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Vero Beach

Magazine

AUGUST 2026



With its outdoor
'classroom,' Painted
Sky Farms is

**PLANTING
SEEDS**



Little ones celebrate their achievements at Childcare Resources. Inset: Jeff and Stephanie Pickering drop son Colin off at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.



PHILANTHROPY

Training for Life

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE IN THE PARENTING MARATHON IS A TEAM EVENT



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

“Four hours, 14 minutes, 52 seconds.” Those were the words I heard the announcer say over the loudspeaker as I crossed the finish line of the Chicago Marathon on October 7, 2001. A respectable pace of 9 minutes and 43 seconds per mile for the first and only time in my life that I would run 26.22 miles all at once. However, it would not be my last marathon. I completed my next one in

194,141 hours and 31 minutes on June 13 of this year when my elder son graduated from college.

Colin Jerome Pickering was born March 25, 2004 weighing 6 pounds, 10 ounces and measuring 21 inches tall. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a blood-curdling cry that persisted for the next 72 hours. His only comfort was a near-asphyxiating swaddle and his mother’s breast. Looking back,

I do not believe I’ve ever felt so useless or sleep deprived. Little did I know that the parenting “marathon,” with its goal of raising an independent, loving, educated child was just getting started. I had a lot to learn.

For my first marathon, I turned to legendary American distance runner Hal Higdon for advice. I read his best-selling *Marathon: The Ultimate Training Guide*, which provided me with a comprehensive 18-week

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



Colin Pickering is a chip off the old block.

training plan to help me achieve my goal. Its week-one schedule, taped to the refrigerator of my third-floor walk-up condo near the lake in the Chicago suburb of Evanston, went something like this: Monday, rest. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, run 3 miles. Friday, rest. Saturday, run 6 miles. Sunday, cross-train, which I took the liberty of interpreting as climbing the Wrigley Field bleachers with a cold Old Style draft beer in hand.

In the following weeks, the weekday distances increased. So did the mileage of the Saturday long runs. If the Cubs were in town, Sunday's cross-training routine remained consistent. Except for week 15,

when the thought of climbing up and down three flights of stairs after a 20-mile Saturday run to the Lincoln Park Zoo and back kept me in the "friendly confines" of my living room watching the broadcast of the game on WGN. I was exhausted, sore, and not the least bit interested in my typical game-day libation.

When race day arrived, I had run a total of 435 miles. After finishing the next 26.2, I joined the ranks of less than one percent of the world's population ever to accomplish this feat. Several celebratory Old Styles were consumed. At the time, I thought this would be the hardest thing I would ever do. Then the challenge of



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Jay Lundy Sr. works with youngsters at Gifford Youth Achievement Center. Below: Pickering presents a check to Megan McFall of Health Start Coalition.

parenting a child from birth through college came along.

I've often wondered whether this parenting marathon would benefit from its own version of Hal Higdon's book and training program. At the age of 94, it's unlikely the distance-running guru has it in him. Now that I've crossed that finish line for my first time, however, I am grateful for the lessons I've learned along the way.

One is the critical importance of early access to prenatal care. A trip to the emergency room after a bicycling accident is when we learned that Colin's mother was pregnant. She was almost two months along but still able to visit an obstetrician within the first trimester to begin prenatal care and give us the best chance for a healthy birth. Last year, 72 percent of pregnant mothers in Indian River County were able to do this, thanks to local charities like Indian River Healthy Start Coalition, A Caring Center for Women, and Cleveland Clinic Indian River Hospital. Plenty more work remains.

Another lesson came from Colin's access to quality



early education. Children's author Eric Carle's books were in heavy rotation during Colin's first year, long before we enrolled him in a formal preschool program to prepare him for kindergarten. I can still recite lines from favorites such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *The Mixed-Up Chameleon*. Local charities Childcare Resources, Economic Opportunities Council, and RCMA are a few of the organizations preparing Indian River County children for kindergarten, although a declining trend in preschool enrollment is concerning and worth a closer look.

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 A large photograph of a smiling woman with short white hair and glasses, wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt. She is standing outdoors in front of green foliage and pink flowers.

A square QR code with the letters "VNA" in the center.

SCAN ME

The logo for the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA), featuring a stylized circular graphic and the text "VNA VISITING NURSE ASSOCIATION".

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INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS



Ranee Bok of The Learning Alliance works with little ones.

In elementary school, Colin never struggled with reading proficiency; however, many students do. Thanks to The Learning Alliance and more than 100 active members of its Moonshot Community Action Network, 71 percent of students are reading on grade level by third grade. A strong partnership with Florida's Superintendent of the Year, David Moore, and the School District of Indian River County has the community well on its way toward achieving 90 percent proficiency for all students.

Extracurricular activities through middle school and high school were critical to Colin's academic success. As a middle school student at Saint Edward's School, he participated in four sports during the academic year: cross country, soccer, tennis, and lacrosse. Also required to play an instrument, he chose percussion.

This choice led to his decision to transfer to Vero Beach High School, where nearly every moment of his free time was consumed by a leadership role in the drum line in the Fighting Indians Marching Band and the responsibility

for multiple instruments, including drums, piano, and guitar, in the jazz band. These academic extracurricular activities and other career-oriented programs operated by local charities such as the Gifford Youth Achievement Center, Hibiscus Children's Center, and Youth Guidance Mentoring Academy provide the structure needed to keep young people from engaging in risky behaviors that could jeopardize their futures. It certainly helped Colin.

When life got tough emotionally, Stephanie and I were fortunate to have access to community resources for



Grant Pickering joins big brother Colin on the field.



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Youth Guidance pre-apprenticeship students learn construction skills. Right: Phil Cromer accepts an IRCF grant on behalf of MHAIRC.

Colin to explore to support his own mental health and well-being. Each year, thousands of children and families overcome psychological challenges and find emotional stability with help from local charities such as the Mental Health Association, Tykes and Teens, Treasure Coast Community Health, and Whole Family Health, to name a few. The biggest lesson we all learned through these programs is that it is okay to ask for help.

During high school, Colin impressed me with his initiative to find part-time employment that shaped his work ethic and eventually led to a career path in agricultural business. After washing dishes at Chelsea's Gourmet and bus- ing tables at Riverside Café at the beginning of high school, Colin spent back-to-back-to back summers working first for a California table-grape farm and then a Florida aquaculture venture. While he



gained practical work experience, we all learned lessons about what it would take for a young adult to achieve financial independence.

Earning a bachelor's degree in agricultural business and water science from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo is a huge accomplishment for anyone,

but especially for kid from a Florida beach town where temptations of a life of leisure abound. So is parenting a son through that journey. It is a marathon.

After fighting the good fight and finishing this race, I have faith that it has been one worth running. 🌻

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