

# Greater Marco Family YMCA lends helping hand

## SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

Summer can be a tough time for children whose families are scraping by financially. Their stomachs are often empty, their reading skills degrade and too much idle time can spell trouble.

Seeing the need, the Greater Marco Family YMCA 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, with occasional field trips to the Y and beyond. The programs have been growing and changing kids' lives ever since.

The results have been so positive that the Marco Y won the 2012 Florida Commissioner of Education's Business Recognition Award. This year's award honors 79 Florida businesses — only two in Collier County — for showing an outstanding commitment to improving education by partnering with schools in their communities.



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**Stephanie Pepper, Leslie Drake and Cindy Love of the Greater Marco Family YMCA with Collier County Commissioner Donna Fiala and YMCA board member Skip Merriam.**

The Marco Y received high marks for literacy and math components aligned with the Collier County Public Schools curriculum and helping hundreds of children get the extra support needed 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 struggling readers from low-income families. The program helps K-3 students become better readers and prevents later school failure by engaging community volunteers to work with students.

### Wine festival proceeds at work

The funding for the Marco Y's programs for underprivileged and at-risk children comes chiefly from the 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," says 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 edu-



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**Counselor Nixon Joseph entertains 300 children during the Greater Marco Family YMCA summer camp.**

cationally enriched summer classes and experiences."

According to Cindy Love, Greater Marco Family YMCA CEO, the outreach to neighboring families in need is about "making sure kids are okay." She adds, "For some families, it's 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 distribute 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. ■