

THE FIRST ✨ THE ONLY

Vero Beach Magazine®

APRIL 2022

*Local professionals step out of the office
and into the ocean for a different kind of*

Board Meeting





The Learning Alliance's Moonshot Moment Reading Rocket travels throughout Indian River County.

Spread the Word

READING IS A GOLDEN TICKET TO A HEALTHY, HAPPY, AND PROSPEROUS FUTURE

The summer of 2019 could not have arrived soon enough for the Pickering family. Our older son, Colin, had just finished his freshman year of high school and was headed west for a rite of passage – farming table grapes and practicing his Spanish in the California sun. Our daughter, Olivia, had just graduated eighth grade and was headed for high school. Our younger son, Grant,

was finally finished with preschool and ready for kindergarten. For Stephanie and me, this meant a parenting dream would finally become a reality: Come fall, thank goodness, all three children would be on the same school schedule.

Summer plans for our family included a “staycation” in Vero Beach hosting various friends and family members, a surfing trip for me, a girls’ trip for Stephanie, and an

end-of-summer cousin-palooza in Chicago. In between these planned activities, we looked forward to the unscheduled ebb and flow that comes to the barrier island in summertime, including spontaneous visits to the uncrowded beaches.

As a preemptive measure against the “summer slide” – what teachers tell me is the tendency for students to lose some of the gains they achieved during the



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION
© VERO BEACH MAGAZINE

previous school year—our summer 2019 began with a trip to Vero Beach Book Center followed by the promised orange slushie and vanilla ice cream treat from Countryside Citrus on Ocean Drive. On the day of our bookstore visit, our housekeeper’s son, Miguel, was spending the afternoon swimming with my children, so I invited him to join us. It was a particularly celebratory affair, considering that just six months earlier, halfway through his third-grade year, Miguel could not read.

Miguel’s mother began working for our family in the summer of 2015, shortly after our arrival in Vero Beach from Bakersfield, California. Over the years, most of my interactions with Miguel had taken the form of brief exchanges every so often when my return home from the office coincided with the tail end of an afternoon playdate with my son while his mother worked. Between Miguel’s developing English vocabulary and my sparse Portuguese, the extent of our encounters usually consisted of a high five, a smile, or some exchange of silliness on his way out the door. Miguel was kind and loving to my own little boy, however, and that was all that mattered to me.

My Christmas gift to

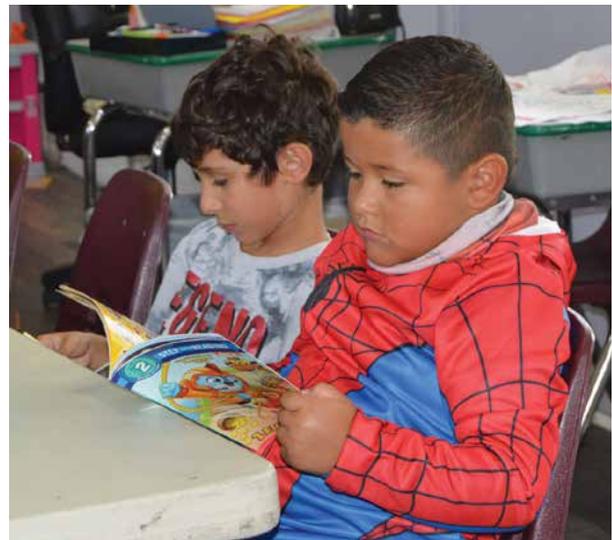


ERICA READIN

Marie O'Brien shares the story *Thank You, Omu!* as part of an international literacy event.

Miguel that year included some sporting equipment and a ridiculous assortment of candy that paired with various characters in a new copy of Roald Dahl’s wonderful story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. A candy bar for Charlie Bucket and Grandpa Joe. Chocolate sauce for Augustus Gloop. Sourpatch Kids for Veruca Salt. Bubble gum for Violet Beauregarde. While I expected that this act of sugar-coated overindulgence would not make his mother happy, it was the look on her face when he tore the wrapping paper from the book that prompted a different level of concern. Stephanie asked what was wrong, and, with eyes tearing up, she told us that he could not read.

Now, I was fully aware from Indian River Community Foundation’s involvement in the community’s literacy



Alexander and Hector read during a Moonshot Community Action Network summer program.

initiative, the Moonshot Moment, that third-grade reading proficiency scores for Indian River County school children were a problem. I also knew that there was an army of community-based organizations working to improve these conditions. What I was unaware of until that afternoon was

just how close to home this problem hit. Miguel was not a statistic. His mother was not an absentee parent. These were two people who were very important to our family, whom we loved, who had fallen behind. It was all Stephanie needed to hear to shift into “super-mom” mode.

With Miguel's mother's permission, Stephanie and I contacted the principal of Miguel's school to share our concern and ask what we could do to help. From my involvement with the Moonshot Moment, I was aware of the principal's recent efforts to raise the school's grade from a C to an A, due in large part to participation in innovative programs designed to help students learn to read. To her credit, rather than perceiving our involvement negatively, she listened to our questions and welcomed our intervention on Miguel's behalf.

Yes, Miguel was behind, she confirmed. Not surprisingly, she also confirmed several contributing factors that included limited English proficiency in the home and some behavioral challenges not uncommon to boys in his age group. However, none of these factors was a good reason for him falling behind.

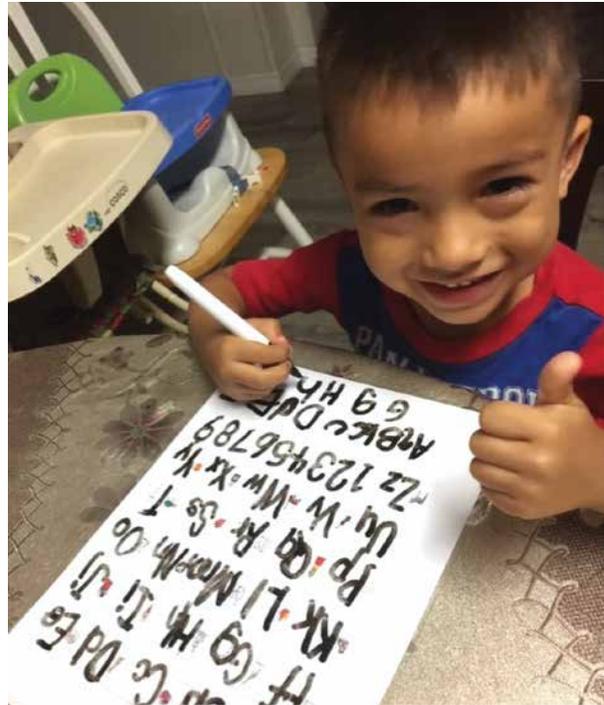
The principal acknowledged that the school was failing him and that their team needed to do more to prevent him from falling further behind. She also explained that it would be important for Miguel's parents to participate in this intervention by ensuring that he attend an after-school program called Moonshot Academy, which provides

students with extended learning opportunities focused specifically on reading.

Finally, while not an option available to every student, the principal welcomed my family's offer to pay for three months' expenses for a private tutor to ensure for Miguel an opportunity to move beyond a third-grade reading level in time for the next school year. Fortunately, everyone cooperated and Miguel was on his way to academic success.

According to the Florida Department of Education, in 2020 just 60 percent of Indian River County's third-grade students were proficient in reading. While this data shows a significant improvement when compared to a decade earlier, there is still work to be done. Fortunately, in Indian River County, there is a well-organized collaboration of more than 50 local organizations called the Moonshot Community Action Network working to ensure that all children in our community have the same opportunity as our friend Miguel to learn to read.

One of the organizations that is leading the way in this effort is The Learning Alliance. CEO Barbara Hammond, together with co-founder Liz Remington and



A youngster stays on track during the pandemic with a learning kit from The Learning Alliance's Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative.

philanthropist Ray Oglethorpe, launched this social enterprise to ensure that 90 percent of all Indian River County students read at grade level by third grade. The organization's business model is fueled by philanthropy and focuses on developing and operating literacy programs that promote excellence in teaching, provide extended learning for students, empower families, and engage community leaders.

Together with our clients, Indian River Community Foundation has awarded The Learning Alliance more than \$1 million in grants for proven programs like the Moonshot Academies that currently operate in six out of the thirteen public elementary schools. We

also participate in funding promising practices to promote excellence in teaching and learning, thus advancing education in our community. In addition, The Learning Alliance is a participant in the Community Foundation's Endowment Partners Program, which helps strengthen and sustain these important programs for generations to come.

Visit thelearningalliance.org for information on how you can support The Learning Alliance by making a charitable contribution or a planned gift from your estate. Your generosity will help our community's children learn to read, so that they can read to learn and live healthier, more prosperous lives. ☀