

# GRACE PLACE

FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

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NEWSLETTER



► SPRING 2025

# One Short Year at Grace Place

Last year, when Meidy and her family moved from Guatemala to Naples, she spoke no English – at age 8.

“When I was new, I was scared and felt different, but Ms. Jasmin, my teacher at Grace Place and my new friends helped me feel comfortable,” Meidy shares.

## Test scores tell the story.

Third grade is a crucial time for literacy. Research shows that a student who can’t read at grade level by 3rd grade is four times less likely to graduate than their peers.

At the start of the school year, Meidy’s score on the specialized ELL assessment scale for English Language Learners was low. Through her hard work and dedication this school year, she advanced to the regular grading scale, improving her score by four levels. Her growth is also reflected in her standardized 3rd grade test score, which improved from the 34th to the 50th percentile – an amazing accomplishment.

## Illiteracy is a local and national crisis.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recently reported dismal results. In 2024, the average reading score for the nation at grade 4 was 2 points lower compared to 2022 and 5 points lower compared to 2019.

In Florida, the 2024 scores were 7 points lower than 2022 and 2019. (See [nationsreportcard.gov](https://nationsreportcard.gov))



Meidy (right) and friends.

## Literacy transforms lives.

Meidy’s progress is a powerful example of how early support can transform a student’s academic path. In her first year at Grace Place, Meidy has grown into a confident, caring and literate student. She was recently named Student of the Month in her class at Grace Place for her kindness in helping new students adjust to school and life in the U.S.

Her advice to students learning English? “Don’t be nervous! You can do anything—you are smart!”

With the support of her family, her teachers and especially Ms. Jasmin, Meidy is on track to be promoted to 4th grade at the end of this school year. Her journey is a testament to the power of perseverance, encouragement, and the right learning environment.

Click Me



Scan here or click to watch a short video of Meidy sharing her story of courage.



Meidy with her teacher Ms. Jasmin.

# Three Generations, One Goal: A Family’s Journey



Marie Venise, Marie France, and Esther.



Jean Remy and Esther.

Learning is a family affair for Jean Remy, his three-year-old daughter Esther, and his mother-in-law, Marie Venise. Together, they represent three generations committed to education and growth.

## Esther blossoms in Bright Beginnings.

Jean Remy and Esther have been part of the Bright Beginnings program for several years. Despite working the early morning shift at Publix and his wife, Marie France, working long hours as a CNA, the family prioritizes attending the program. Their dedication is paying off. Esther is thriving in the early childhood classes and can now identify 15 more uppercase letters than she could at the start of the year. She is making new friends, learning a great deal, and especially loves playing with the play kitchen. She has made amazing progress — and her growth continues every day.

## Jean Remy sets family goals.

In his Bright Beginnings classes, alongside other parents, Jean Remy is learning about child development, discipline, and early learning strategies. Daily English classes at Grace Place have also helped Jean Remy improve his language skills, boosting his confidence in everyday conversations. Jean Remy and Marie France have dreams of starting their own business selling skincare and hair care products, and the skills they’re learning at Grace Place are helping them work toward that goal.

“Jean Remy shares what he learns with me. It helps us both be better parents and support Esther and our other children,” says Marie France.

## Marie Venise joins the fun.

Their commitment to education extends further. Marie Venise, Marie France’s mother, moved to the United States full-time in 2023 and began English classes at Grace Place earlier this year. With her hard work and determination, she’s gaining the language skills she needs to thrive in her new home.

The family’s dedication to learning is an inspiring example of Grace Place’s Family Literacy Model. By making education a priority across generations, they’re empowering themselves and their community. Grace Place is proud to support this incredible family as they grow, learn, and succeed together.



# What's happening in the Food Pantry?

"It's a rewarding experience knowing that you can help make a small yet significant difference for people that you actually get to know."

- David Beier



Food Pantry volunteers with our retail rescue van.

A lost job, unexpected medical expenses, someone new in the household. We don't ask why a family needs food. It's a basic need that we play a small part in fulfilling as part of our mission. Since 2008, the Arthrex Food Pantry at Grace Place has been a vital resource for the Golden Gate community.

## We have a new refrigerated van for food pickup.

For many years, the Harry Chapin Food Bank delivered frozen meat, fresh vegetables, and bread donated by local grocery stores. Now, Grace Place handles these pickups, using a refrigerated van we acquired through a grant.

Our pick up team starts early each Friday collecting the same amount of food that was previously delivered to campus. They drive to four grocery stores, load the groceries, and deliver them to Grace Place for distribution. To supplement these donations, we purchase food from the Food Bank when we have the funds.

## Volunteering on Friday is the new happy hour.

Lately, many of our volunteer spots have been filled by employee teams, communities and church groups – often in matching tee shirts – ready to work as a team for several hours.

On Friday mornings, the 1st shift assembles the pop-up tents and tables, sorts the week's supplies and organizes what looks like a farmer's market at the back of the campus. The second shift welcomes families, helps with food selection and wraps up the day by up and breaking down the food line.



Volunteers sort through donated food.

"It's a rewarding experience knowing that you can help make a small yet significant difference for people that you actually get to know," explains David Beier, a volunteer since 2023. "Our Food Pantry lifts up those in need and builds a strong sense of community between the volunteers and recipients. I feel both humble and proud to be part of the Grace Place Food Pantry."

**How you can help.** Drive the van, register new clients, make a donation to supplement the weekly food pick-ups or decide to volunteer on your own or with your friends. We guarantee you'll leave smiling.

Contact Melisa Mast at  
[melisa.mast@graceplacenaples.org](mailto:melisa.mast@graceplacenaples.org)  
to join in the fun.



Clients at the choice pantry select only the food they want.



A group from Schwab volunteers in the pantry.



# Mentorship in Action: Aylin and Emily



Emily and Aylin.

A great mentor offers guidance, encouragement, and clarity. For Aylin, a senior at Golden Gate High School, her mentor, Emily, played a pivotal role in her journey.

## Aylin's connection to Grace Place began when she started kindergarten.

"Grace Place has been a constant support in my life," Aylin shares. "From after-school programs to summer camp, and English classes for my mom, we've learned so much. Even my godparents attend classes here!" Joining the mentorship program was an important next step, as she would be the first in her family to apply to college.

Emily Shafer, an Engineering Project Manager at Arthrex, is member of our Board of Ambassadors – young professionals who support Grace Place by volunteering and fundraising. "I chose to serve as a mentor this year, because I've had incredible mentors myself, and now I'm honored to give back," Emily says.

## When Aylin was matched with Emily, they immediately clicked.

Emily provided academic advice as well as emotional support, helping Aylin tackle senior year challenges with confidence. "Emily has been so supportive, always giving 100% to help me with both my academic and personal

goals," Aylin reflects. "Growing up as an only child, I thought asking for help was a weakness. But Emily showed me that seeking support is actually empowering."

The college application process was a turning point in their relationship. Emily went above and beyond, meeting Aylin at a coffee shop on a Saturday evening to ensure her completed application was submitted on time. "Emily helped me focus on my strengths – and I know that attending Florida Gulf Coast University will be my path to success," Aylin reflects. "I'll be working toward my goal of becoming a dental hygienist."

## For Emily, the experience has been equally rewarding.

"Mentoring reminded me of how challenging senior year can be," Emily says. "It's also deepened my appreciation for mentorship in both personal and professional settings. I look forward to watching Aylin succeed and hope she will pay it forward one day by mentoring others."



Emily and Aylin working together.

# Transformation at an Urgent Care Center



Maria Isabel.

"I'll try to speak in English, and if I don't understand something, I'll let you know," said Maria Isabel proudly to the young doctor at Urgent Care a few weeks ago. Her husband was ill, and he spoke limited English.

The nurse at Urgent Care was bilingual but the doctor was not. So, Maria Isabel bravely engaged with the doctor, explaining her husband's symptoms by translating for him. **It was the first time she ever felt comfortable handling a medical situation on her own in English.** "I understood everything that was said," she explains. "I was so proud – of myself!"

## Literacy = Independence

This was truly a milestone for Maria Isabel, who had relied on translators for many years. She emigrated from Cuba in 2018, at age 61, to reunite with her two daughters and three grandchildren. Although Maria Isabel did not graduate high school in Cuba, she did attend a trade school and worked for 34 years in accounting.

"When I first moved to Golden Gate, I used to walk around the neighborhood with my friend, Nora, who



Maria Isabel in English class.

worked at Grace Place," recounts Maria Isabel. "I told her – I don't want to depend on my daughters – I need to learn to speak English so I can be independent!" That's when her literacy journey began.

Once Nora helped her enroll in Adult Education, she became a dedicated student. "My teachers and all of the staff are always so kind," she says. "I learn something new every week from Ms. Julie, Mr. David and Mr. Al. I am so grateful to them. And I tell my friends that Grace Place is a great place!"

## A proud new citizen

In addition to studying English, Maria Isabel enrolled in Citizenship Test Preparation at Grace Place and passed her test in 2022, only four years after starting her Adult Ed classes.

With all these accomplishments, Maria Isabel has no plans to stop learning. She still attends class every morning and is working on learning new words to expand her vocabulary. She is proudly independent, and her family is equally proud of her. So are we.

For more about volunteer opportunities, visit [graceplacenaples.com/volunteer](https://graceplacenaples.com/volunteer).





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# TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE!

## 13TH ANNUAL *A Swing of Grace* BENEFITING GRACE PLACE FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



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BONITA BAY GOLF CLUB**

**Join the fun—reserve your  
foursome today!**

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