



## Family Literacy Academy at Lake Wales

**Special Edition**  
**Fall Newsletter**  
**October 2023**

### Executive Director's Column

Our May 2023 Newsletter served to present the academic year 2022-23 wrap up, the highlights of that year. This newsletter is meant to present the connection with our new academic year, 2023-24.

This is the start of the Family Literacy Academy's eighteenth year, and what a beginning it has been - and continues to be. Plenty of new day and night class GED and ESOL students join up with returnees from last year, and a few returnees from previous years back to complete their search for a high school diploma by finishing up the work on a single subject - usually Math! We expect a healthy group of new diploma gainers by the end of the academic year. We already have two... Teia Wilson & Andrew Denton (see our next edition).

Our ESOL student population has grown tremendously, in both the daytime and nighttime classes. This fills the Center at night with some surprise because we had every reason to assume minimal attendance due to

the immigration controversies. This all comes to excite our "new" ESOL evening teacher, veteran GED language arts expert, Mrs. Freddie Robinson. Our skillful daytime ESOL teacher, Donna Barringer, is pleased with the opportunities a burgeoning class provides.

Meanwhile, our former longtime evening ESOL teacher, Sondra Annotti, has taken the role of evening GED reading and writing class. Gail Crum, our Director of Education, continues to provide daytime and nighttime GED classes, as does Math guru, Sue Frantz.

We are once again blessed with the assistance of a long list of steady, talented, and experienced tutors from the community, including Dr. Bill Barringer, Melissa Massey, Nancy and Lee Turnquist, Sally Knight, Bunny Wetzel, Jeff Olson, Nita Propst and Randy Lo Patin. We always appreciate the contributions of our community tutors to our mission.

That pretty much rounds out our educators for the 2023-24 year. Now, what about the follow up on last year's initiatives? First, we begin with the fundamental question - what is this all about? What is family literacy in the first place...

## WHAT IS FAMILY LITERACY?

The Family Literacy Academy at Lake Wales provides a fully integrated, comprehensive educational program with wide-spread community support.

Our efforts include:

**Adult Education** => Improving academic skills, including preparation for GED attainment, job preparation and ESOL (English Speaking Other Languages) classes.



**Early Childhood Education** => Readiness skills (birth - 4 years old) and Academic tutoring for school-age children.



**Parent Groups** => Learning to help children with homework, address discipline concerns and other parenting skills, and explore financial literacy, employment, housing, and health-related issues.

## 2023 ACADEMIC YEAR RECAP

During the academic year, four students achieved their diplomas, one of whom, **Jessica Martinez**, gained hers on the final day of class. Shortly thereafter, **Jessica Robertson** and **Belin Pineda**, passed their GEDs --In all, six GEDs (please see short bios below).

That left a large number of students who have gained improvements in their education, including more confidence in themselves and their ability to help their families. Most of them have returned to class to finish the work on their diplomas (and improve their families' lives).



"Polk State College is proud to partner with the Family Literacy Academy at Lake Wales to advance the educational attainment of Polk County residents. Together, we are transforming the lives of students and their families, and promoting future prosperity through the positive economic impact of education on our community."

**Dr. Angela Falconetti, President-PSC**



### JESSICA SHRUM

Jessica Shrum joined the Academy in the fall two years ago with her preschool daughter. She was a serious student, making rapid progress toward the GED, passing three of the four required tests while with us the first year. Then a combination of factors, family matters and difficulty with math, occurred. (She has five children.) Jessica overcame the challenges of family and math to pass the math component of the GED and gain her high school diploma !

We wish Jessica the very best while she mulls over her options, including enrollment at Polk State.

### MARISSA BROWN

Marissa enrolled in the Academy last September with her two sons. With regular attendance, the boys made great progress in preschool while Marissa, through conscientious study, was able to gain her high school diploma early in 2023. For the remainder of the school year (ending in May), the Academy hired Marissa to tutor her remaining classmates in math. This enabled her boys to continue preparing for school and lifelong learning and reading in the Academy's preschool.

This period also allowed Marissa to contemplate the next steps in her education journey. As a result, she completed the papers to enroll at Polk State in time to start her college career !

Congratulations to Marissa for pursuing her lifelong goals and thanks to the Brown family for their support of that pursuit !

### JESSICA MARTINEZ

Jessica joined the Academy in 2011, because, in her own words, "I had attended other places three previous times to get my GED and I didn't follow through; I was determined to get it this time. The main reason I wanted to get my GED was to prove to myself that I could do it."

**This year she did it !** She conquered Math to gain her high school diploma. The Academy is so proud of her "stick-to-a-tivity." In her own words, Jessica says about her experience at the Academy: "It has been a challenge, but I have learned so much. I am so thankful for Gail and Dem for never giving up on me and for supporting me. The teachers have been wonderful. They are so patient and always willing to help." Jessica goes on to say that her children loved to come with her to class. They have started to read more, and their grades are "great." Jessica's dedication to her and her family's education and gaining the goal of her high school diploma are highly laudable.



### **MICHAEL OCASIO**

Michael joined the Academy in September 2022, and completed his GED by December of that year. Obviously, Michael is bright, attentive, and hardworking. He is also a nice guy who will go far. He liked the classes and sang the praises of Ms. Crum and the staff. He enjoyed the parenting classes, something that will benefit his two children, already on their way to success in school. Michael has goals—completing his efforts to provide barber services and enrolling at Polk State to gain business skills and entrepreneurial abilities. There seems to be no stopping him !

### **JESSICA ROBERTSON**

Jessica enrolled at the Academy with her daughter in November 2021. They came to Lake Wales from Washington State, where Jessica completed all the tests required to obtain her GED except for Math. Jessica attended the evening class. She took the Math test twice (missing by 2 points and then by 1), until she passed on her third try (with determination

and joking that she expected to get 144.5 - not the 145 required - this time around). Thus, she gained her high school diploma ! (Her daughter continues to do well at Polk Avenue Elementary.)

Jessica has enrolled at Polk State with the intent of pursuing a nursing degree. She says she loves to help other people, the best way she can. We wish her the best, knowing she has the determination and the smarts to succeed.

### **BELENA PINEDA**

Belen Pineda enrolled in the Academy in September of 2022 upon arrival to Lake Wales from Oregon in a trailer modified to serve as a residence (with a shower!) and as a work storage van for her about-to-be fiancé, a certified electrician. They parked their trailer in various places around the city until one of the Academy instructors asked them to move into spare rooms in his house. The electrician went to work while Belen assumed her studies at the Academy. She worked diligently on her GED, quickly passing her first three tests. Math took a little longer. Belen achieved a 153 on her Math exam (passing is 145), her last requirement to obtaining her high school diploma.

She is considering enrolling at Polk State to earn a nursing degree. We wish her the best and know she will do well !





**Here a Few Students that made notable progress towards their GED:**

**MARION SOUTH**

Marion has been with us for a number of years – she left us for a while and returned to pass every test but social Studies and Math, both by a few points. Despite her perseverance those few points continued to evade her. Just as classes started for this year, she again scheduled her retake tests – unbeknownst to us. Great news this time ! Marion slayed the Math dragon and missed Social Studies by only one point. Come the first night of classes, Marion was back at the table with our Social Studies instructor, searching for that one point to gain her high school diploma – a well-deserved reward for her long battle to reach her goal !

**SHANE MONGE**

Shane Monge started with the Academy's evening GED program

with her six-month-old son. They came to Lake Wales from Massachusetts, where Shane was in her eleventh grade. Since she enrolled in GED class, Shane has made progress with her pursuit of her high school diploma, most recently by passing the math test – dreaded by a majority of her classmates! Her goal is to successfully finish her time with the Academy as quickly as she can, so she can pursue her other goals, including enrolling at Polk State.

Meanwhile, her son continues to advance as a smart, talkative and friendly, well-adjusted four-year-old who gets along with and likes to help his fellow classmates in the Academy's preschool. He is ready to enroll in VPK before going on to kindergarten.

As has been said, obtaining a GED is hard work, requiring a large commitment of time and effort. It is very difficult to renew learning or learn for the first-time information and how to communicate it. Each GED topic requires a series of pretests, practices, final tests, and retests if inadequate scores initially result. Much of the material required seems inconsequential to day-to-day living requirements, no matter how really significant or interesting. Many of our students comment on how they wish they had taken their high school years more seriously and that they urge their children to do so.



During academic year 2022-23, the number of students day time and night time ESOL classes took longer to rebound, although significant results were still achieved. Take the following bio of one our most impressive results:

### **REYNA ZACARIA**

Twenty-four years ago imagining a place that could provide a better future for her daughter, Isabel Reyna Zacarias left her parents, and the country of Guatemala for the United States. Not knowing anyone, she was determined to find a better life than the one she left behind.

Never having the opportunity to attend school in Guatemala she couldn't read or write in her native language. Working tirelessly in agriculture-- crop picking-- was the only way for her to earn a living. After briefly working in Georgia and Missouri, she found her way to Florida, specifically Lake Wales, to pick oranges. It was backbreaking work, toiling in the groves and she found being short a disadvantage to tearing the fruit from the limbs.

Luckily, her mother had taught her at a young age to sew. Reyna honed that craft and became a beautiful seamstress. She found work at a mattress factory sewing. However, being short with short arms had her at a disadvantage; she wasn't able to pull the hefty mattresses through the

sewing machines as quickly as the job required. Fired, she had to find a way to earn money.

Her housekeeping business was born out of necessity. Much hard work and dedication went into making it a success....she now employs herself and three others. One thing stood in the way of making each and every day run smoothly. Not knowing how to read, write or speak much English, notes or texts left by clients were often lost in translation. Relying on her daughters to translate was not always an option.

Her daughters, happy to help over the years translating, were leaving, one by one for college, encouraging her to finally learn English. With her client's encouragement as well, she began ESOL classes at the Family Literacy Academy last January. Faithfully attending, and cleaning several houses before the 9:00 AM class, she began not only to speak English, but to read, for the first time ever! She has also encouraged others to attend. Her learning is infectious.

Many "light bulb" moments occurred as she finally understood words her clients and others were saying to her. After years of compensating--not knowing English--by smiling and nodding her head, she could finally answer in complete sentences.

Reyna is determined to not only master English, reading and writing, but to obtain her GED. As hardworking and intelligent as she is, there is no doubt she will accomplish this.



### **GADELOUPE “LUPE” JUAREZ**

Guadeloupe “Lupe” Juarez came religiously to the Tuesday evening ESOL program with two sons, a two-year-old and a third grader. Lupe improved her understanding of and communication skills in English, gaining greater confidence in her ability to participate in the community. We need to confirm that her Mexican high school diploma qualifies for acceptance to local institutions of higher learning before she enrolls in the Academy’s GED program. In the meantime, Lupe will continue to improve her English by attending the evening ESOL classes this year, with her two boys.

Her two-year-old did well in the Academy’s preschool program while her third grader benefitted from Academy tutoring/homework assistance.

### **ESMERALDA “ESME” CONTRERAS**

Esmeralda (Esme) is 35 years old, married, and the mother of three children. Esme's native country is Mexico. She has been in the United States eighteen years and enjoys life here. Esme is a very dedicated student and is always eager to share about her life and participate in class.

Her English skills improved during the 2022-2023 school year, and she has returned this year to continue her studies. Esme steps in to translate in class for students whenever needed. Her husband and two older children speak Spanish in their home, but her four-year-old son, Alex, speaks only English, but he understands spoken Spanish. Esme wants to communicate to Alex and others in English. One day, Esme would like to be involved with community service.

Alex, Esme’s son, loves the Family Literacy Academy's pre-school program. He looks forward to attending his class and is always eager to learn. Alex's English is very good and he speaks in complete sentences. He also displays excellent social skills in and out of the classroom. Both Esme and Alex are welcome additions to the Family Literacy Academy of Lake Wales.

Many other students gained confidence in their ability to comprehend and communicate in English in their hours of reading, listening, practicing and discussing innumerable topics all geared toward improving students’ grasp of English.

As a result of last years’ efforts, this year’s classes will build on basics in smaller “bite size” segments, resulting in certificates for achievement measuring accomplishment levels. Great timing for the very large class enrollments so far in both the daytime and evening classes this year !

# Preschool News

What changes and improvements have been made under the leadership of head daytime preschool teacher Robin Jolley to make sure our preschool students are getting ready for success in their futures ! New centers are periodically created, such as a veterinary "clinic" to treat gamut of "sick" pets, a flower shop for "buying" - ordering and delivering - floral arrangements, and setting up an airport terminal with chairs and ticket counter. These have made for countless hours of creative, constructive play and a great

opportunity of playtime with others, learning to share and respect others.



Once a week, the Arts Center teacher worked with the preschool to present a "Mommy and me" program - parents and their children working together reading and performing arts projects to strengthen at-home constructive ties. This year, we plan to carry this out for the fall semester.

Enrollment in both the daytime and evening classes continues to build as new adult GED and ESOL students join the Academy.





## **AGENDA FOR ACADEMIC YEAR 2023 - 2024**

We have made great strides in recruiting new students for the Academy's GED and ESOL programs. Banners advertising both programs have been placed at each of the elementary schools and we have met with school principals. We have provided our program information throughout the community. In addition, our traditional yard signs have been placed in store fronts and at strategic locations throughout the community. Also, the usual word of mouth is working to spread the news of the availability of the program.

As a result of these efforts, new enrollment is up in the GED program, with a greater demand for seats in the evening class. Enrollment in the ESOL programs is way up—again explosively so in the evening class, much to the delight of ESOL evening teacher Mrs. Robinson and the Academy staff assisting her. The increased enrollment provides a great opportunity to assist even greater numbers of area residents with educational improvements, much

to the advantage of the community.

Many of last year's students in the GED and ESOL classes have returned this year to resume their search to improve their education. In addition, a number of students from years past who need only one or two tests to gain their high school diploma are returning to give it "one last try."

READING is a critical and necessary part of educational improvement. We have always stressed the importance of parents reading to their children each day. We have endorsed Dr. Rodolfich's program, READ 20, as a good start toward that goal. We have added to the reading part of our curriculum greater emphasis from daily teaching of Director of Education, MS. Crum, and the nighttime reading efforts of Ms. Annotti.



## FOOD/NUTRITION PROGRAM

Last year, the Academy was fortunate to secure a large grant from the Sislak Family Foundation/Florida Literacy Coalition to implement a food/nutrition program to address our students' dietary and availability problems, especially resulting from the food desert areas in and surrounding Lake Wales. (These hardships were explained in the class response to a writing exercise, including the problem of missing class because of the conflict with timing of food banks and not knowing enough about nutrition to guarantee a balanced diet on a budget.) We ended organizing and planning for implementation of the grant, including the initial administrative requirements, leaving the start of the program to this semester. The combined daytime GED and ESOL classes had the first session of nutrition classes with the County Extension Service –understanding food labelling and nutritional values of products. The discussion was followed by breaking the class into several small groups for preparing a nutritious, quick and inexpensive meal - a good example of a meal that could be fixed at home. Response to this first session was very favorable, with discussion of the focus of the next session in the next one of two classes each month - the nutritional value of soft drinks, fruit juices and water.



Meanwhile, a large group of ESOL and GED Students and their children cleared two plots in the community gardens (next to the Methodist Church) and planted vegetables and herbs donated by Roosevelt Academy, to be tended and harvested by our students to be included in the Academy's weekly food bags, provided as part of our food distribution to our families, as supplemented monthly by the Lake Wales All Veterans Center.

The result of our food and nutrition program will be families better aware of the value of the food they eat, shopping tips to help them with costs of food and comparison pricing to assist with meal preparation, and food availability.

Our appreciation goes to the Florida Literacy Coalition for selecting our food and nutrition program to be funded by the Sislak Family Foundation, the Lake Wales All Veterans group, the Polk County Extension Service, Roosevelt Academy, and the Family Literacy Academy food team, led by Linda Brown and Eddy Jean Rivers and staffed by Academy students - a great joint effort to tackle the Academy students' food and nutrition difficulties, as identified in a class writing assignment.

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## WE NEED YOUR HELP !!

There is always a way to help the Academy... for instance:

- \* Tell someone you know about us - someone who wants to complete their high school diploma or improve their use and comprehension of English.
- \* Volunteer during daytime or nighttime GED or ESOL classes, in the office or during one of our community events. (call 863-224-1250 for particulars)
- \* Contribute to our annual community fundraising, or anytime during the year.

Call 604-8012

Take time during the day to read.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

As part of the Academy's commitment to the community, the Academy participates in several events throughout the year, expanding the opportunities afforded to our students and Lake Wales itself. Some of these include:

1. Participating in events such as the Annual Arts Festival and Mardi Gras,
2. The library's proposed tutoring service
3. Local schools' information needs
4. Resurgence of the Family Literacy Coalition to work with community activities such as food and housing needs.
5. Working with the Childrens' Museum at Bonnet Springs Park

We have the Lake Wales community to thank for supporting the Academy. In addition to volunteering, individuals, local foundations and companies have been most generous to the funding needs of operating the efficiency and effectiveness of the Academy through our annual fundraising "ask". We appreciate the continued support of our community program!



# The Lake Wales Family Literacy Academy

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[www.flalw.org](http://www.flalw.org)

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