

APPLAUSE!

Meet Marcos.

"His teacher and all the therapists work so hard to help him reach his goals. I could not have picked a better school for my son."

- Elena, Marcos's Mom

Lasting Impressions: Marcos's Story

Suddenly and with no warning, life took an unexpected turn for Elena and her husband, Ariel. At only 24 weeks into their pregnancy, they were picking out baby names and planning a baby shower when her water broke. She was overcome with emotions as she was rushed to Tampa General Hospital; asking herself, over and over, "Will my baby be okay? Will he make it through all this?"

Just a few hours later, Elena and Ariel's baby, who they named "Marcos," was born via C-section. He weighed only 2 pounds, 8 ounces and fit into the palm of his dad's hand.

The doctors discovered that Marcos was bleeding on both sides of his brain. He had to be intubated due to his underdeveloped lungs. Elena longed to hold her beautiful newborn, but that would not happen for two weeks because of his premature birth and medical complications.

After four months, which seemed like an eternity to his parents, Marcos was discharged and ready to go home for the first time. Elena and Ariel were grateful that the family could finally be together under one roof, but they were understandably nervous about bringing their medically fragile baby home.

The family did all they could for Marcos and carefully monitored his

development. One year after coming home from the hospital, Marcos and his parents faced another hurdle: Marcos was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

Hearing those words was hard for Elena and Ariel. They had many questions about what this diagnosis meant for their baby's future. But the parents knew that Marcos was a fighter. Elena and Ariel were determined to do everything they could to ensure that Marcos had every opportunity to succeed in life.



When Marcos was two-and-a-half years old, he was referred to the Achievement Academy's Charter School. Although Elena could hardly bear the thought of sending her shy little boy with very special and specific needs to a school with people she did not know. "Who could care for him better than his

mother," she thought. But after visiting the Achievement Academy Charter School campus, Elena felt peace knowing that the staff was well-equipped to give Marcos the tools he needed to thrive. Marcos would learn in a small class environment where he would receive an individualized education plan (IEP). Also, and of critical importance, Marcos would also receive individual physical therapy, speech therapy, and occupational therapy every week.

When Marcos first enrolled in Achievement Academy's Charter School, he was three-and-a-half years old and could only communicate by using one or two words. He is now five and speaks with long phrases and sentences! Marcos serves as the unofficial "class ambassador," welcoming everyone who enters his classroom. The once-shy student charms his teacher with a sweet "I love you" at least once each day.

Cerebral palsy has affected Marcos's muscle tone, causing muscle tightness and rigidity. As a result, Marcos has received Botox injections into his leg muscles to help loosen them and enable more extensive movement. Connie Banfield, Achievement Academy Physical Therapist, addressed Marcos's movement deficits with strengthening exercises. Working

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Just two months ago - Monday, February 24, 2020 - more than 300 guests attended the Sixth Annual "Top Chef of Polk County" event at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland. Who could have imagined at that time that the coronavirus pandemic would subsequently affect so many lives - including those related to the restaurant industry. Many of our participating chefs have decided to

temporarily close, while others have elected to remain open with take-out, delivery or curbside services. We celebrate and acknowledge both the chefs and the community for their involvement in "Top Chef of Polk County." Special thanks to each Chef, Committee member, Community Leader, Sponsor, Volunteer and Attendee for raising much-needed funds for children with special needs.

and the winner is...



Top Chef of Polk County Winner
Chef Brandon Bailey (with Chef Terrie Lobb of Terrie Lobb Catering, Inc.)



Chefs' Choice Winner:
Chef Matthew Oakley (Crave & Copper) with Stacy Williams-Myers, CFRE (Achievement Academy Development Director)



Top Chef of Polk County and Silver Spoon award-winning dish by Chef Brandon Bailey (Terrie Lobb Catering): Elk Bourguignon and Wild Mushroom Demi-Glace with Caramelized Tricolor Baby Carrots



Participating Chefs and Community Leaders



Chefs' Choice award-winning dish by Chef Matthew Oakley (Crave & Copper): Florida Wild Boar Bolognese, Parisian Chive Gnocchi and Citrus Gremolata

Participating Chefs:

Chef Brandon Bailey
(Terrie Lobb Catering, Inc.)

Chef William Ball
(Cob & Pen)

Chef Tina Calhoon
(Frescos Southern Kitchen & Bar)

Chef Gene Gelb
(Publix Aprons Cooking School)

Chef James Lazaros
(La Imperial Bakery Café & Catering)

Chef Matthew Oakley
(Crave and Copper)

Chef Dean Riley
(The Estates at Carpenters)

Chef Steven Rojas (Nutwood)

Chef Patrick Schaefer
(Patio850)

Chef Jose Vicente
(Brasa Latina)

Chef Erik Walter
(1916 Irish Pub Lakeland)

Chef Abigale Weech-Starkey
(The Chop Shop)

Community Leaders from throughout Polk County were paired with one of our participating chefs by way of a blind drawing during an energetic and fun-filled event hosted by Benny Robles, Jr., and Bartow Ford. Each Chef/Community Leader Team raised funds for – and awareness of – Achievement Academy's children, families and programs during the month leading up to the event.

Thank you

Collectively, the Chef/Community Leader Teams raised a total of \$61,665.00! The Team with the highest combined donations from the auction and on-line donations were awarded the "Top Philanthropic Chef" and "Top Philanthropic Community Leader."



Top Philanthropic Winners:
Community Leader Melody Robles (Bartow Ford) and Chef Tina Calhooon (Frescos Southern Kitchen & Bar)

Participating Community Leaders:

Trish Buchanan (Publix Super Markets, Inc.), Brianna Burton (Polk County Builders Association), Taher Hamid (Alltek Services), Matt Hinton (PalletOne, Inc.), Jen Lay (Keller-Williams), Erica Lupercio (CPS Investment Advisors), Kristi Merritt (Mulling Insurance Agency), Mark Miller (Holland & Knight LLP), Tora Miller (Lakeland Chamber of Commerce), Brenda Ramirez (Kaylor Law Group), Melody Robles (Bartow Ford)

Thank you again to everyone who participated in the Sixth Annual "Top Chef of Polk County" event. We hope that through this pandemic we will all come out on the other side stronger, as we continue helping each other along the way. Please continue to support our amazing Top Chefs, as they were so generous in supporting the mission of the Achievement Academy.



Silver Spoon Winner:

Chef Brandon Bailey (Terrie Lobb Catering) with "Secret Chefs" Vanessa N. Marquis and Rene J. Marquis with Top Chef Committee Member Chef Adam Walkover.

Participating chefs sampled each other's dishes before the event and voted for their favorite. The "Silver Spoon" Award was added this year and was a surprise to the chefs. Three professional chefs from outside of Polk County were invited to secretly sample each of the chefs' signature dish and then score each one to determine a winner. The three "Secret Chefs" were Chef Rene J. Marquis, CEC, CCE, CCA, AAC, ACE; Chef Vanessa N. Marquis, CEC; and Chef Philip O'Brien.

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Stacy Williams-Myers, CFRE,
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with Marcos's Teacher, Connie also positioned Marcos in the classroom to keep his muscles stretched. This enabled Marcos to stand supported with good alignment while also assisting with his gait training.

Unfortunately, over time the injections began to lose their effectiveness and a more aggressive solution was needed. Last summer, Marcos underwent a five-hour surgical procedure on his lower spinal cord called "selective dorsal rhizotomy" – another agonizing wait for his parents. But Elena and Ariel were grateful that the surgery was a success! Intense physical therapy at Achievement Academy and an outpatient facility followed, with encouraging results.

Less than a year after his surgery, Marcos can pull himself up to stand and walk on the playground and in his classroom with help from "gait training" equipment. He can also walk with assistance from an adult,

which increases his opportunities to be included with his peers in classroom activities. Marcos can now enjoy the playground slide at recess with assistance from his teacher and to ride an adapted tricycle.



He has also mastered fine motor skills, such as working on puzzles and threading string, and is currently learning to write his name!

"I am forever grateful for the Achievement Academy's staff," Elena explained. "Marcos has learned and accomplished so much, from colors and shapes to numbers and letters. Therapy also plays a big role in his life due to his cerebral palsy. His teacher and all the therapists work so hard to help him reach his goals. I could not have picked a better school for my son."

Today, like other children affected by state-wide school closures due to the current coronavirus pandemic, Marcos is continuing his learning safely at home with developmentally appropriate activities provided by his teacher and therapists. Additionally, Marcos's teacher and therapists are in regular contact with Elena, providing additional activities to continue his forward progress.