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SPOTLIGHT

NEWS MAGAZINE

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Gargiulo Education Center seeks to teach more kids

By Jeff Lytle
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The curriculum includes mathematics, science, business and entrepreneurship.
Support services include food and medical, dental and mental health care.

Students get out into the community to shadow executives.
What sounds like a model for a college actually is a snapshot of Gargiulo Education Center, based at Rail Head Industrial Park off Old U.S. 41 and dedicated to broadening horizons of farm laborers’ children from two nearby migrant housing complexes. Gargiulo runs the complexes, farms, the education center and a packing house next door.

Nearly 70 K-12 students come on weekdays after school to do their homework, have their grades monitored and learn new skills to help break the cycle of poverty. That effort can be complicated when parents follow crops from state to state.
The GEC hub of activity now seeks to expand and serve even more children. Mary Asta, the sparkplug executive director and a board member, has her eye on one of three neighboring idle buildings. Location, she explained, is crucial to maintain linkage with the existing center, students and families, who clean the school and cook native annual banquets for donors. She told Spotlight she has \$500,000 already and will mount a fundraising campaign, which she has done for medical and military foundations in New York.



Students at Gargiulo Education Center get assistance with homework.



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Meanwhile, she and the center have other needs, such as a sponsor for an entrepreneurial program next year; a business mentor for a “store” stocked with donated goods that serve as rewards for good grades and conduct; and a van for field trips for fun and learning about career opportunities.
At a pre-holiday party for students, families and supporters, “improved grades” was a common refrain from youngsters when asked what the education center means to them.
High schooler Aaron Rodriguez added that the center opened his eyes to criminal justice and the hospitality industry as possible academic and career pursuits.

Continued on next page



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Jeff Lytle

A guest at the holiday festivities, Marcia Weis, brought books as gifts for the third year in a row.

Ashley Pimentel, a senior, has attended the center since kindergarten and leans toward majoring in business management at Florida SouthWestern State College and, later, Florida Gulf Coast University.

She was proud to tell Spotlight her sister, now 29, is a center alumna now working as a nurse.

A guest at the holiday festivities, Marcia Weis of Quail Creek, brought books as gifts for the third year in a row. She told of one little boy who was curious about the world, so she brought him an atlas. That hooked him on learning, she said, and she enjoyed reading to him from another brand new geography book this year. “They leave a little twang in my heart,” Weis said of the students.

Nearly 70 K-12 students come on weekdays after school to do their homework, have their grades monitored and learn new skills to help break the cycle of poverty.

To stretch an annual budget of \$750,000, the education center reports a long list of community business and non-profit partners. The center’s focus on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts/music and math)

is labor-intensive, with all paid or volunteer teachers certified in their subjects. Other curriculum seeks to build character, emotional stability and even etiquette, with students at the holiday party being reminded to use napkins. Visits to assisted living centers teach compassion, Asta told Spotlight, and remind students that the elderly come from diverse and productive backgrounds as workers and parents.

Testimonials help tell the story of the Gargiulo Education Center.

Lisa Morse, director of community engagement for Collier County Public Schools, points to teamwork. “CCPS services migrant students through our school-based programs and family-based services,” she said, “and we believe all supplemental services benefit the academic achievement of this needy population.”



Contributed

Students at GEC get music lessons on piano, voice, guitar, ukulele and songwriting.

The Collier Community Foundation’s senior director of marketing and public relations, Cindi Withorn, hails the education center’s administrative and grant efforts. “We are honored that GEC chooses to keep its endowment fund with our community foundation, enabling GEC’s endowment fund to receive tax-deductible donations and grow to support GEC’s valuable work,” Withorn commented. “The foundation was also honored to support GEC’s hurricane relief work with a grant in October to support efforts for the deserving students and families they serve.”

Maria Jimenez-Lara, CEO of the Naples Children & Education Foundation, praised the “much needed” center and sums up GEC’s mission: “Since our initial grant in 2015, we have seen meaningful results in increasing the number of at-risk students graduating high school and going on to college, thus improving the future of entire families, one child at a time.” 🌈

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By Lisa Green

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