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IMPORTANT UPDATES ON PARENTAL CHOICE IN FLORIDA.

Student Spotlight

► Silas Lopez, Shayla Williams

Victory Christian Academy, Lakeland, FL

Ten years ago, Maria Quinones-Garcia was determined to remove her five grandchildren from their broken home and dedicate her life to their upbringing. She left her warehouse job in Reading, Penn., and made the leap of faith to Lakeland, Fla., where she hoped the children would thrive in a new environment.

Silas Lopez and Shayla Williams were among her charges, but things weren't going well for them in their new school career. Both were enrolled at a local public middle school in Lakeland, and neither excelled academically. Lacking a father figure, Silas was at times defiant and lax in his studies. Shayla, shy and anxious in such a large school where fights frequently broke out around her, often told her grandmother that she was sick and needed to stay home.

The change upon which their grandmother would insist two years ago has also been a turning point in their lives. Silas and Shayla are now students at Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland through a Step Up For Students Scholarship for low-income families, and they say they couldn't be more pleased.

The turnaround has been dramatic. Silas, now 16, found the school small when he first arrived, but its size has brought out his leadership potential and inspired him to volunteer his time to school causes, his teachers and coaches say. He wound up on the football team and raised his grade-point average to a 3.1. Shayla, now 13, climbed out of her shell and eventually tried out for the volleyball team. She's

now earning As and Bs. Just as importantly, school administrators say, she's smiling more.

Of her new school, Shayla said, "there's no drama. No one fights here." Silas says he now looks forward to school. "You want to come. You expect to laugh," he said.

They even have career goals: Shayla hopes to become a pediatrician; Silas, a doctor or a teacher.

Shayla and Silas aren't the only two grandchildren to benefit from Step Up For Students. Quinones-Garcia already has sent one grandson on to college after attending Evangel Christian School in Lakeland. That grandson's success and his emerging role as a father figure for Silas persuaded Quinones-Garcia to pursue the same option again. Evangel had since closed its doors but one administrator there, Rhonda Borders, who grew close and supportive to Quinones and her family, took a job at Victory Christian. Silas and Shayla joined her.

For Quinones-Garcia, raising grandchildren by herself has not been easy. But she offers no complaints. In fact, she continues to reach out to help others in her community. She now works as a hospital chaplain and spends her time ministering to jail inmates in Polk County.

"I knew it was going to be rough," Quinones-Garcia said of her decision 10 years ago. But she tells her grandchildren today, "When you go out to do something, sometimes you have to struggle. Not everyone has the luxury of being from a rich family."



MARIA QUINONES-GARCIA, center, left her home and job in Pennsylvania 10 years ago for Florida, where she hoped her five grandchildren would thrive. Two of them, **SILAS LOPEZ** and **SHAYLA WILLIAMS**, have found success at Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland.

About Victory Christian Academy

Victory Christian Academy opened in 1998 to first-grade students and now enrolls 400 students in grades Prek-12, 62 of whom are on the Step Up For Students Scholarship. Located at 1401 Griffin Road in Lakeland, the school boasts a curriculum that is "traditional in content, but innovative in approach." It emphasizes reading, critical thinking, character development and learning labs while introducing advanced concepts during group and hands-on activities. The school also administers the Stanford Achievement Test. Out of 23 high school seniors last year, 20 went on to college. The annual tuition is \$5,280 for grades K-5 and \$5,530 for grades 6-12.

Want to nominate your student for our Student Spotlight?

Visit <http://www.stepupforstudents.org/tellus.php> to send us your story.

Or contact Adam Emerson at aemerson@stepupforstudents.org or call (866) 753-0985, Ext. 233



NEWSLETTER



Gov. Crist, corporations gather to celebrate Step Up For Students

When Gov. Charlie Crist talks about students helped by the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, he's talking about students like Antonio Trigo, who was close to failing until he found a new school that turned his educational life around. In October, the governor and Antonio shared the same stage.

Antonio once struggled in school and had little motivation to do better. His grandmother, who started caring for Antonio when he was 5, worried about the fights he was getting into and the Cs and Ds he was bringing home on his report card. She feared for his future, but had few options with a fixed income. It wasn't until a few years ago that she heard about the Tax Credit Scholarship offered by Step Up For Students.

The scholarship allowed Antonio to enroll at Mt. Olivet Seventh-day Adventist School, a private school in Fort Lauderdale, where he earned a spot on the honor roll and learned to play piano by the eighth-grade. Last spring, he addressed his classmates as their valedictorian.

Now a freshman at Miami Union Academy, Antonio shared his story with the governor and the corporate donors whose contributions made the scholarship possible. "You have given me a second chance at success," Antonio

told his audience of nearly 1,000 people assembled at Mount Bethel Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale.

Step Up For Students is the nonprofit group that oversees the scholarship program and thrives thanks to the contributions of its donors. In the eight years since Florida created an education option for economically disadvantaged children, corporations have redirected more than \$500 million to scholarships for needy students.

Walgreen Co., which has contributed \$26 million to provide scholarships for at least 6,500 low-income children since 2006, was the title sponsor of the Fort Lauderdale celebration. Additionally, BB&T Corporation, among the nation's largest banks, announced that it is contributing \$2 million to Step Up For Students, which will award scholarships to 491 students. LabCorp also said it is contributing \$2.25 million to provide 560 scholarships.

"Our company understands that, in order to have strong and prosperous communities, we must invest in the educa-

tion of our youth," said Casey Cesnovar, manager of state government relations for Walgreen Co. "Step Up For Students has created a way for companies to provide valuable educational opportunities for Florida's families so that their children can thrive."

See 'A time to celebrate achievement,' inside



GOV. CHARLIE CRIST shares the stage with Step Up scholarship recipient Antonio Trigo at the 2009 Donor Rally. Trigo, a freshman at Miami Union Academy, shared his academic progress with some of the donors who made his scholarship possible. "You have given me a second chance at success," he said.

Kathleen Kiley



Step Up schools show Blue Ribbon excellence

Dr. Kathleen Kiley doesn't hide her enthusiasm when she shows off her latest school literature. "Your child deserves to attend a Nationally Recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence," reads one postcard for prospective parents.

The St. Andrew Catholic School leader isn't simply boasting. In 2009, the Orlando school and Brauser Maimonides Academy in Fort Lauderdale were two of only 12 public and private schools in Florida the U.S. Department of Education named Blue Ribbon Schools.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program honors elementary, middle and high schools that are either academically superior or that show dramatic gains in achievement among

disadvantaged students. St. Andrew and Brauser Maimonides are special to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program; both have a unique impact on the hundreds of Step Up students they serve.

For Kiley, the distinction is especially sweet. While she helped bring a more affluent school to Blue Ribbon excellence about two years ago, St. Andrew enrolls some of the most economically disadvantaged students in a diocese that covers nine counties.

Founded in 1961, the school has gradually evolved into an institution that reaches out to at-risk youth from the surrounding Pine Hills neighborhood, which itself has seen an increase in greater and greater poverty. It is a mission that Kiley and her staff

take seriously. Despite the financial challenges facing all Catholic schools these days, St. Andrew recognized a need to fulfill a vital role in the community.

St. Andrew Catholic serves 130 students in the Step Up program. Brauser Maimonides, 14.

"If it wasn't for the scholarship, Kiley said, "there's no way [the neighborhood kids] could afford to go here. Now, they can go to a nationally recognized school."

Asked about her formula for Blue Ribbon excellence, Kiley said it's no mystery: the faculty is committed; the parents are committed; and the expectations are high.

"I inherited a good staff," Kiley said. "Our teachers hold students to a high standard."

SCHOLARSHIP RENEWAL:

Scholarship renewal applications will be available at www.stepupforstudents.org beginning March 1.



A time to celebrate achievement

Nearly 1,000 people filled the hall at Mount Bethel Christian Academy on Oct. 16 to recognize the students, educators, public officials and corporate contributors who make the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship possible. Antonio Trigo, a freshman at Miami Union Academy, brought the audience to its feet as he described how he managed to transform his brush with academic failure into valedictorian status in eighth grade and standardized test scores that are now two years ahead of his grade level.



"Step Up For Students gives underprivileged families an option. It gives a parent who once felt trapped by finances the opportunity to find the school that matches their child's learning style."

The Rev. H.K. Matthews,
civil rights activist



"Step Up For Students is literally transforming lives and giving children the means to overcome challenges in school and in life. Our continued support of this valuable program will create a better future for our children and improve communities throughout the state."

Julio Fuentes, president and CEO,
Hispanic Council for Reform in Educational Options (HCREO)



"I am grateful to all the companies who have taken the time to learn about this valuable program and participate in it. With their generous support, Florida's children have more scholarship opportunities available, and together, I am confident we will continue to provide more educational opportunities and options here in Florida."

Gov. Charlie Crist



"Step Up For Students gave my grandmother, who struggles without much income, a choice she would never have had. Not only did I graduate from the eighth grade, I was also named valedictorian of my graduating class."

Antonio Trigo, freshman,
Miami Union Academy



This is the official newsletter for Step Up For Students, published four times a year.

About Step Up For Students: Our mission is to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children from low-income and working class families. The scholarships allow these students to consider a private school or an out-of-district public school that may better suit their individual needs. This choice is not based on whether the public school is judged as succeeding or failing. Rather, it recognizes that different children learn in different ways and that our collective struggle is to help the students who often are at the greatest disadvantage in modern education.

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Scholarship Director: **John LeHockey**

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A new enrollment milestone brings big changes

Step Up For Students has soared past a major enrollment milestone this school year, and is expanding its application processing center to meet the growing demands for next year.

Eight years after its creation, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship surpassed 25,000 students just a few weeks into the 2009-10 school year and reached 27,600 students by the holiday break. In just the past five years, the program has more than doubled in growth and is now the equivalent of the 27th largest school district in the state. The momentum is one indication that parents throughout the state are embracing this learning option.

With that growth, Step Up scholarship executive director John LeHockey is preparing some major changes to better respond to renewing and new families in the spring.

All application processing will be handled directly by Step Up staff, ending the contracts with Private School Aid Service in Ohio and the Florida Processing Service. The direct control should provide

parents with better feedback and more timely answers.

A new call center will better handle call volume and be able to respond to questions about the program and the application process.

Applications for the current year were

closed on Dec. 1, with the 2010-11 school year application period opening up on March 1.

More information will be made available on the Web site, www.stepupforstudents.org, as some of the projects, such as the call center, move closer to reality.

TAX CREDIT ENROLLMENT





JORGE AND LAURA POSADA were recently named the national spokespersons for Hispanic CREO, which has long been a partner with Step Up For Students and works to empower Latino parents to choose the right education for their children. “Few possess the convictions to empower families in a time of great need as Jorge and Laura,” said Julio Fuentes, HCREO’s president and chief executive officer.

World Series-winning catcher joins efforts of Hispanic parental choice advocacy group

Jorge Posada, the World Series-winning New York Yankees catcher, and his wife, Laura, have for years reached out to families of children with special needs nationwide. Now they will speak on behalf of Latino parents empowered to choose the right education for their children.

The Posadas will serve as the national spokespersons for the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), which has long been a partner with Step Up For Students. During an event in December at the historic Columbia Restaurant in Tampa, Jorge Posada told an assembly of Hispanic leaders throughout the state that “Latino parents are starved for an education that best meets the needs of their children.”

Laura Posada continued, “Jorge and I see this opportunity to help HCREO as an extension of what we’ve been working toward — to provide families with the support they need to overcome the toughest challenges their children face. Make no mistake: Ensuring equal educational op-

portunities for our most disadvantaged is a challenge we all have to step up to. HCREO was created to empower families to choose the right education for their child. That mission is more critical than ever.”

John Kirtley, the chairman of Step Up For Students, praised the Posadas’ newest role.

“We’ve seen what they have done to help families through the most challenging times any parent can face,” said John Kirtley, the chairman of the Florida School Choice Fund. “To know they will expand their efforts to empower parents to find the right education for their children should bring excitement to us all.”

HCREO works to improve educational outcomes for Hispanic children by empowering families through parental choice in education. For the last several years, the organization has developed grassroots efforts to educate and inform Hispanic parents about their parental rights and encourage them to become advocates for

their children’s education. The Posadas will be critical to HCREO’s continued efforts.

Julio Fuentes, the President and Chief Executive Officer of HCREO, praised the Posadas’ long-time commitment to children who are affected by the congenital medical condition known as Craniosynostosis. That passion, Fuentes said, makes the couple an ideal choice to speak for a group that gives Latino families hope.

“Few possess the convictions to empower families in a time of great need as Jorge and Laura,” Fuentes said. “They both know how important it is to provide a support network for families who would otherwise have none. HCREO has a similar mission.”

Since 2000, the Posadas have worked to create awareness of Craniosynostosis. Their oldest child, Jorge Luis, was diagnosed with the ailment 10 days after he was born and has since endured numerous surgeries. To provide assistance to families with children affected by this condition, the Posadas founded The Jorge Posada Foundation.

Donor Corner: BJ's Wholesale Club, Inc.

For the past 25 years, BJ’s Wholesale Club, Inc. has been providing its members with a one-stop shopping destination for high-quality, name brand food and general merchandise at every day low prices. BJ’s is the leading operator of membership warehouse clubs in the Eastern United States with 184 Clubs in 15 states including 29 locations across Florida.

In addition to providing high-quality products at great savings, BJ’s strives to support, enhance and enrich important local community programs that primarily benefit children and families. This year, BJ’s enhanced their giving with a \$500,000 donation to Step Up For Students.

BJ’s generous donation to Step Up For Students will fund K-12 education scholarships for roughly 125 underprivileged children in Florida, which will allow the children to attend the school of their parents’ choice.

In celebration of its \$500,000 contribution to the scholarship program, BJ’s

hosted a “Choose to Give” food drive at scholarship-recipient school Tampa Bay Christian Academy on Nov. 16.

During the “Choose to Give” event, America’s Second Harvest of Tampa Bay was the recipient of more than 500 canned food items that were collected by students during a month-long food drive. BJ’s Wholesale Club matched the generosity of the students by providing \$1,000 worth of food toward the drive.

“All of us here at BJ’s Wholesale Club are so proud for this opportunity to donate to Step Up For Students and to support the children and families that stand to benefit from a quality education,” said Jessica Newman, BJ’s manager of community relations. “Our donation provided us with a great opportunity to support the needs of children and families throughout Florida while also having fun and donating food to the food bank. We are proud to partner with Step Up for Students on their outstanding program.”



Step Up For Students recently celebrated BJ’s Wholesale Club’s \$500,000 donation at Tampa Bay Christian Academy just before the Thanksgiving holiday.