

GRACE PLACE

FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

NEWSLETTER

WINTER

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25



Dreams Take Flight: From Ideas to Enterprise



Chris teaching Business Basics.

In a sunlit classroom last August, 28 mothers gathered around a table, their business dreams sketched on notepads. They were part of **Bright Beginnings 301**, but this was no ordinary class – it was where ambitions would take shape under the guidance of local business leader Chris Hartman. Their ultimate goal? To develop business ideas that will help them secure funding and bring their entrepreneurial visions to life.

These aspiring entrepreneurs dove into business fundamentals: market analysis, financial planning, and customer service. They crafted SWOT analyses, explored funding options, and developed business plans. But beyond the technical skills, something more profound was happening. Interactive activities and practical discussions were key components, helping the students get their small businesses ready to launch.

“The journey has been transformative for everyone – me especially,” says Chris. “From day one, the students have shown remarkable dedication to learning business basics, while bringing tremendous enthusiasm and creativity to each class. My goal has been to combine theoretical knowledge with practical application, ensuring that each mom feels confident and prepared to take the next steps.” The classroom became a place of possibility, where ideas transformed into action plans. Each lesson built not just knowledge, but confidence. Women who once hesitated to speak were now confidently presenting business strategies.

One participant, Maria Gaudalupe, shared, “This course has been a game-changer for me. It has always been my dream to turn my business idea into a reality and now with Chris’s support, I’m now ready to pursue funding and get my business started.”

The impact reaches beyond these 28 women. Each successful business they launch will create ripples of change – inspiring their children, strengthening their families, and enriching their neighborhoods. Their courage shows that every dream, no matter how humble its beginnings, deserves a chance.

Together, they’re building more than businesses. They’re creating legacies of hope, one entrepreneur at a time.



Chris with his business students.

The **Bright Beginnings 301** course in the Family Literacy Program supports parents in becoming confident, effective first teachers for their children while equipping them with vital life and career skills to re-enter the workforce successfully.

Hearts, Hope, and Homework: A Family’s Journey at Grace Place

When Benderley stepped into his kindergarten classroom at Grace Place, he was a bundle of restless energy. “I was a little troublemaker,” he admits with a sly smile. “I couldn’t stop talking and I didn’t want to sit still. It was hard for me to focus. Now I wait my turn.”

Six years later, he is a poised sixth grader. His hands move deliberately as he explains his newfound passion for chess, a game that demands the very patience he once struggled to find. “It teaches you to think ahead, to consider all your moves,” he says.

Now a straight-A student, he approaches mathematics with the same strategic thinking he applies to chess. “There are so many ways to reach the right answer,” he explains. “Sometimes the longest path teaches you the most.” His dreams stretch far beyond the classroom – to owning his own business. “I’d like to run a car customization shop,” he shares, “or maybe a restaurant where people can gather and share stories.”

His younger brother Ralph’s story, is equally moving. When he arrived at Grace Place last year as a first grader, he was painfully shy. Now, he chatters enthusiastically about his favorite dinosaur books and mathematics problems. “I used to think I’d be a cook like my mom,” he says, “But now, I want to be a teacher.”

Nuryn Santos, Ralph’s teacher, watches his progress with pride. “Ralph brings such pure joy to our classroom,” she says. “He’s the first to raise his hand even when he’s not sure of the answer. He is not afraid to try new things.”

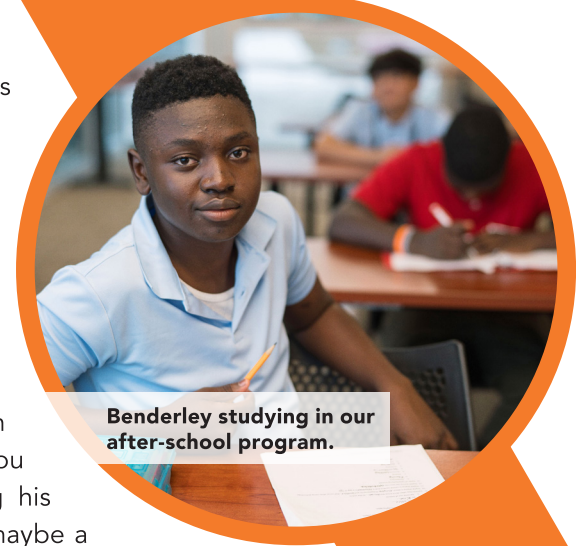
The most powerful chapter in this family’s story belongs to their mother, Meralda. She joined Grace Place’s Citizenship Preparation program with determination in her heart and dreams for a better life. Night after night, after long days of work and helping with homework, she studied. Her sons would find her at the kitchen table, textbooks spread out, practicing English and memorizing civic facts.

This past year, all that dedication paid off when Meralda became a U.S. citizen. “I’m so proud of my mom,” Benderley says. “She worked very hard to pass this test!”

As Meralda watches her sons tackle their homework at Grace Place’s after-school program, her eyes shine with pride and hope. “Education,” she says softly, “is the greatest gift I can give my children. And Grace Place helps make that possible.”

Their story represents everything Grace Place stands for – the belief that education can transform not just individuals, but entire families.

Education Changes Everything.



Benderley studying in our after-school program.



Meralda, Benderley, Abby, and Ralph.

Helping Young Children Talk More: The LENA Grow Program

We were excited to introduce **LENA Grow** to our Bright Beginnings program in the fall and it is changing the way our teachers and parents interact with their toddlers and preschoolers.

LENA Grow, a new program that helps teachers have more conversations with young children in the classroom. This matters because talking more with adults helps children develop better language skills. Research shows that by age three, children from wealthy families hear 30 million more words than children from low-income families. This word gap starts showing up as early as 18 months old and gets bigger as children grow.

LENA (Language Environment Analysis) works by counting the back-and-forth conversations between the teachers and children. Each time a teacher and child take turns speaking, it counts as one "turn." These conversations are important because they help children's brains develop, especially in areas used for language and social skills.

The program uses a small device that counts how often teachers and children talk to each other during class. Teachers get reports showing how much they're talking with each child, helping them make sure they're giving attention to everyone. These conversations are particularly important - studies show that children who have more back-and-forth talks with adults in their early years tend to have higher IQ scores by middle school.

The program is already showing positive results. Teachers report that children are:

- Talking more during class activities
- Listening better
- Paying more attention to instructions

Teacher Shaga Francois, says the program helps her better connect with her young students by giving her specific strategies to make every conversation count.

By focusing on quality conversations between teachers and children, LENA Grow helps build strong language skills that will benefit children throughout their education. This program is part of our commitment to supporting every aspect of a child's development.

Teachers also get coaching sessions where they learn new ways to encourage children to talk more. This has been especially helpful for children learning English as a second language, who end up speaking about 50 more times each week.



A student wearing his LENA vest during storytime.

"Our teachers are seeing real results," says Diane Ponton, Chief Learning Officer. "Children are talking more during activities, listening better, and following instructions more closely."

Through LENA Grow, we're helping children build strong language skills - one conversation at a time.



Students wearing their LENA vests in class.

Empowering Futures

Women On Pathways to Success



Aenny



Adina



Love Mica

High school summer camp was intense this year! Rising to the challenge of producing a commercial for their new business idea, Shark Tank teammates **Aenny, Adina** and **Love Mica** brought their unique passions and amazing teamwork to the task. And while the *Slay with J.E.C.* may never get off the ground, their project created skills, experiences and friendships that will last a lifetime. This dynamic trio truly inspires us and our younger students.

• Aenny: The Compassionate Leader

With a keen interest in health and human services, Aenny has been instrumental in leading our Middle School students with everything from homework to career advice. She plans to become a pediatric nurse and says that working at Grace Place as an intern is preparing her for this job by teaching her patience and child development skills. Aenny also volunteers in the Food Pantry.

• Adina: The Goal Setting Driver

Adina joined Grace Place as a high school freshman, because her friends said Grace Place motivated them to do better in school. Adina knew she would need help to achieve her goal of attending college. She jumped right in – attending the daily after-school classes and summer sessions, plus volunteering in the Food Pantry on Fridays. At the start of the 2024 school year, Adina embraced the opportunity to work as a paid classroom intern in the Middle School program.

• Love Mica: The Creative Visionary

Love Mica has a passion for creativity which sparked many of the ideas her team used in the Shark Tank challenge. She joined Grace Place as a shy freshman with limited English, and credits the staff with gradually building her confidence. She moved back to Haiti with her father for two years, but when they returned, she quickly started the summer program. Love Mica would like to become a nurse as well. She loves working with the elementary students where she demonstrates the importance of a positive attitude and respect.

What's next? College visits, applications, graduation – and plans for a future that may not have seemed possible when they were freshmen.



Help dreams become reality for our students and make a difference today!
Contact Stacey Vaughn at stacey.vaughn@graceplacenaples.org

Twenty Years of Dreams: A Night in Emerald City



Grace Place staff and students performing.

room erupted. But beyond the numbers were the faces of those students who had led donors down that yellow brick road, each representing countless futures made brighter through education.

As the evening drew to a close, CEO Lara Fisher stood before the crowd, her voice thick with emotion: "For 20 years, we've watched families rewrite their stories. Tonight, we are blown away. You've helped ensure we can continue this work for decades to come. A huge thank you to our event chair, Hannah Roberts, and the entire event committee for their creativity and hard work in making this evening a huge success."

Grace Place students, their small hands warm in the hands of donors, led guests down a winding yellow brick road. Each step was more than just a theatrical entrance – it was a bridge between those who give hope and those who receive it. Our students are living proof of two decades of transformation.

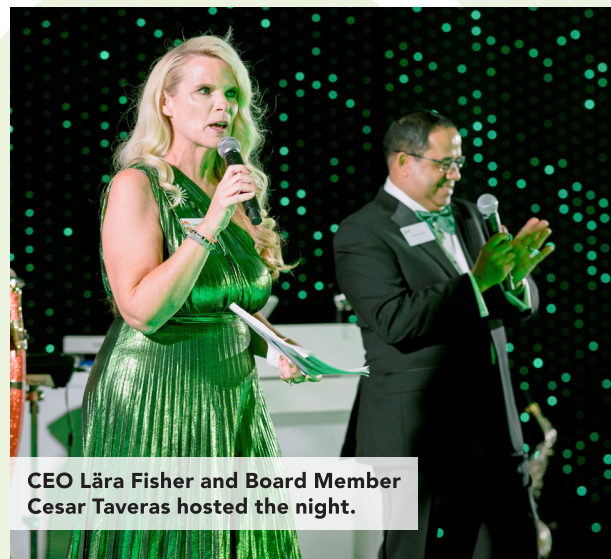
The Elite Jets hangar shimmered like Emerald City itself, but the real magic unfolded when 40 students and teachers took the stage. Their Oz-inspired performance spoke of courage found, minds awakened, and hearts touched – mirroring their own journeys at Grace Place.

Founders Reverend Stephanie Munz Campbell and first employee Diane Ponton were recognized for their unwavering commitment, as were our honorary chairs Julia Van Domelen, Craig and Pat Jilk, and the Schoen Family. Their shared dream of empowering families through education now touching countless lives.

But it was Glendy and her stepdaughter Yoselyn who brought the room to complete silence. Standing at the podium, their voices wavering but strong, they shared their journey. "Before Grace Place," Yoselyn said, "I didn't believe I had a future. **Now I know my dreams have no limits.**"

Their words echoed through the hangar as donors opened not just their wallets but their hearts. When the final tally was announced – \$1.8 million raised – the

Like the Emerald City itself, Grace Place has become a beacon of hope where dreams take flight. For twenty years, Grace Place has proven that education is a force powerful enough to transform not just individuals, but generations.



CEO Lara Fisher and Board Member Cesar Taveras hosted the night.

Thank you for celebrating the courage of our founders, the heart of our volunteers and sponsors, the brains of our students, and the home that Grace Place becomes for so many.

Thank you for an incredible night!



Rich Ponton, Olivia Ponton, Honoree Diane Ponton, Abigail Ponton, and Jean Batian.



Honorary Chairs, Craig and Pat Jilk with a student.



(in the circle)
Event Chair Hannah and Ben Roberts.



Joe Sanda, Honorary Chair Julia Van Domelen, and students.



Jodi Bailey, Honorary Chair Sharon Schoen, and Nick Bailey.



Honoree Reverend Stephanie Munz Campbell.

13TH ANNUAL
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Jan 29 – Feb 14



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Or Visit:
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Scan the QR code to receive our monthly e-newsletter, The Goodness Report.

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