



MARIA JIMENEZ-LARA

**CEO, NAPLES CHILDREN
& EDUCATION FOUNDATION**

When it comes to helping kids facing the most challenging circumstances, Maria Jimenez-Lara has always stepped forward with grace and determination. For her first job, she worked with children in gangs on the streets of Miami. She also helped develop a handful of charter schools in at-risk communities of South Florida, which she calls her proudest professional achievement.

"The schools are all high-performing and still in existence," she says, "and their students are thriving academically and personally." Locally, Jimenez-Lara spent nearly 15 years helping at-risk children in Immokalee before ultimately joining the Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF) and moving up the ranks to become chief executive in 2015.

The nonprofit helps underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County through its largest fundraising vehicle, the Naples Winter Wine Festival, held in January. The annual festival has raised more than \$161 million since its inception in 2001.

"After more than 20 years of working with high-risk children, I know firsthand that health and education are the constants that impact and can change a child's life," she says, noting her focus is on continuing to develop ways to bring more children into early-learning and literacy programs, as well as make sure they have access to health care, including mental health. "The Collier community affords so many opportunities for young people to succeed." —T.E.