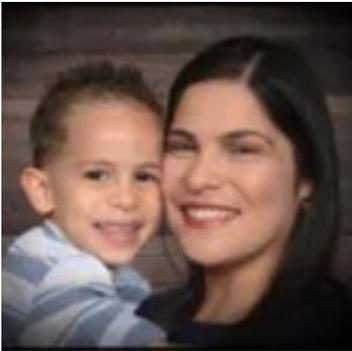


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Gardiner Scholarship helps children with special needs

By Arely Burgos



Arely Burgos with her son Omar

More than two years ago, my husband and I left our native Puerto Rico because we were searching for better opportunities for our young son, Omar, who is on the autism spectrum. We found them in Naples, thanks in large part to Florida's Gardiner Scholarship for children

with special needs.

The Gardiner Scholarship, created in 2014, serves students with autism, Down syndrome, spina bifida and other special needs, regardless of their family's income. Although the scholarship amount varies by county and grade level, the average amount for most students this school year is \$10,400. That money can be spent on private school tuition, therapists, specialists, curriculum, and technology. The program will benefit more than 13,000 students this school year.

Unfortunately, there are 4,000 more on a waiting list for scholarships. They deserve to experience the kind of relief Gardiner brought us.

Omar was diagnosed with autism when he was 1 1/2 years old. Now 5, he's intellectually very high above his age. He reads and writes, and he understands Spanish and English. However, he struggles with comprehension. For example, if he falls down and gets hurt he can't describe his pain. He requires occupational and speech therapy on a weekly basis.

In Puerto Rico, Omar was receiving a total of six therapy sessions a week. Sadly, none of the services were covered by health insurance, so we couldn't afford them anymore. Yet, our family income was too high to qualify for government funds. So we made the life-altering decision to leave our home island for the mainland, where my husband and I could get better jobs and our son could get the educational instruction he needed.

We settled in Naples, and initially enrolled Omar into public school. He already had a lot of the skills they were teaching (letters, numbers, colors, etc.). Because he wasn't being challenged, his behavior began to decline.

Then a family member in Florida told us about the Gardiner Scholarship,

The scholarship gave us the means to enroll Omar in the Montessori Academy of Naples, one of 13 schools in Collier County that accepts the scholarship. I'm overjoyed to say that our son is thriving there.

Montessori is a perfect fit for his needs. He can learn his own way, not just by sitting at a table taking instruction, but by working with puzzles and other hands-on materials. The teachers are very patient with him. They are helping him become more independent. He chooses his clothes, cleans up, and help me to setup the table for dinner. He socializes with older students, and is developing communication skills. (He's picking up English so well he corrects me!) His two therapists come to the school every week.

Montessori Academy provides him with a delicate balance between academic and life skills. Omar is so happy and comfortable.

The Gardiner Scholarship is the best thing to happen to him. We have seen tremendous progress in Omar the last two years. The school is fantastic and the therapists are fabulous. We sure make a great team! There is nothing in Puerto Rico that would make me go back again.

It breaks my heart to know there are families out there who unable to enjoy the same benefits from Gardiner.

As a parent of a special-needs child, I know what they are going through — the stress and the uncertainty. You worry about your child's future if they can't live by themselves. What happens to them if you die? What if you don't have enough money to help them? I'm moved to tears thinking of the services they need but cannot afford.

Gardiner not only helps provide these students with the tools to succeed — it gives their families peace of mind that they will not be left behind.

I was thrilled to see the Florida Board of Education recently approve a proposed budget that would boost funding for the Gardiner program by a record \$42 million. That would provide scholarships for the families currently on the waiting list.

I hope Gov. Ron DeSantis and the Florida Legislature approve that additional funding so that the Gardiner Scholarship is available to every family who needs it, so that they can experience the same blessing we have.