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# Spring News

*Gayane Stepanian*  
MESSAGE FROM YOUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

## Seeing immigrants close up

There's a curious coincidence between myself and my RCMA predecessor, Barbara Mainster. Each of us is an American daughter of immigrants.

Barbara's German parents met on a ship destined for Ellis Island.

That's also where my father, an Armenian, came after he fled the Ukraine and war-torn Europe. He met my mother, a nurse from Mexico, in Southern California, where they opened a small Catholic gift store.

Like Barbara's parents, mine worked hard and lived humbly. They focused on the new opportunities they were creating for their children. We, in turn, embraced their dreams for us and ran with them.

The process has repeated itself year after year, town after town, throughout American history. We are truly a nation of immigrants.

In Florida, a fifth of the population now consists of immigrants. The unauthorized immigrants alone pay some \$437 million in state and local taxes in southeast Florida, \$112 million in the Tampa Bay area and \$29 million in the Naples-Immokalee area.

An estimated three-fourths of Florida farm workers are unauthorized immigrants, eagerly taking on tough work that the native-born Americans shun.

Immigrants pick tomatoes, oranges, strawberries, cucumbers and dozens of other crops. They sustain Florida agriculture. They help our farms produce a safe and secure supply of nutritious food.



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## Kids prosper after attending RCMA

**A LONG-TERM STUDY OF HOW CHILDREN PERFORMED IN SCHOOL AFTER ATTENDING RCMA HAS DOCUMENTED WHAT RCMA TEACHERS HAVE KNOWN FOR DECADES: THE KIDS DID WELL.**

"This study shows that children from migrant farm-worker families have great potential and can achieve at levels comparable to their native-born low-income peers," concluded the researchers in *The Journal of Educational Research*. "Teachers and school administrators should have high expectations for these resilient and hard-working students."

Adam Winsler, Associate Chair of Graduate Studies in the Psychology Department at Virginia's George Mason University and researcher in the study, called the study "uplifting and positive" in an email to RCMA.

"It shows that the children of migrant families who attend your RCMA programs ... are doing quite well in elementary school, and performing in many cases as well if not better than other children in poverty in the county or compared to statewide averages including children not in poverty. We talk about how it is likely that the RCMA programs are responsible for these children's early school success."

The study examined assessment records of 289 children of migrant families who attended RCMA centers in Miami-Dade County, and then entered public school between 2004 and 2007. The oldest students were followed through the third grade.

Not surprisingly, Winsler, along with PhD student Tanya Tavassolie and other researchers, found that migrant children struggled most with English, their second language, and with language-heavy school subjects. However, kids did well in other subjects and improved their English rapidly from year to year.

RCMA's small class sizes, curriculum and targeted activities for children with problems were cited as the important factors that prepare children for school.

"Children of migrant farmworker families not attending such specialized RCMA Pre-K programs tailored to the needs of migrant families likely do not arrive at the kindergarten door as ready to learn," the authors concluded. "Also, the children of migrant farm workers at RCMA centers likely experience less discrimination, bias and low

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"Most immigrants come here to secure a better life for themselves and their families. They cherish the values of hard work, faith, family, enterprise and patriotism that have made this country great."

- FORMER FLORIDA GOV. JEB BUSH

# Procacci companies honor Mainster

Barbara Mainster, in her last months as RCMA's executive director, was honored with the creation of the "Mainster Digital Literacy Program" at an Immokalee elementary school.



The honor on Nov. 15 was accompanied by pledges of \$5,000 annually to RCMA and the elementary school by tomato growers Santa Sweets, Inc. and Gargiulo, Inc., which are siblings in the Procacci Family Companies.

"Barbara has been a tremendous friend to our companies, our workers and our industry," said Joseph M. Procacci, chief operating officer of Santa Sweets. "There is nothing more precious to us than our children. Her incredible leadership during her career has opened doors that weren't previously there for our workers' children. Our employees show up for work knowing that their kids are in great hands."

On Jan. 3, Miami's Gayane Stepanian succeeded Mainster as executive director. But Mainster has remained on the job, aiding in the transition.

The Procacci ceremonies were held at Immokalee's Pinecrest Elementary School, which received the Mainster Digital Literacy Program. The program, rooted in a supply of Procacci-bought iPads, is designed to support digital literacy among the Pinecrest students.



## A WALL OF COMFORT

RCMA received 450 boxes of diapers in December from the nonprofit Baby Basics of Collier County, which supplies diapers to low-income families. Baby Basics volunteers who delivered the diapers were (left to right) Marty Feeney, John Chaffey, Dick Lynch and Phil Bailey.

# Empowerment

## A HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR WINS \$19,000 TO HELP RCMA GIRLS



Carson Eckhard

WIMAUMA – A \$19,000 grant to instill confidence and leadership in 6th-grade girls has fallen into the lap of Leadership Academy, RCMA's middle school south of Tampa.

RCMA didn't request the project, but was delighted to accept it on March 18 when high school senior Carson Eckhard received a \$50,000 package of honors from the Tampa Bay Lightning Foundation.

"Carson's program will create a profound experience for our girls," said Mark Haggett, director of RCMA's Wimauma schools.

Eckhard's life changed when she became exposed to programs blending leadership, mentoring and outdoor adventure. Embracing those concepts, Eckhard founded Girls Outside, a program at her school, Berkeley Preparatory School in Tampa.

Berkeley Prep has befriended the children of RCMA's charter schools in multiple ways. Last year, Berkeley formed a college-preparatory program for low-income middle-school students, and selected 17 applicants from Leadership Academy. They attend classes and other activities for several Saturdays during the school year and several weeks during the summer. Eckhard met several of the girls.

"In the sixth grade, I was super timid and never talked," Eckhard said. "I think most middle school girls are that way. The RCMA girls are really eager to learn, and some of them are on the quieter side too."

Eckhard's project sprang to life when the Lightning foundation named her a "Community Hero of Tomorrow" at a hockey game March 18 in Tampa. Now, rising 6th-graders from RCMA will start the program with a one-week course, followed by gatherings on eight Saturdays. They will climb a rock wall, surmount rope courses and talk extensively with mentors about leadership, friendship, achievement and women's issues.

"Carson doesn't just talk about empowering girls – she's a living example of it," Haggett said. "I would love for our girls to follow in Carson's footsteps."



## Awareness colors

Staff at RCMA's headquarters building added color to their causes on Oct. 21. October was Breast Cancer Awareness Month (pink shirts) and also Domestic Violence Awareness Month (purple shirts).





## Tee up for RCMA kids

**NAPLES** – On May 13, you can help RCMA and enjoy a terrific round of golf in a single morning. You can compete in the Lipman Golf Classic, a key annual fund-raiser for RCMA.

The fee of \$225 per golfer covers breakfast, lunch, door prizes and 18 challenging holes of golf at Naples Heritage Golf & Country Club. For information, call Angie Alfaro at (239) 658-3560, ext. 224. Or email her at [angiea@rcma.org](mailto:angiea@rcma.org).

## KIDS PROSPER AFTER ATTENDING RCMA

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expectations from peers and adults or staff than do similar migrant peers not in RCMA programs.”

Gayane Stepanian, RCMA's executive director, underscored the importance of RCMA's model on the long-term academic and social success of children.

“This study supports what we see every day,” Stepanian said. “Qualitatively, we see RCMA's impact long-term. School-aged children that attend our after-school programs and once attended our early learning centers in South Miami-Dade are doing quite well in school. In fact, over half of them are on the honor roll! That's no coincidence.”

## MESSAGE FROM GAYANE

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Well-behaved: RCMA children in Plant City revel in new books.

Yet immigration politics has taken a toll. American produce growers can't find enough laborers to achieve optimum production; they are losing market share to foreign importers.

“The U.S. needs workers of all types,” former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush wrote in the Wall Street Journal in 2013 as he and a colleague prepared to publish a book on immigration reform. “The birthrate in this country has fallen below the level necessary to sustain the population at the very time that millions of Americans are leaving the workforce and expecting retirement benefits. The

nation needs energetic young workers to spur the economy and support an ever-increasing social-welfare burden.”

Bush also wrote: “Most immigrants come here to secure a better life for themselves and their families. They cherish the values of hard work, faith, family, enterprise and patriotism that have made this country great.”

That sounds a lot like the people who trudge into our child-care centers at the end of a workday. They may arrive grimy and exhausted, yet they beam at the sight of their happy children.

In my first months at RCMA, I have visited many of those child-care centers and all three charter schools – often accompanied by guests. We hear two comments repeatedly:

1. You people are doing wonderful work.
2. These children are SO well-behaved!

*And it's true. Children arrive at our thresholds with reverence for their teachers. Their parents have taught them at home that school is the ladder to a better life; that teachers will show them how to succeed; that America continues, after 241 years, to be a beacon to those with energy and a dream.*



# Strawberry event earns record profits

PLANT CITY – The Strawberry Picking Challenge, an annual fund-raiser for RCMA, hauled in more than \$100,000 in February, a record for the 4-year-old event.

The bumper crop of sponsors grew by nearly \$30,000 when the Florida Strawberry Growers Association assumed the title sponsorship for \$10,000, Mosaic Fertilizer contributed \$12,500, Monte Package contributed \$7,500 and four other donors chipped in \$2,500 for the first time or enlarged their prior gifts that much.

An auction also became richer with the addition of a private flight



Gary Wishnatzki

to The Masters golf tournament (\$5,700); a trip to the U.S. Open tennis tournament (\$3,200) and tickets and a backstage tour for the production of Broadway's Wicked in Tampa (\$1,300).

"This has been our best year yet," said Gary Wishnatzki, an RCMA board member whose berry company, Wish Farms, stages the annual benefit. "It seems like the event is really getting momentum."

Wishnatzki previously supported RCMA by organizing an annual tennis tournament. He conceived a strawberry-picking competition to salute his industry.

February's event was a first for Gayane Stepanian, RCMA's new executive director, who joined one of the corporate strawberry-picking teams.

"I never realized how strenuous and meticulous this work is," she said afterward. "Bending under the hot sun all



Third graders Daniela Jose, Lexie Xyong and Alessandra Gomez celebrate a tasty strawberry crop at February's Strawberry Picking Challenge.

day, and doing it again the next day, to pick and pack the perfect strawberries, is hard work. The average American won't sign up for this work.

"I gained an even deeper respect for our families as well as the growers," Stepanian said. "Hats off to Gary and his family for their humanity and kindness."

The day-long event featured a charity u-pick open for the public. Other family-friendly activities included a strawberry-shortcake eating contest, balloon artist, face painter, games, music and an appearance by the Florida Strawberry Festival Queen and Court.

Stepanian said proceeds will be devoted to future RCMA capital projects.



RCMA third graders sing for the crowd at February's Strawberry Picking Challenge.

# RCMA hosts educational forums

RCMA HOSTED TWO FORUMS OUTSIDE TAMPA IN OCTOBER IN COOPERATION WITH THE WHITE HOUSE INITIATIVE ON EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE FOR HISPANICS.

The forums were the fourth and final stop of Raising Migrant Voices, following similar gatherings in California and Oregon.

A Thursday-night gathering in Ruskin featured migrant farm workers talking about helping their children navigate the Tampa-area school system. They said their children had been the victims of bullying by students, low expectations by teachers and indifference by administrators.

The next morning's forum showcased businesses that have supported the educations of farm workers' children through a scholarship fund at the University of South Florida. The fund was launched by RCMA Board member Gary Wishnatzki, owner of Wish Farms. It received major support from the Florida Tomato Exchange and the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

The meeting drew Ansberto Vallejo, a former RCMA child and employee who now is an administrator with the Hillsborough County School District. He said such scholarships are vital, but don't remove all the barriers between migrant students and college.

"It is difficult for a migrant child to leave the nest," Vallejo told the group. "There is support, but also pressure and guilt. We are more than just a family – we are a company. Leaving home can be seen as disloyalty since we are no longer an earner for the family. This can bring challenges, especially for those leaving and going out of state.

"Another challenge is the lack of financial assistance. It is only thanks to the support from a program like Mr. Wishnatzki's that I was able to get a Ph.D."

"Helping families is the right thing to do and it's good business," said Chuck Allison, co-owner of Umatilla's Spring Valley Farms. "We have workers who return with their families to us year after year for work. It makes sense to support RCMA because the families know their children are well-taken care of."



# Rubio visits, praises RCMA

IMMOKALEE – U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio toured RCMA’s Immokalee charter school and a migrant child-care center in January, and promptly praised RCMA on Facebook.



Third graders (from left) Sheyley Garcia Bravo, Gisselle Sanchez Rojo and Natalee Quintero asked to meet Sen. Marco Rubio when he visited Immokalee Community School in January.

“It was a true pleasure learning more about the group’s mission and work they do in rural communities, and just as rewarding, meeting the children they teach and care for,” Rubio said in his posting. “Each child, regardless of their background, race, or culture, deserves a fair chance to receive a quality education and achieve success. I thank RCMA for graciously opening their door to me and sharing about their work. These are bright students who have a better future ahead because of it.”

Barbara Mainster, transitioning out of her job as RCMA’s executive director, was one of Rubio’s tourguides for an

hour. Mainster said Rubio asked good questions, and showed impressive awareness about brain development in young children.

Rubio was accompanied by Todd Reid, his deputy chief of staff who wrote in February, “We had a wonderful time visiting with your staff and students. It’s been the highlight of the year so far.”

“We were delighted to have such a prominent U.S. senator take an interest in RCMA,” said Mainster’s successor, Gayane Stepanian. “Most of RCMA’s funding comes from the federal government, and Sen. Rubio, a member of the Appropriations Committee, is in a perfect position to speak up for the value of Head Start and work such as RCMA’s.”



Sen. Marco Rubio posed with a class of kindergarteners and their teachers at Immokalee Community School. Celebrating the 100th day of school, several students and teachers were costumed as if they were 100 years old.



Gabriela (in the yellow vest) listens as a teacher reads a book.

## Gabriela enjoys her rightful place

By Daniel Stowe

**ONE RECENT MORNING, I STOPPED BY OUR SAM ALLEN CENTER OUTSIDE TAMPA, AND IT WAS LIKE JUST ANOTHER DAY. PROFESSIONAL TEACHERS WERE AT THE READY. EVERY CHILD WAS SAFE AND WELL FED, MOVING SELF-DIRECTED ABOUT THE ROOM, LEARNING.**

Right in the mix was Gabriela. At 3, she knows only a few words. She cannot walk or crawl. Yet she was there, without her wheelchair, interacting with her peers, with joy in her eyes and theirs. Priceless.

Such moments don’t come easily. Gabriela has cerebral palsy and seizure disorder. These afflictions make it all the more valuable when Gabriela can join activities with the rest of the kids.

So for Gabriela, we installed a changing table in a room where the other kids are potty-trained. We obtained a swallow study, which showed she can eat finely diced food. Our cooks became trained for Gabriela. We collaborated with the Migrant Head Start program that cared for Gabriela in Michigan, where her parents pick strawberries and apples each summer, and where Gabriela first experienced seizures. The Michigan program shared medical files and procedures that caregivers should use with Gabriela.



Daniel Stowe

Marlene Rivera from our Health Advisory Service Board came in and trained us, including parents, all at once on seizure disorders, feeding and emergency procedures.

We stretched the budget of the child-care center to hire an additional teacher. Gabriela received support from her open-minded teachers and their supervisor and other supervisors several levels up the chain of command. Family support workers and health specialists worked together. Everyone bought into the mission that Gabriela should be fully included in every activity.

All so I could say to the world that we included one little girl right where she belonged – with her classmates.

*Daniel Stowe helps RCMA serve children with disabilities.*



# UF fraternity shares big energy

ANTHONY – For the sixth time in three years, dozens of University of Florida students have piled into a caravan of cars and spent a day sprucing up an RCMA child-care center.

The gritty, high-energy help has come courtesy of the UF chapter of Alpha Phi Omega, a nationwide service fraternity whose members say RCMA has become their most popular destination.

“It’s one of everyone’s favorite services,” said member Evan Robins of Gainesville, a senior majoring in environmental science and wildlife ecology, who has joined three of the work days.

The feeling is mutual. Quite possibly, no other organization has donated so much human energy to RCMA.

“These young people are just wonderful,” said Leticia Gonzalez, the area coordinator who has overseen the visits. “They pull weeds. They wash windows. They scrub floors. They paint walls. They are thorough, and they are cheerful the whole time.”

The roots of the relationship reach back to 2013, when APO member Lindsey Backman remembered a work day in her high school years at one of RCMA’s centers in the Tampa Bay area. Backman contacted RCMA and learned of the three RCMA centers in the Ocala area.

The first work day was held in October, 2013, at Anthony Child Development Center, just north of Ocala. The center serves some 50 children, mostly of parents who work in the area’s horse, peanut, blueberry and melon industries.

More than 30 APO students worked that day, and were treated to an unexpected, vintage Mexican lunch by staff and parents from the center. They began learning about the travails of immigrant farm workers, and the help that RCMA provides to them.

Since then, APO has descended

on RCMA’s Walker center, in Interlachen; the Kendrick center in Ocala, the Seville center, south of Palatka and twice more to the Anthony center, including last Oct. 29. For the students, the work days have the adventuresome air of road trips.

“We we first heard about it, we got really excited,” said junior Alexandra Uchdorf, a health science major from Miami.

She said RCMA has been clearly thankful for the help, and is clearly effective in helping low-income families.

“What RCMA does is exactly the thing that brought us to service,” she said. “For us, it’s going back to a community that needs it the most.”



**Evan Robins of Gainesville points to his signature on a fence that members of the University of Florida’s Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity have signed over the years at RCMA’s Anthony Child Development Center. Robins, a senior majoring in environmental science and wildlife ecology, had signed the fence during a previous work day at the center.**



**Fraternity members store cribs. They are: (left to right) Jessica Curbelo, a freshman journalism major from Miami; Karen Cohen, a graduate student in health administration from Rockville, Md.; and Claudia Perez Brito, a sophomore journalism major from Miami.**



**Members of Alpha Phi Omega service fraternity apply fresh paint to the parking pavement at RCMA’s Anthony center.**



**APO members weed a flower box. They are: (left to right) junior Alexandra Uchdorf, a health science major from Miami; junior A.J. Harris of Brandon, an English & philosophy major; senior Carlos Thomas of Fort Lauderdale, majoring in biochemistry and economics; and Nikki Picon, a sophomore from Miami.**



# Parent-child talk measured

For the first time ever, RCMA is giving homework to toddlers.

Some 200 RCMA children ages 0-3 are going home each weekend with vests carrying voice recorders. The devices measure how much talk is directed at the child. The more, the better.

The effort hearkens to one of the nation's landmark studies in the development of children's vocabularies, the foundation of their learning. The study in 1995 showed that large preschool vocabularies were found in affluent families. Using tape recorders, researchers concluded that a child of college professors experienced 45 million words during its first four years of life, while a child of welfare recipients experienced 13 million words. Talking to children extensively and positively was the most important key to IQ and school success.

RCMA leaders have been talking to parents for years about the "30-Million-Word Gap" discovered in 1995. Now, they are taking the issue a step farther through a two-year, \$95,000 grant from Head Start.

Besides the vests and recorders, the grant pays for software to measure how parents are doing and to coach them how to improve.

Parent training sessions were held during the winter, and use of the devices was fine-tuned during February, said Olivia Chopra, who supervises the project as RCMA's family engagement manager.

"The parents are really excited about this," Chopra said. "Many of them have low literacy, and they're anxious to see their children do better. They have wanted to help, but weren't sure how."

"Now they get specific feedback about what they can do. They can see when they have improved."



Leadership Academy's soccer team has won every game in its three-year history.

## Soccer Team Keeps Winning



WIMAUMA – For the third straight season, the soccer team at RCMA's middle-school south of Tampa has won every game and the league championship. The team is 36-0 since its founding in 2014.

Coach Sonny Juarez said the success can't be attributed to the fact that soccer is central to the players' Hispanic culture. Instead, Juarez said his players win because they play hard.

"They never give up," Juarez said.

Meanwhile, the school's street hockey team won a 20-team tournament sponsored in February by the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The school, Leadership Academy, competes in the Central Florida Charter Athletic League against schools from southern and eastern Hillsborough County.



## Turkeys fly to RCMA

IMMOKALEE – RCMA's neediest families received some 250 turkeys at the Immokalee airport on Nov. 12, courtesy of several Fort Lauderdale groups led by the Rotary Club of Downtown Fort Lauderdale and Turkeys Take Flight – a group that makes charitable deliveries in a World War II era DC-3. "We're really trying to give back and help the migrant families, who have worked hard all year to provide us with fresh produce," said Tom Powers, in the turkey costume, who organized this year's delivery.

## A Mexico-funded health van

PLANT CITY – Working with Mexico's Orlando consulate, a non-profit in Mexico has bought a health van that travels among RCMA centers east of Tampa conducting screenings for RCMA families.

The bus and its staff are the fruit of a one-year grant from Juntos Podemos, a Mexico-based organization that seeks to help expatriate Mexicans prosper in the U.S.

Some 90 percent of the patients visiting the health bus have been RCMA parents, said Lourdes Villanueva, RCMA's Director of Farm Worker Advocacy. They have received blood-pressure checks and screenings for diabetes and high cholesterol.





## Spring News

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### Sebring group gives \$10,850 for toys

SEBRING – Ag Angels, a local nonprofit, made a huge splash in December when it joined RCMA’s traditional scramble for children’s Christmas toys.

Ag Angels made a series of donations that totaled \$10,850. Those included a last-minute gift of \$350 to help three boys whose mother had fallen terminally ill.

“I think this was RCMA’s biggest Christmas surprise,” said Kathleen Roehm, director of community relations. “Ag Angels was super-generous. They made a big difference in Christmas for hundreds of low-income kids.”

Many RCMA child-care centers rely each Christmas on local benefactors to fund mass-purchases of toys so no child will experience Christmas without a gift. That is a serious possibility when parents can afford little beyond food and other necessities.

Ag Angels was founded a decade ago by Scott Kirouac of Sebring when he learned about the plight of some low-income families through his grandson’s school.

### On The Move

## She’s small, but kids look up to her

IMMOKALEE – At 3 feet, 9 inches tall, Ana Abarca is smaller than any of her students and, for that matter, anybody else at Immokalee Middle School.

Her attitude toward this may be summed up as: “So?”

It has been that way since Abarca was born 24 years ago with Kniest dysplasia, a genetic condition that causes short stature. Size wasn’t a factor when she entered RCMA’s Rollason Infant Migrant Head Start center, one of the tiniest children ever to toddle through the door.

It didn’t matter when Abarca was president of the nationally known BETA Club at Immokalee High School or when she graduated among the top 20 seniors in 2011 – headed for Florida Gulf Coast University with \$60,000 in scholarships.

And it has not mattered this season as Abarca launched a career teaching math in her hometown middle school.

“Just because you have a disability, you’re no different from anybody else,” she said.

In her first year at Immokalee Middle, Abarca believes she

is known less for her height and more for her credentials as the daughter of tomato pickers in Immokalee.

“I understand my students’ background,” she said. “I came from that background. I care for farm worker families. The kids definitely tend to have more respect for me ... I don’t give up on them; I don’t want them to give up.”

Abarca attended both preschool and after-school programs at RCMA.

She is grateful that RCMA allowed her to engage with other children for so many years. Yet she is more grateful that it freed her parents to work longer hours, for larger paychecks.

“I’m thankful for RCMA,” she said. “I don’t know where I would be without them . . . but I do know that my life is more fulfilling and meaningful because of their sacrifices.”



Ana Abarca