

Charter school steps up aid to Dorian victims

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Riverview Academy of Math and Science steps up with Hurricane Dorian aid

By LINDA CHION KENNEY

The path of two parents aiming to instill a spirit of service in their children intersected this month with the efforts of a Riverview charter school's drive to support relief for Bahamians affected by Hurricane Dorian.



LINDA CHION KENNEY PHOTOS

At the newly opened, tuition-free public charter school, from left, music teacher Gabe Stokes; teacher Marcella Hakun; Maria Jaramillo, physical education teacher and advisor to the USA Barracudas club; art teacher Yasmin Gonzalez; and Principal Marcy Ringdahl. The school is at 9906 Symmes Road, Riverview.

As the Ledford family from Valrico on Sept. 19 loaded its cargo carrier with donations from the newly opened Riverview Academy of Math and Science (RAMS), Principal Marcy Ringdahl gave high praise to the school's USO Barracudas club. Student members spearheaded the school-wide drive after the record-breaking Category 5 storm pummeled the northern Bahamas over the Labor Day weekend, causing catastrophic damage to Grand Bahama and the Abaco islands.

The club is for children whose parents serve in the military. "They took charge and it's just filling me with pride that they not only were able to do this, but that they wanted to do this," Ringdahl said. "They were on this the day after we came back from the hurricane break."

Loading boxes and bags of water, food, Gatorade, coal, diapers, wipes, toothpaste, toothbrushes, blankets and more, Royce Gene Ledford reflected on the night's work, which also involved a collection 5

miles to the southeast at the Love First Christian Center. The church, at 12847 Balm Riverview Road, invites community members to contribute to its ongoing Hurricane Dorian relief drive.

"Multiple box trucks and trailers like this are meeting Saturday in Tampa and conveying their way into the Port of Tampa Bay," Ledford said, at the church Sept. 19. He added in a phone interview Sept. 23 that about 40,000 pounds of goods had been collected for barge-transport to the Bahamas on Sept. 24.



Working with his father, Royce Ledford; his wife, Tonya Ledford; and their children, Emma, 8, and Landon, 10, Ledford said the relief effort is a lesson he expects his children to carry with them for a lifetime.

"Teaching them about being a good person, about helping other people, that's why we're doing it," Ledford said.

"My children are homeschooled," Tonya Ledford added, "and this pairs in nicely with their journaling to make the world a better place."



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Emma Ledford, 8, a homeschool student, holds a box filled with donations for the Hurricane Dorian relief drive. One side notes the contents of the box; the other side, a prayer for relief.

According to Ringdahl, the relief effort coincides well with her school's community-minded mission. The tuition-free public charter school debuted Aug. 12 as a K-7 school, with plans to expand to grade 8, then on through high school. The campus sits on about 19 acres west of U.S. Highway 301, at 9906 Symmes Road. Opened at capacity with 625 students, the school has a 350-student waiting list.

"We're a public school with a private school feel," Ringdahl said, noting the school's emphasis on STEAM projects (science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics). Prior to her job as principal, Ringdahl worked as a classroom teacher and media specialist, with stints at Alafia, Nelson and Summerfield elementary schools. Most recently she was assistant principal at Independence Academy in Dover, one of 19 schools run by Charter School Associates in six Florida counties. Hillsborough County alone has nine CSA schools, including RAMS, Bell Creek Academy (K-8) and Bell Creek Academy High School in Riverview, at 13221 Boyette Road.



Physical education teacher Maria Jaramillo and Royce Gene Ledford pack food into a Hurricane Dorian relief box at the Riverview Academy of Math and Science.

"I have a real passion for the kids and learning and for them to feel accepted and appreciated," said Ringdahl, who twice was a District Teacher of the Year finalist for Hillsborough County public schools. "I'm really big on community, parent involvement and family engagement. Keeping a very positive school culture is very important to me."

Toward that end, the USO Barracudas hurricane relief drive took root. "I wanted them to be involved in the community, to understand it's important to give back to the community just like their parents do through their service," said club advisor and physical education teacher Maria Jaramillo.

Art teacher Yasmin Gonzalez said she knows first-hand the importance of hurricane aid. She lost contact with her parents for weeks after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico head-on as a high-end Category 4 storm Sept. 20, 2017. Her parents live on the Caribbean island, "where two years after the storm there's still great struggle but the spirit is strong, the people are very resilient," Gonzalez said. "It was imperative that help was provided for

Puerto Rico as soon as possible. Every little thing helps."

Jennifer Travieso, vice president of the school's Parent-Teacher-Student Organization (PTSO), said parents were eager to assist the relief drive.

Even if the Bahamas is a foreign country 300 miles to the east, "it doesn't matter, community is community," she said. "If it happened to us, I would hope other people would help us. It doesn't matter where you live or how far away you are, if I can help, I'll help. It's all about building community."

For more on the Love First Christian Center drive, call 813-671-2009. For more on RAMS, visit riverviewacademy.com or call 813-412-6111.



The Ledford family of Valrico, making another Hurricane Dorian relief drive pick-up at Love First Christian Center in Riverview, where Zhivago "Vago" Lightbourne, right, is pastor for outreach, missions and the arts. From left, Royce Gene Ledford and his wife, Tonya Ledford; their children, Emma and Landon; and their grandfather, Royce Ledford.

Comments