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Children draw chalk art at Grace Place For Children & Families in East Naples on Sept. 21. The free event brought a sense of normalcy to families after Hurricane Irma. PHOTOS BY ASHLEY COLLINS/STAFF

FAMILIES REGAIN SENSE OF NORMALCY

Golden Gate families take a breather at Grace Place after Hurricane Irma



“We knew we wanted to do something for the families in Golden Gate and provide children with a sense of normalcy before school starts on Monday.”

TIM FERGUSON, GRACE PLACE CEO



Families enjoy a fun day of food and games at Grace Place For Children & Families. Above: Families wait in line for food.

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Things are gradually returning to normal after Hurricane Irma made landfall in Southwest Florida, destroying homes, knocking down power lines and flooding neighborhoods.

That was most evident in the laughter heard from families who visited Grace Place for Children & Families in Golden Gate on Thursday for family fun day.

Children and their parents created arts and crafts together in air-conditioned classrooms and played catch under the burning sun.

A long line extended out to the basketball court at noon for lunch.

Dilia Diaz and her three young children waited for a hot meal. After the week they had, and still without power as of Thursday, Diaz still considers her family lucky. Her house was barely touched by the hurricane and her children are safe.

“After, I told God, ‘Thank you for my house,’” said Diaz, 32.

“We knew we wanted to do something for the families in Golden Gate and provide children with a sense of normalcy before school starts on Monday,” Grace Place CEO Tim Ferguson said about the family fun day.

Grace Place, a nonprofit organization, provides education to low-income youth and adults living within the the 2-mile-by-2-mile square that is Golden Gate.

For the most part, the 5-acre educational facility was unharmed by the hurricane with the exception of some downed trees and loss of power, which was restored Monday.

“The families seem to be excited to come back to normal,” Ferguson said as he greeted them back on campus.

Patty Calloway was busy organizing supplies for the food pantry in the chapel. Every Friday, between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m., the food pantry is open to Collier County residents in need of food and toiletries.

As the facilities and operations manager at Grace Place, Calloway sought refuge from the storm in that very building.

“I didn’t trust my home’s roof,” she said. Her Golden Gate house suffered water damage, destroying the floor.

Calloway, 42, added that the people of Golden Gate need essentials like toilet paper, laundry detergent, socks and underwear.

Eighty-five percent of families live at or below the national poverty line in Golden Gate, according to Grace Place.

“These people live paycheck to paycheck. If they don’t get a paycheck in one or two weeks because of the hurricane, it’s not good,” she added.

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