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Whenever McKee  
descendant Marion  
de Vogel visits the  
botanical garden, it's

**‘LIKE  
COMING  
HOME’**





Childcare Resources executive director Shannon McGuire Bowman has big plans for the next phase of the organization's growth.

# GRADE-**A** PERFORMANCE

CHILDCARE RESOURCES OF INDIAN RIVER ENLISTS THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S LASTINGER CENTER TO PUT ITS METHODS TO THE TEST

BY ALISSA KOLAR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVEN MARTINE

When students of any age think about education, they have to admit almost every word associated with school has multiple connotations, depending on personal experience. "Test," "schedule," "lunch," or even the word "school" itself can cause instant panic or a quick grin. Arguably, the most particularly charged word is "grade," so imagine someone volunteering to be observed for two years straight for one final grade. Now, imagine it wasn't a student but an actual school. This is exactly what Indian River County's Childcare Resources (CR) chose to do.

CR is a nonprofit early childhood education center established in 1994. Its mission is "to elevate and promote the highest quality early childhood development and education in Indian River County, focusing on economically challenged

children and families."

According to administrative/teacher assistant and parent liaison Kimberly Martinez, CR is not simply a daycare, despite the fact that its staff cares for the children while their parents are at work. She shares that CR is truly an educational center, one that is accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

"Our teachers have lesson plans for kids ages 6 weeks old to 5 years of age," says Martinez. "Babies learn to return sounds, and older kids learn everyday life lessons."

She stresses that while lessons are rooted in play, the play always has meaning. For example, she says, "we may look like we are just playing 'grocery store,' but the kids are learning how to stand in a line as well as learning money skills."



“

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—GABRIELLE MISHLER

In fact, CR offers a trifecta of initiatives to local ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) families: its preschool and all-day childcare, its Wellness and Early Intervention Program for the families and children, and its outreach programs for early childhood educators in the community.

These three components allow CR's mission to be met at all angles, and the board of directors wanted to prove the nonprofit's fidelity to this mission by having its programs and concepts “graded” by a third-party evaluator. Board members also knew this could ensure that CR's mission was working for, and having a lasting impact on, the community that supports it through fundraising and donations.

When choosing an evaluator, they chose the University of Florida's Lastinger Center for Learning. When asked why, CR's executive director, Shannon McGuire Bowman, says it was an easy choice: “The Lastinger

Center has a reputation of quality and excellence in the field of early childhood education.”

The evaluation process took two years to complete, and Bowman says they met for two hours every two weeks. For the duration of the evaluation, the Lastinger Center collected data, held observations, conducted interviews, and formed focus groups with everyone from board members and teachers to volunteers and donors.

While this process may seem arduous, Martinez says, “The Lastinger report was super fair. The evaluation was nothing we aren't used to, because we are always ‘on,’ doing the best we can; it's just a social norm.”

Her testimony holds true not only as a staff member but as a parent of two children at CR. She says that the staff always being “on” has led to immense strides in her children's learning, especially in terms of language acquisition.

Echoing Martinez's statement about increased language

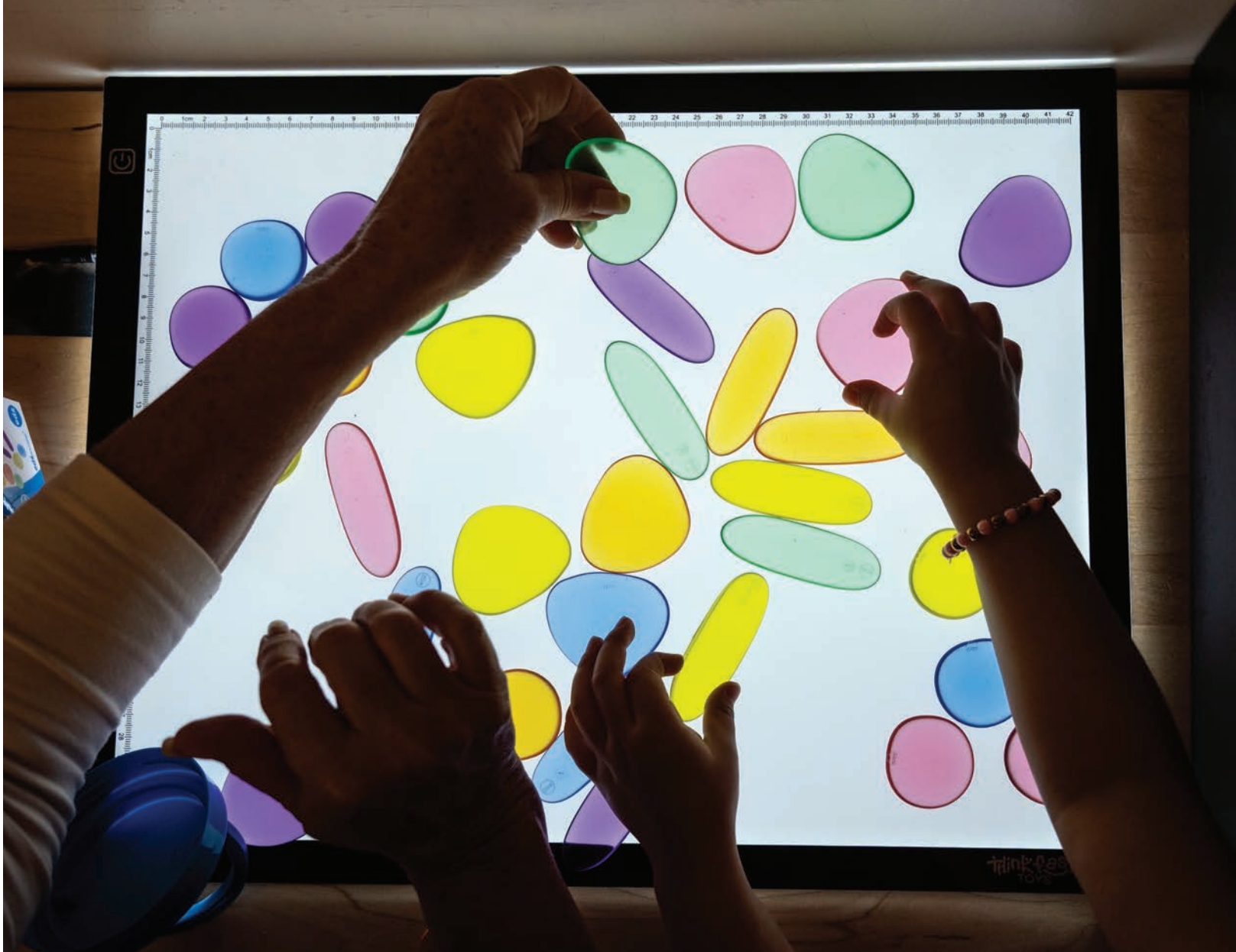
acquisition is parent Gabrielle Mishler, whose son has been at CR since he was 1 year old. Mishler works near the school and explains that she would watch the children playing outside with their teachers, and their interaction is what made her sign up for CR's waiting list while she was still pregnant. “It is more than a school; it's a little community,” she says. “I could see how genuinely caring the

teachers were with the kids—it was never a chore.”

Equally impressive to her were the school's wellness services, which give students access to mental health referrals and on-site therapies. When her son needed speech therapy, he was able to receive services during the day. According to Mishler, “The flexibility is game-changing. With people as busy as they are, an extra two or



Physical therapist Livya Barreirinhas has spent a year working with Alvin, 2, on strengthening his balance and improving his motor skills.





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—SHANNON MCGUIRE BOWMAN

three appointments a week can be really tough, so the fact that he can do it there is amazing.”

Mishler also details multiple learning opportunities her son enjoyed, such as studying pumpkin decomposition at Halloween, taking ballet classes, and having a new “job” every week—everything from being in charge of lineups to setting the breakfast table.

This rich tapestry of opportunities likely stems from the vast network of teacher outreach programs and profes-

sional development workshops hosted by CR for early education teachers all over Indian River County. As Martinez says, “Every child is so different, we have to learn new and fresh ideas all the time. They constantly provide training for us, so we always feel heard.”

All opportunities for the teachers, students, and families were examined and observed, and in October 2024 the Lastinger Center’s evaluation came to an end. The final report, which exceeded 100 pages, came in December, and while a traditional letter grade was not issued, the result can be summed up with the following sentence from the conclusion: “As described in detail above, CR has experienced a high degree of success in meeting the needs of families, children, and educators in Indian River County.” Testimonials, as well as evidence-based lesson plans and projects, were included to justify the results.

According to Bowman, the staff and leadership at CR already knew they were incredibly beneficial to the

community, but she says they were thrilled to discover that their education, wellness, and teacher outreach programs were “even more meaningful than we thought, and we can’t wait to grow even further and deepen our professional outreach.” She adds that they are still digesting the results and will use the report to inform their future planning and strategic decisions.

Part of what they wish to do in the future is continue to partner with the Lastinger Center to do an even more advanced study.

The study would involve observing CR students in Indian River County schools, most likely kindergartens, and comparing their progress with students of similar socioeconomic backgrounds who did not attend CR. At the time of this writing, they are waiting to see if this study can happen in 2025.

One thing for certain is that they will continue their mission in a new location: a 30,000-square-foot building in downtown Vero Beach that will, it is hoped, be ready in 2026. This building will allow them to expand their resources to the community by including more children from their waiting list and adding more teacher resources.

With a new facility on the horizon, fully measured success, and a strong relationship with the community, CR’s legacy has only one problem. According to Mishler, CR leaves its students’ parents with a huge obstacle to overcome: she says she now feels the pressure to pick a kindergarten for her son that can match—or even come close to—his early childhood education. ❁





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Skylar Schrock and Nikolai, above, work on spelling. Teacher Brittany Stallings, right, involves the class, including an eager Xzavier, during story time. Opposite page: Kimberly Martinez sits with her daughter Rae, top, and son Julian, left, in their classrooms.



for children.  
for families.  
for educators.



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