

## Meet Barbara Mainster, Redlands Christian Migrant Association

Immokalee, Florida

“Hope. That’s the key. Migrant parents have hope for a better tomorrow for their children,” begins Barbara Mainster, executive director of Redlands Christian Migrant Association. “And that’s what makes all of this work.” Although she may be the last person to tell you this, Barbara’s efforts for almost 30 years have been instrumental in directing this hope for positive change.

During our time together, Barbara shared many things with me; but one quote stands out: “It just isn’t right. And this is the United States.” It seems to me that Barbara is about social justice. If something isn’t right, she’s here to do what she can to make it better.

She asked almost every staff member how long they had been with RCMA. Typical responses were “20 years,” “12 years,” “5 years.” Over 85% of the 1,565 staff are former farmworkers. The innovation began in 1965 when Wendell Rollason, RCMA founder, convinced farmworker mothers that they were uniquely suited to help care for children like their own. RCMA’s original commitment to hire from within the community continues. At every level of management former farmworkers work side by side with degreed professionals. Former farmworker staff bring to the table knowledge of the hardships farmworkers face, a strong tie to the local community, and most importantly, a message that says, “There are choices, and if I can do it, so can you and your children.” The degreed professional brings knowledge of child development, education, and the ability to train and develop entry level teacher trainees into competent early childhood professionals.

Countless farmworker women who have been employed with RCMA, have worked their way up to supervisory positions and the attainment of college degrees, when a high school diploma seemed too great a reach. They have become leaders in their community, helping to open doors for others. Testimony to the dedication of these staff is that fact that 43 of RCMA’s 58 programs are NAEYC accredited.

RCMA is grounded in serving the needs of migrant families and rural poor families in Florida. With an annual budget approaching \$41 million, RCMA provides services to over 5,700 children and families statewide. It is Florida’s largest private, non-profit, non-sectarian provider of quality child care and social services. It was founded in 1965 through the efforts of the Mennonite church and later Wendell N. Rollason. Seven years after starting at RCMA as the education coordinator, Barbara married Wendell



and they developed RCMA statewide until his death 18 years later.

“Politicians respected him a great deal. RCMA wouldn’t be what it is without our partnership. We really complemented each other.”

There is such a profound respect for migrant workers as individuals and families for their contributions to the American economy. “We’re really

here for the families, not only the children. Our mission for parents as well as staff is educational success, economic stability, personal safety, and health — and opportunity.”

“Through our parent group, parents gain confidence to speak up at meetings. We help them practice to interact with the schools as advocates for their children. We coach them to let the schools know how smart their children are. We help them gain confidence in introducing themselves to teachers and advisors. We understand that regardless of the kind of quality educational program we deliver, without the parallel education and development of parents we are merely spinning the wheel. The gains our children make will be short term without the support and advocacy of parents throughout their public school years. Parent involvement isn’t a problem here. If other groups want parents, we can get them all the parents they want. If we ask, they’ll come, because we respect them.”

Thousands of families who have traveled through RCMA programs have taken with them improved language skills,



self concept, job training, access to health care and social services, the opportunity to participate as active decision makers in the program that is designed to help them help their children, and the opportunity to advocate throughout the education of their children. “How can you not love that, seeing all that happens? I’m very lucky.”

Responding to the needs of a population of young children who quickly fall behind in school because of language and stability issues and of preteens who drop out of school, RCMA has opened two charter schools. The new school they are constructing will be the first three story building in Immokalee; however, the local bank does have an elevator to their second floor. The first year of the charter school, kindergarten and grade 6 will be offered, the second year grades 1 and 7 will be added. “We want to help children become strong in their primary language and then work with them to develop their second language. We enable older children to strengthen skills they missed as they serve as tutors and mentors to the little ones. But we want to prepare them for the real world and the public schools, so we don’t offer every grade; our goal is to prepare children to deal with reality and seize opportunities. I really believe all the answers depend on education.”

For several minutes she played in the housekeeping area, reluctantly smiling in the direction of the camera now and then. She became bored with the props at hand and seemed surprised that the children were not. “I can’t believe they have played in this area so long.” A teacher replied, “The kids love it; this is their favorite area. We follow the children.” And Barbara’s reply, “Well, what do you know! I learned something.” Everybody talks to Barbara is one of the catch phrases at RCMA; maybe that’s because Barbara listens.