

APPLAUSE!

Half the Heart. Twice the Fight

"Because of the support and care provided by Achievement Academy, my son's development has blossomed into what it is today."
 - Keara, James' mother

1 out of every 100 infants is born with some form of congenital heart disease. - Center for Disease Control

James was born at 39 weeks in the cardiac operating room at Tampa's St. Joseph's Hospital. He was diagnosed in utero with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome, a congenital birth defect where the left side of his heart didn't fully develop and his veins were underdeveloped, affecting normal blood flow through the heart. There is no cure, only monitoring, procedures, and surgeries - of which James has had many.



James' first procedure took place immediately after birth: a balloon catheterization to help blood flow to his lungs and body. One week later, he had the first of a three-part open-heart procedure to create a new functional systemic circuit that would allow the right

ventricle and aorta to pump blood throughout the body. James experienced complications following his surgery, requiring an additional corrective procedure on his aortic arch. This was his second open-heart surgery in two weeks.

Two and a half months after his birth, James was able to come home with his family. He returned to the hospital two months later for the second of the three-part procedure to continue working to make his two-chamber heart operate as a four-chamber heart. In less than six months, James underwent three open-heart surgeries, plus countless tests and monitoring.

That's the frightening beginning of James' triumphant story. At age three, James enrolled in our ESE Charter Pre-Kindergarten and began receiving one-on-one speech, occupational, and physical therapies as a part of his regular school day. When James started therapy, he used single words, jargon, and nonsense words, making communication with others a challenge. Through hard work with his speech therapist, he is now able to ask and answer questions, maintain simple conversations,

and understand verbal directions. He has excelled in occupational therapy (OT) and achieved developmentally appropriate levels with his fine and visual motor skills, testing out of his OT services in June 2021. In physical therapy, he is overcoming his struggles with balance and can now walk the four-inch balance beam without falling.

Today, James is four and a half years old and enjoys singing and dancing - skills that he's refined through his efforts with his therapy team and staff. His younger brother, Conner, has since joined him at Achievement Academy's Lakeland campus.

We are honored to have played a part in James' story, and the stories of so many other children who benefit from our programs!





and the winner is...

Congratulations to Chef Lucy Cortes-Castaneda with Red Door Lakeland, who secured this year's title of Top Chef of Polk County with her Alice in Wonderland inspired menu! Chef Nicolas Mut, Terrace Grille, was the first recipient of the newly created Most Creative Chef award for his use of garlic, which was selected as the mystery "challenge" ingredient. The Judging panel all agreed that this year's competition was the toughest to judge yet, given the extraordinary menus put forth by our competing Chefs.

Similarly, the Community Leaders came out strong as they competed to see who would win the title of Top Philanthropic Team. With our mission in mind, the nine Community Leaders were extraordinarily busy in the six weeks leading up to the main dinner as they carried out various activities and fundraisers in pursuit of the title. From happy hours to food & beverage specials, private parties, and even the first-ever Arcade Olympics: our teams got creative as they raised funds for Achievement Academy and awareness of our mission. For the second year in a row, Pat Spinosa, AgAmerica Lending, won the honor of Top Philanthropic Team with Chef Cem Demirhan, Nineteen61.

The real winners are the children who benefit from our programs. We are so grateful for the community's support of our mission and our work to help empower children to achieve their maximum potential.

Thanks to the Chefs, community leaders, sponsors, and attendees, this year's Top Chef of Polk County was our most successful event yet, raising more than \$240,000 that will benefit the children we serve. We reached our Fund-A-Need goal to purchase a new playground structure for the Bartow charter school campus, and we look forward to sharing pictures when it's installed this Fall!



Top Chef of Polk County Winner

Chef Lucy Cortes-Castaneda with Richard DeAngelis, Red Door Lakeland

Most Creative Chef

Chef Nicolas Mut, The Terrace Grille, receives award from President/CEO Kristin Aiken



Top Philanthropic Team

Community Leader Patrick Spinosa, AgAmerica Lending, and Chef Cem Demirhan, Nineteen61

Red Door Lakeland's Winning Dish

Homemade ricotta dumplings, braised rabbit, rutabaga puree, seared rabbit saddle, and elephant garlic chips.



This event would not be possible without the commitment of our Chefs, our Community Leaders, and our Sponsors. We are thankful for your partnership as we provide brighter futures to children with special beginnings!

Participating Chefs:

Chef Brandon Bailey, Lakeland BBQ Company

Chef Tina Calhoon, Frescos Southern Kitchen & Bar

Chef Lucy Cortes-Castaneda, Red Door Lakeland

Chef Cem Demirhan, Nineteen71

Chef Jason Ellis, Cob & Pen

Chef Gene Gelb, Publix Aprons Cooking School

Chef Nicolas Mut, The Terrace Grille

Chef Abigale Weech-Starkey, The Chop Shop

Chef Chris Worley & Chef Terrie Lobb, Terrie Lobb Catering, Inc.

Participating Community Leaders:

Caitlyn Salters, Exxact Transport

Danielle Harris & Dawn Lyons, Bank of Central Florida

Par Sahota, Boring Business Sytems

Pat Spinosa & Mac Miller, AgAmerica Lending

Kyle Kilburn, Gate Arty & the Group - Keller Williams Realty

Emily Topper, Publix Super Markets, Inc.

Barbara McMickle, The Terrace Hotel Lakeland, Tapestry Collection by Hilton

Alexandra Lee, Citizens Bank & Trust

Adam Riley, Ewing, Blackwelder & Duce Insurance

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Thank you



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Cindi Parker-Pearson, *Principal*



United Way
of Central Florida

Teacher & Support Person of the Year!

As the year came to a close, we were pleased to pause and take time to recognize two of our outstanding employees. The Teacher of the Year and Support Person of the Year are determined by popular vote from the entire staff, making it a very meaningful award.

Our Teacher of the Year is Miss Gina Mills, who teaches at the Lakeland Campus. Gina joined Achievement Academy in 2018 and is an incredibly dedicated educator. She goes above and beyond for the children in her classroom. Every decision she makes is centered upon one guiding principle: what is the best option for this individual child. She is compassionate, kind, and optimistic, setting the standard for her peers and



Teacher of the Year Gina Mills with Principal Cindi Parker-Pearson



colleagues to emulate.

The Support Person of the Year is Mr. Steve Holland, who is also based at the Lakeland campus. Joining the Achievement Academy in 2018, Steve's contributions to our organization have been invaluable. There has not been a task too big or too small for Steve to tackle: from security to maintenance, he is quick to share his many talents. His can-do attitude and willingness to take on any challenge has been greatly appreciated. Steve retired at the end of the school year, and his presence on campus will be missed.

Congratulations to both Gina and Steve on this well-deserved recognition. We are fortunate to have them on our team!

Support Person of the Year Steve Holland with Principal Cindi Parker-Pearson