

# APPLAUSE!

## Confidence for Colt!

When Lauren gave birth to her son Colt six weeks early, she was suddenly thrust into the unknown. As a first-time mom, everything was new—and nothing had gone as planned. Colt arrived on November 14, weighing just 4 pounds, 12 ounces. He spent two weeks in the NICU battling jaundice and requiring oxygen. It was a frightening and uncertain time.

“You don’t know how those early days are going to affect your baby,” Lauren shared. “The doctors and nurses were amazing, but there was still so much I didn’t know.”



That changed when Lauren learned about Achievement Academy’s Birth to Three program during her stay at Lakeland Regional Health. Because Colt was born premature, he was recommended for

early intervention services Lauren hadn’t even known existed.

Shortly after bringing Colt home, Lauren met Ms. Tina, an Early Intervention and Infant Toddler Development Specialist. Tina has worked with the family ever since, visiting monthly to provide coaching, support, and developmental activities tailored to Colt’s needs.

“Colt absolutely loves Ms. Tina,” Lauren said. “She’s passionate and knowledgeable. She meets him where he is and helps him grow through play. And I’ve learned so much along the way.” From the time Colt was three months old to now, at two and a half, Tina has helped both Colt and Lauren navigate each developmental stage.

When Colt’s doctor expressed concern about possible speech delays, Tina stepped in with expert strategies to support his language development.

Today, Colt is right on track for his adjusted age and thriving. He is counting to 20, recognizing shapes and colors, and getting ready for preschool. He loves books (his mom has been reading to him since the NICU), and absolutely loves to swim!

With Tina’s guidance, Lauren gained confidence as a parent, learning to manage her expectations and embrace Colt’s individual pace. “I’ve learned patience,” she reflected. “This program is not just about helping your child, it’s about growing as a parent, too.” Lauren says she highly recommends the Birth to Three program, not just for children, but for parents as well. “It’s so helpful to have someone to talk to who is an expert rather than relying on Google. The support has made all the difference.”

The Birth to Three program is made possible by a generous allocation from United Way of Central Florida, and stories like Colt’s are a testament to the power of early intervention, strong partnerships, and donor support. Together, we’re giving children the best possible start while giving parents the tools and confidence to guide them along the way!



## Top Chef of Polk County 2025: Flavors of Florida!

The flavors of Florida shone bright at this year's Top Chef of Polk County 2025, presented by Publix Super Markets Charities, an unforgettable evening benefiting Achievement Academy. Despite a rainy night, the excitement and energy never wavered as a record sold-out crowd gathered to enjoy outstanding cuisine, thrilling entertainment, and an inspiring mission-driven celebration.

The evening was elevated by an incredible performance from Nashville artist Willie Shaw, who captivated the audience with his soulful voice and high-energy set. Guests also engaged in a fierce Live Auction, contributing to what became a record-breaking fundraising night in support of children with special needs and their families.

A highlight of the night was the culinary competition, where Chef Jon Burns of Tantrums Flightside Cafe and Catering dominated, sweeping all three Chef Awards and earning well-deserved recognition for his outstanding creations. Meanwhile, Adam Hamid of Adrenaline Body Works demonstrated unparalleled dedication to the cause, securing the esteemed Top Philanthropic Award for his fundraising efforts.

Thank you for making Top Chef of Polk County 2025 our most successful yet - we can't wait to see you at next year's event!

This year's competitions featured ten talented Chefs showcasing their culinary expertise and eleven dedicated Community Leaders working tirelessly to raise funds for Achievement Academy's critical programs. Their collective efforts ensured a brighter future for the children and families we serve.

One of the most moving moments of the evening came when Alison and Paul Moore took the stage to share a compelling message about their daughter, Rosie, and the incredible ways she is thriving through the Achievement Academy. Their heartfelt story was a powerful reminder of why the community's support is so vital in providing opportunities for children with special needs.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who participated, attended, and supported this extraordinary evening. Looking to bring some of this culinary magic to your next event? Visit [AchievementAcademy.com/Chefs](https://AchievementAcademy.com/Chefs) to view the full lineup of chefs, complete with contact information, and book your favorite for an unforgettable dining experience.





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Recognizing Excellence!

Achievement Academy is proud to recognize Ms. Alyss Ruster at our Winter Haven campus as Teacher of the Year, and Ms. Terri Pitts at our Lakeland campus as Support Person of the Year! This annual award is selected by their peers, making it that much more meaningful.

This year's recognition is extra special: twelve years ago, Ms. Alyss and Ms. Terri worked side by side in the same classroom. Now, they are both being honored for their unwavering commitment to the children and families we serve.

"Ms. Alyss and Ms. Terri are exemplary educators

and professionals," said Principal Cindi Parker-Pearson. "They consistently display love, care, and excellence in everything they do. We are so grateful to have them on our team, and this recognition is well deserved."

Congratulations, Ms. Alyss and Ms. Terri! Your passion and dedication creates a lasting impact on our students and their futures. We are proud of you both!





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## Community Partners Transform Lives

Every child deserves the opportunity to thrive, and we are making that goal a reality every day. Our Foundation partners enable us to provide children with quality education and care, offer family support and guidance, and create stronger beginnings for our community's youngest members.

### With deepest gratitude to our foundation partners:

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Thank you for helping us create brighter futures, one child at a time!