

Marco YMCA says 'why not' to helping neighbors

By Ashley Lupo
Special to the Eagle

During the summer, most kids attend camps, visit museums and take family trips. However, for children of South and East Naples families whose incomes scatter along the poverty line, summer is a rough time. Summer vacation often translates into empty stomachs, reading-skills loss and jittery parents concerned about kids getting into trouble.

An affluent island neighbor 12 or so miles from some of the poorest areas in East and South Naples, Greater Marco Family Y saw the need and stepped out of its geographic zone. First, the Y raised funds and then set up summer school and after-school programs in high-need elementary schools, including occasional field trips to the Y and beyond. The programs have been growing and changing ever since.

The results have been so positive that the Marco Y recently received the 2012 Florida Commissioner of Education's Business Recognition Award. This year's award recognizes 79 Florida businesses – only two in Collier County – that have shown an outstanding commitment to improving education by partnering with schools in their communities. Acknowledging the state commissioner's award, Dr. Kamela Patton, superintendent of Collier County Public Schools, said, "I view such support as one of this community's greatest strengths."

The statewide award commended the Y for making a significant difference to almost 600 students. The Y got high marks for literacy and math components aligned with Collier County

Public Schools' curriculum and helping children get the extra support they need to be successful in school. Marco's YMCA Reads! program was another factor in receiving the award. This public/private partnership between state government and Florida's YMCAs is an after-school program for low-income struggling readers. The program helps K-3 students become better readers and prevent later school failure by engaging community volunteers to work with students.

Wine festival proceeds at work

The funding for Marco Y's programs for underprivileged and at-risk children comes chiefly from Naples Children & Education Foundation, creators of the Naples Winter Wine Festival. Since 2007, NCEF's Marco Y grants have totaled nearly \$1.1 million.

"Our foundation's focus is on the whole child – body, mind and spirit – and the Y shares that philosophy," said Karen Scott, NCEF grant chair. "We pushed for academics to be part of the summer curriculum as a condition of our grants, and the Y moved the needle from dodge ball and swimming to educationally enriched summer classes and experiences."

According to Cindy Love, Greater Marco Family YMCA CEO, the Y's outreach to neighboring families in need is about "making sure kids are okay." She added, "For some families, it is not about choosing to send their children to after-school programs, but choosing to put food on the table." To that end, Marco Y partners with organizations to distrib-



Cindy Love, center, with the Greater Marco Island Family YMCA, accepts a 2012 Florida Commissioner of Education's Business Recognition Award. SUBMITTED

ute food and clothes to children in East and South Naples, and wherever else is needed. When a for-profit provider of after-school care for Parkside and Manatee Schools pulled support this summer, the Y raised \$20,000 and secured an NCEF grant for the rest. As a result, 550 children are enrolled this summer.

Mentors spell success for YMCA Reads!

The quality of mentors in the Marco YMCA Reads! program is among the highest in the state, according to Love, and a factor in receiving the award. "We have 37 mentors, 13 of whom have graduate degrees. A large majority of mentors live on Marco Island during the winter and are retired professionals such as teachers, librarians or reading specialists. This is a tremendous talent pool of dedicated people, and they are making a

real difference for these kids," said Love. Florida schools' data concurs that YMCA READS! has achieved great success in schools with high-poverty rates.

Manzie Lawfer has seen the results first hand: "The extra time spent helping my daughter Sophie has allowed her to catch up to her classmates' reading skills."

From a mentor's perspective, the benefits cut both ways. "I call it 'close up reading,' said mentor Kathy Slater. "It is so rewarding: this ability to work one-on-one and give children the reading and writing interaction they cannot get anywhere else, not even from school reading specialists who usually work with groups of four children at a time."

Ashley Lupo is a member of the Greater Marco Family YMCA board. For more information about Marco Y programs, how to donate and volunteer, contact the Y at (239) 394-3144.