

GRACE PLACE

FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2025 ◀



Empowering Futures: Grace Place Scholarships Fuel Naples' Workforce

Grace Place's scholarship program is sparking a wave of opportunity. For over two decades, Grace Place has been a catalyst for change, and today, its college scholarship program is boosting the local workforce and economy with a new generation of dream-chasers.

Opportunity in Action

Each year, Grace Place awards four full-ride scholarships and helps even more students in securing additional full rides. Many Grace Place students are the first in their families to graduate high school or attend college. About 70% of these families speak Spanish at home, while 30% speak Haitian Creole. Most live at or below the poverty line, and many parents have limited education—62% have not finished high school, and 14% did not complete fifth grade.

This year's scholarship recipients, Aylin, Isadora, Devonde, Yoselyn, Gabriela, Travis, and Ernely, plan to pursue degrees in the high-demand fields of nursing, orthopedics, and education. Their career goals align with critical workforce needs in Collier County,

preparing them to contribute to institutions like NCH Hospital, Arthrex, and local schools.

Lifting Families Out of Poverty

Grace Place scholarships are more than tuition—they are lifelines for families living at the poverty line. These full-ride awards dismantle financial and systemic barriers, giving students the chance to focus on their studies without the crushing weight of economic hardship. For families stretching every dollar, these scholarships mean a debt-free path to college, opening doors to a future where they can thrive, not just survive.

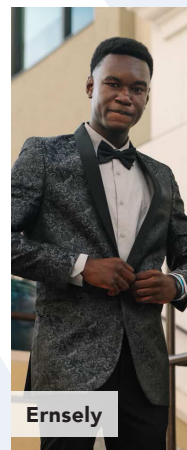
The impact is undeniable. These scholars aren't just escaping the future of a low-income job; they're reshaping their families' legacies and energizing Naples' workforce. Many return to Southwest Florida, eager to give back to the community that championed them. They're not just filling jobs; they're meeting critical needs in key fields, making Collier County stronger, smarter, and more vibrant.

Building a Stronger Economy

Thanks to the support of donors and community partners, Grace Place is not only changing lives but also shaping the future of Southwest Florida. By supporting Grace Place, you empower the next generation and help create brighter futures for our community.



Aylin



Ernely



Isadora



Travis



Yoselyn

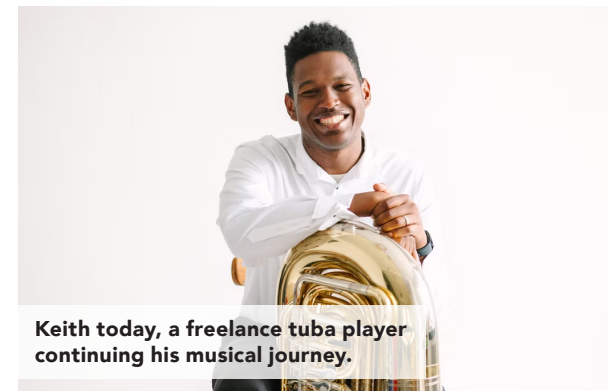


Devonde



Gabriela

A Humble Beginning: From Struggling Student to Inspiring Musician



Keith today, a freelance tuba player continuing his musical journey.

Born and raised in Golden Gate, Keith grew up as the second oldest of four in a Haitian American household. Like many local students, Keith faced academic hurdles early on. But everything began to shift in 2004, when, as a struggling third grader at risk of being held back, he became one of the first students to enroll at Grace Place. With focused support from dedicated staff, Keith passed the required standardized test - and advanced to fourth grade—his first major step toward a remarkable future.

The Sound of Discovery

By seventh grade, Grace Place provided critical support again, this time through tutoring that strengthened Keith's skills in advanced math and boosted his confidence. Around the same time, he discovered a passion for music, joining the Advanced and Jazz Bands at Golden Gate Middle School, where he mastered the tuba and trombone.

His talent and ambition earned him scholarships to Seacrest Country Day School and the prestigious Lutheran Summer Music Academy in Minneapolis. He attended the academy for five summers, continually pushing himself to grow as a musician. During his junior year, Grace Place founder Pastor Stephanie gifted Keith his own tuba—a treasure he still holds dear. Balancing academics, basketball, and music, Keith also mentored younger Grace Place students, giving back to the community that nurtured him.

Rising to the Challenge

After high school, Keith attended Baldwin Wallace University on a music scholarship, where he earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Tuba Performance. He went on to earn his Master of Music degree at the New England Conservatory. Now a professional freelance tuba player, Keith performs with orchestras like the Akron Symphony and Binghamton Philharmonic and inspires others through teaching and masterclasses.

Keith remains deeply connected to Grace Place. "You have to embrace the feeling of asking for what you need to move forward in life." He credits Diane Ponton, his longtime Grace Place mentor, for her unwavering support and encouragement: "She has always been gracious, super kind, and a big advocate of my development."

A Legacy of Purpose

Keith's journey—from a struggling third grader to an accomplished musician and mentor—embodies Grace Place's mission to empower students to thrive and lead purposeful lives. His story shows what's possible when community support meets determination and opportunity.



Keith practicing the trombone in 2008.

Scan here to see Keith in action.



The Power of Early Intervention: A Tale of Twins at Grace Place

“It’s been amazing to watch Ennson and Enndy come out of their shells. They’ve grown so much, and it’s a reminder that every child learns and grows in their own time.” - Ms. Jasmin

In August of 2024, Grace Place welcomed twins, Ennson and Enndy, to our Explorers classroom, just shy of their second birthday.

Born prematurely the boys faced developmental hurdles common to preterm infants. They were nonverbal, hesitant to interact with peers, and required assistance with foundational skills like self-feeding. Their journey, however, showcases the transformative impact of early intervention, dedicated educators, and a committed parent.

A Nurturing Foundation

Ms. Jasmin, the twin’s teacher, brought specialized training in early childhood intervention to her work with the twins. Equipped with professional development in supporting children with developmental delays, she tailored activities to their needs, using tools like playdough, tweezers, and bead-stringing to strengthen their fine motor skills. These engaging, hands-on tasks fostered growth in a warm, supportive classroom environment.

The boys’ progress was amplified by their mother, Cherlada, an example of the Bright Beginnings ethos. Her determination to provide a brighter future for her children began with their older sister Danaika, age five, who also attends our program.

Initially, Cherlada felt self-conscious during Parent and Child Together (PACT) Time, unsure about joining in songs and activities. With encouragement, she grew confident, incorporating songs, routines, and learning strategies into daily life at home. She created a language-rich environment—filled with conversation, storytelling, and responsive interactions—to stimulate the twins’ communication skills. By taking teachers’ feedback to heart, she transformed her home into a space that nurtured cognitive and emotional growth.

The results were remarkable. Ennson and Enndy began feeding themselves with utensils, babbling with newfound confidence, and playing independently. Their progress reflected a powerful partnership between home and school, anchored by Cherlada’s belief in the value of early learning.

Celebrating Unique Spirits

As the twins grew, their distinct personalities emerged. Where once they moved as a reserved duo, they now made independent choices, built relationships, and engaged with their surroundings in their own ways. These milestones stemmed from consistent care, a stimulating classroom, and Cherlada’s role as their first and most influential teacher.



Cherlada, Danaika, Ennson, and Enndy.

“It’s been amazing to watch Ennson and Enndy come out of their shells,” said Ms. Jasmin. “They’ve grown so much, and it’s a reminder that every child learns and grows in their own time. With a little patience and a lot of love, even the smallest steps turn into big milestones.”

Three Truths That Shape a Lifetime

Early childhood advocate Craig Wuori emphasizes three core beliefs:

1. Learning begins in utero and continues lifelong.
2. The prenatal-to-age-3 window is critical for wiring the brain’s architecture.
3. Optimal development relies on stable, nurturing relationships with engaged adults.

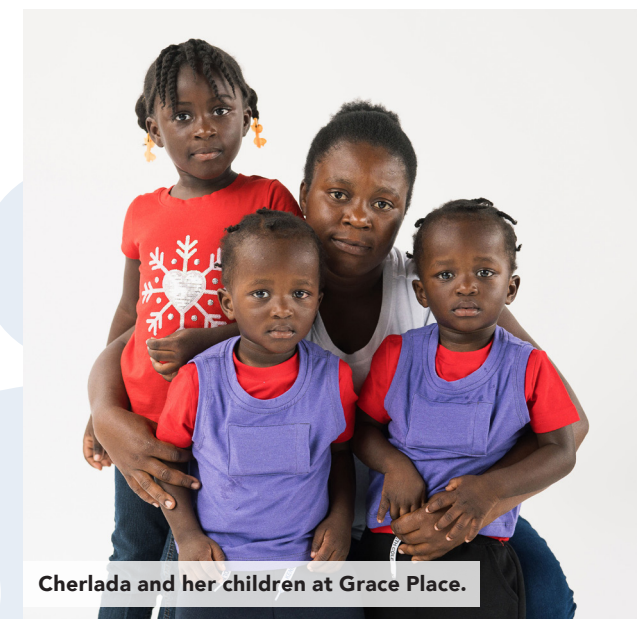
These research-backed principles directly tie to Grace Place’s mission. Our Bright Beginnings program is an early intervention model that empowers families to shape brighter futures. By supporting parents like Cherlada with tools, encouragement, and community, we affirm that parents are their child’s first and best teacher. Her dedication proves that when families are equipped, outcomes transform.

A Community Investment

Bright Beginnings is more than a program; it’s a movement to protect early years, value educators, and partner with families. When we create nurturing, language-rich spaces, we unlock limitless possibilities for children, parents, and communities.



Ennson and Enndy play dress-up during dramatic play time.



Cherlada and her children at Grace Place.

Bring a Friend for a Campus Tour! Have you seen the impact Grace Place is making? Invite a friend, colleague, or neighbor to join you for a campus tour and help us grow our community. Reach out to **Stacey Vaughn** at stacey.vaughn@graceplacenaples.org.

Meet Dorothy: A Rising Star Growing in Confidence and Creativity

At Grace Place, students like Dorothy are discovering their strengths and stepping into the spotlight. Dorothy first came to Grace Place as a bright-eyed first grader, full of curiosity and potential. Now she is entering fourth grade, and her growth has been remarkable.

Building Skills and Confidence

This year, Dorothy's determination led to new experiences and academic breakthroughs. Her math score soared from Level 1 to Level 4—above grade level, and in reading, she advanced from Level 2 to Level 3, meeting grade-level expectations. These achievements reflect not only Dorothy's effort, but also the village behind her—teachers, Grace Place staff, and family—working together to help her thrive. Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a crucial milestone, strongly linked to future academic success, and we are so proud of Dorothy for meeting this goal.

Shining in the Spotlight

But her accomplishments go far beyond academics. In December, she took center stage as a student speaker at our event, Celebration of Grace: A Night in Emerald City. With natural charisma and poise, she lit up the room.

Later in the year, Dorothy led her class's Women's History Month presentation, impressing teachers and classmates as she boldly embodied Coco Chanel, trading her school uniform for a chic skirt, blazer, and heels. "It was Dorothy being Dorothy—creative, fearless, and full of heart,"

said Crystal Hidalgo, Elementary Program Manager.

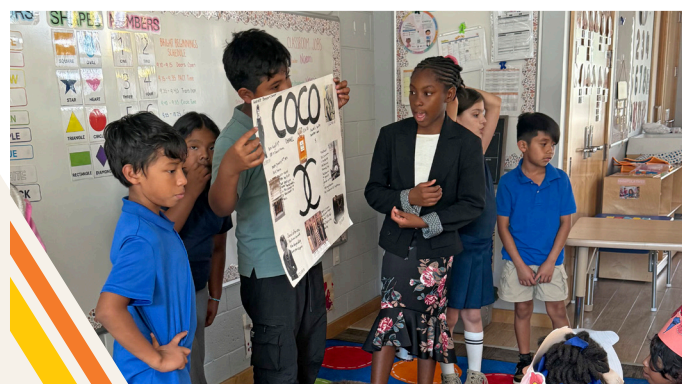
At the Young Authors Festival, where students celebrate the stories they authored and illustrated, Dorothy's creativity stood out when her story was chosen for a live performance by the Naples Players improv troupe. That same spirit of determination carried into every part of her year as just days later, she crossed the finish line of her first 5K with our partner, Girls on the Run, radiating pride and confidence.

The Power of Support

Dorothy's journey is a powerful reminder of what's possible when children are surrounded by a caring community and given opportunities to lead. Thank you for making Grace Place a home for learning and leadership—and for helping students like Dorothy discover how brightly they can shine.



Dorothy completing her first 5K!



"Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a crucial milestone, strongly linked to future academic success, and we are so proud of Dorothy for meeting this goal."

Volunteer in a classroom. Love working with kids? Support students by mentoring, helping with classroom projects, or sharing your career story. Your time can spark curiosity and possibility. Reach out to **Melisa Mast** at melisa.mast@graceplacenaples.org.

From Classroom to Career: Inside Grace Place's Internship Experience



Grace Place interns and Marty Durham, Intern Specialist.

This spring, 12 high school juniors and seniors took a bold step toward their futures by joining Grace Place's paid internship program. For many, it was their first real job—and the first time they saw themselves as professionals.

Learning the Ropes

The journey began with a pre-internship course designed to build confidence and job readiness. The interns learned to write a resume, practiced interview techniques, and developed essential workplace skills like professional phone and email communication and business etiquette.

With resumes in hand, the students participated in a job-fair style interview day with several Grace Place departments. From there, they were hired in positions in Marketing and Development, Bright Beginnings, Food Services, After-school Programs, Data, and Facilities.

"The value of this internship program is immense," said Marty Durham, Grace Place Intern Specialist with 35 years of HR experience. "Thanks to the grantor's support, students had a rare chance to build real-world skills before they are truly needed. They focused on their strengths and exceeded expectations. I'm incredibly proud of them."

Workplace Ready

Throughout the semester, interns gained both a paycheck and hands-on professional experience. They contributed to meaningful projects—from crafting social media posts and supporting teachers in the classroom, to helping



Lara Fisher, CEO, and Elisha, 2025 Intern of the Year.

maintain campus safety with the facilities team—all while learning the importance of punctuality, taking initiative, and adapting to new challenges.

The semester ended with a formal performance review, an opportunity to reflect on their progress and learn how to receive feedback. At a celebratory luncheon, interns publicly spoke about lessons learned and received encouraging words from their mentors.

For Elisha, honored as the 2025 Intern of the Year, the experience was transformational. "At first, I was nervous since it was my first real job," she said. "But after the pre-internship course, I felt more confident—and now I'm thinking about a future in marketing."

Launching Futures

For all 12 interns, this program was more than just a job; it was a launching point. We are proud of their growth, their professionalism, and their courage to take the first step. By helping students excel academically, discover career pathways, and succeed in postsecondary education, we empower families to break the cycle of poverty and strengthen Collier County for generations to come.

Connect students to real-world opportunities!

Know a business that wants to shape the future workforce? We're seeking companies to host interns and provide hands-on experience in trade, technical, and professional fields. Reach out to **Colleen Durham** at colleen.durham@graceplacenaples.org.



Reading this newsletter online helps us save on printing and mailing costs, allowing us to direct more resources toward education for the students and families at Grace Place. If you prefer a physical copy, please email Kim@graceplacenaples.org with your address, and we'll be happy to mail you one. **Thank you for supporting our mission!**

SAVE THE DATE



BEYOND THE BOOKSHELF

Celebrating literacy, resilience, and the dreams of our children

DATE:

THURSDAY
December 4, 2025

LOCATION:

LUNCHEON AT
**Grey Oaks
Country Club**



OR
SCAN
HERE

Tickets available at
Beyond2025.givesmart.com



Speaker: Maria Shriver

Award-winning journalist, bestselling author, and passionate advocate for women, families, and brain health, using her voice to champion education, resilience, and opportunity for all.

VIRTUAL TOWN HALL MEETING: WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27 AT 1 PM

We'll share how the temporary freeze and reinstatement of 21st Century grant funding affects Grace Place, what we've learned, and how we're planning for long-term stability. Be part of the conversation and stay informed: sign up for our emails to receive the event link and updates. Visit graceplacenaples.org to subscribe or scan the QR code below.

Daily Dose of Grace Place: Follow us on our social channels.

 /graceplacenaples  /GracePlaceNaples  /company/graceplacenaples



Scan or click the QR code to receive our monthly e-newsletter, The Goodness Report.

**4300 21st Ave. SW
Naples, FL 34116
Tel: 239.255.7220**

www.graceplacenaples.org