



## TWO DECADES OF MIRACLES

The Milagro Center celebrates 20 years of guiding Delray Beach students

BY ALYSSA FISHER

Several Barbie dolls sit patiently on Barbara Stark's bookshelf, poised for Fun Friday at the Milagro Center. Elementary school teachers don't assign homework over the weekend, so the afternoon is more flexible to play time.

The licensed child care center is creative, colorful and joyous, Stark says, but above all, there's its goal: to help underprivileged children in Delray Beach succeed in school. For 20 years, it's been doing just that.

"We've certainly grown and morphed," says Stark, the organization's president and CEO. "We've continued to push the boundaries. We continue to be the champion for these children and youth who tend to get pushed along or fall under the radar and end up repeating the same cycle of poverty that the generations before them are experiencing."

The 12-member staff of certified teachers holds the center's name, Milagro—which means "miracle" in Spanish—in high regard. "What we like to say is that everyone that walks through our front door either brings a miracle with them, or a miracle happens to them," Stark says.

It's held true for staff, volunteers and mentors, and even more so for the 43 children, kindergarten through fifth grade, who excitedly run off the school bus every day around 2:30 p.m. and stay until 6 p.m. The children live in households beneath the federal poverty line, so Milagro Center doubles as a safe space to wait for their working parents and an academic hub.

They get help with homework there, and take classes such as math and literacy. Because of the small class size (to adhere to the health department's capacity regulations), individual attention is

typical. Grade promotion within the center is 98 percent, she says.

Milagro's curriculum is rooted in the cultural arts. Local artists teach media such as sculpting, photography and animation. Every student learns to play an instrument of his or her choice—there's even an in-house ensemble. They learn to dance and sing and appreciate art in the professional gallery space, which changes six times a year. These activities help them form an identity, bolstering their self-esteem and proving they're not inferior—they can do and be anything. "The core of everything is confidence," she says.

Five years ago, Milago opened a teen program a half-mile away, for middle and high schoolers, based on the same principles. "It becomes their second home," Stark says.

Milagro is celebrating 20 years of miracles at its ARTrageous Anniversary Party, April 21 from 7 to 11 p.m. at Delray Beach Golf Club, where Milagro mentors, volunteers and donors will share their stories.

Every day is a new story for Stark, who worked for years at a high-pressure Fortune 500 company in New York City. When she moved to Florida, a change of heart led her to local nonprofit organizations. At Milagro, where she's worked for almost six years, she says she feels the benefits directly: A fourth-

## TALK OF THE TOWN

Keeping readers in the know about community news.

ChildNet's fourth annual **CARE FOR KIDS** Luncheon, presented by Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital, is April 6 at Wycliffe Golf & Country Club (4650 Wycliffe Country Club Blvd., Wellington).

ChildNet, an agency that protects abused, abandoned and neglected children in Palm Beach County, will present the AT&T Corporation with the Champion for Children Award.

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**MAX'S HARVEST** (169 NE Second Ave., Delray Beach) is celebrating its sixth anniversary with a menu inspired by past favorites—half-brick chicken, crispy pork belly and harvest salad. New dinner and cocktail items also were added.

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**BOCA WEST COUNTRY CLUB** recently debuted its \$50 million Golf and Activities Center, a 153,000-square-foot clubhouse that includes two new restaurants (Prime Cut and Grand Central), as well as a retail Golf Shoppe and men's and women's locker rooms.

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Last month, **METRO DINER** (2864 N. University Drive, Coral Springs) opened its first location in South Florida. The restaurant, featured on an episode of Food Network's "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives," offers "classic comfort food with flair," which extends to the all-day breakfast.

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Coral Springs celebrates Earth and Arbor Day with **EARTHFEST** on April 22 at the Sawgrass Nature Center (3000 Sportsplex Drive). From 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., there will be wildlife exhibits, guided tours, children's activities and plant giveaways for Coral Springs residents.

grader confidently tells her he wants to be an animator. A once-petrified kindergartener skips into her office for a hug. A 14-year-old former Milagro kid is now a paid employee with dreams of college.

Stark says she hopes to open another center to serve another 43 children.

"These kids deserve it," she says. "They have such promise and thrive in this environment."