating between individual and group sessions. The literacy expert, academic advisor and teacher together make an individual plan for literacy development and academic success.

“The first five years of a child’s life are key to later success; that’s when the brain develops the most,” said Mathur. “If you make a difference now it will carry them forward. A qualified teacher who is also culturally competent can meet the children’s academic, social and emotional needs and create a pathway to school readiness.”

She sees the program reaching far beyond the classroom.

“The way I see it, we as a society have two options: we can empower children and families to learn and contribute to society, or we can ignore them and develop a permanent underclass for which we will all pay for life. Forget the politics and face the facts: These migrant kids are born here and are part of our population. When we empower kids, we also empower parents and create productive and contributing members of our society.

“I believe we’re redefining the migrant child. We have found their strengths and we’re building on them. One day when we think of migrant children we won’t think of all that isn’t working for them, and instead teachers will be happy to have migrant kids in the classroom.”