

## Tiny Beginnings, Tremendous Strength: How Connection Changed Everything

New parents often make connections in a playgroup, but Jadacy and Ronda met while scrubbing in to enter the NICU at Lakeland Regional Health, where babies Maxwell and Deanna were born exactly one week apart, both at just 24 weeks gestation. With strict COVID hospital restrictions in place, visiting was limited to just parents, creating isolation in what was already a frightening experience.



Both moms were carrying the weight of fear and the unknown and quickly bonded through their experience. Together, they learned to take life one day at a time, exchanging phone numbers to talk frequently and pray

together often. Through the highs and lows of Maxwell and Deanna's nearly four-month NICU journey, their bond became a steady source of strength.

When they finally brought their babies home, both families faced new challenges - but they did not face them alone. The hospital discharge team had referred them to Achievement Academy's Birth to Three program, where their journeys continued in ways they never could have imagined. Their Early Interventionists provided love, care, and guidance in each child's development, making sure Jadacy and Ronda felt supported every step of the way. As their children grew, both Ms. Becky and Ms. Tina gently encouraged the families to consider enrolling their children in our ESE Pre-Kindergarten. The trust that had been established with their Interventionists was a key factor for both families being ready to take a leap of faith and allow someone outside of family to care for their children.

At Achievement Academy, both families discovered far more than a school. They found a community, and Maxwell and Deanna continued to thrive. Maxwell has flourished in Miss Nicole's classroom, growing in confidence and independence each day. Deanna's journey has been marked by extraordinary determination. Once facing severe feeding challenges that required intensive support, she has made remarkable progress and now eats independently, an achievement that once felt out of reach.

A cornerstone of their support system is Ms. Mary, the Resource Parent, whose impact reaches far beyond the campus. For both Jadacy and Ronda, Mary's presence and guidance have been invaluable. By sharing her own experiences and offering support without judgment, she provides encouragement not only in parenting, but in life. Monthly parent meetings further strengthen this network, reminding families they are never alone in their journey.

The impact of Achievement Academy extends into every part of family life. With Maxwell supported during the school day, Jadacy has been able to pursue her own goals, attending culinary school and building a business. For Ronda, the trust she developed with staff made it possible to confidently place Deanna in a setting where her needs would be met with both skill and compassion.

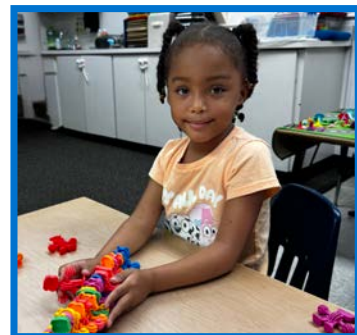
Maxwell and Deanna are not defined by the circumstances of their birth, but by the progress they continue to achieve. At the same time, Jadacy and Ronda are confident knowing their children are in expert, compassionate hands. This ripple effect strengthens not only each child, but entire families, creating brighter futures that extend far beyond the classroom. *(continued on pg 2)*

## Tiny Beginnings (continued)

Today, Jadacy and Ronda remain as close as ever: two mothers brought together by circumstance, but bonded for a lifetime through shared experience, faith, and unwavering support. Their children's stories are still unfolding, filled with milestones both big and small. And as Maxwell and Deanna prepare to take their next steps into Kindergarten, their journeys stand as a powerful reminder of what is possible when early intervention, family support, and genuine connection come together.



From Ms. Tina's early guidance and Ms. Becky's quiet encouragement in Birth to Three to the warm welcome from Ms. Valerie at the front desk, to Ms. Susan, Ms. Wendy, Ms. Missy, Ms. Terri, Ms. Tammy, Ms. Sabrina, and Ms. Jasmine in the classroom, Achievement Academy is a nurturing environment where children feel safe, seen, and celebrated.



At Achievement Academy, these are the stories that define our mission, where children are given every opportunity to grow, families are supported every step of the way, and even in the most challenging beginnings, something beautiful can take root.

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# Top Chef of Polk County 2026 - Spring Into Flavor!

The 12th Annual Top Chef of Polk County presented by Publix Super Markets Charities was a delicious success, bringing the community together for an evening of culinary creativity and philanthropy in support of our mission!

Guests enjoyed signature dishes from talented local chefs, live music from Willie Shaw, and exciting auction opportunities, all while supporting a mission that helps the children we serve achieve their maximum potential. Congratulations to Chef Dustin Olson of Fat Maggie's for claiming THE Top Chef of Polk County 2026 title with his dish of Seared Lamb with spring herbs, paired with a Habanero Blueberry French 75. Chef Blake Jones of Cob & Pen earned the Chefs' Choice, a huge honor voted on by his fellow competitors, with his Seafood Toast on toasted sourdough paired with a white sangria spritz. And Chef Ken James of Plates On Deck was the crowd favorite winner, taking home the Community Choice award with his Spring & Soul Catfish Taco paired with a honey bourbon breeze drink.

This was definitely a fierce but friendly competition as the Community Leaders battled for the top honor, raising nearly \$100,000 through their competition alone. Congratulations to Drew Fulmer of Southern Homes for clinching the title of Top Philanthropic Leader!

We are deeply grateful to everyone who made this year's event possible and helped create such a meaningful impact for children and families in our community. Make your plans to join us for the 13th Annual Top Chef of Polk County on Monday, February 22, 2027 for another unforgettable evening of food, fun, and impact!

# Highlights from Top Chef of Polk County 2026!





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We are grateful to our Community Partners for investing in our mission and the children we serve!

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