



The School District of Osceola County, FL
Terry Andrews, Superintendent

Press Release (English and Spanish)

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Horizon Middle's Media Specialist Selected As 2011 Amanda Award Winner

Michelle Jarrett, Library Media Specialist at Horizon Middle School in Osceola County, has been selected as the 2011 Amanda Award Winner by the Florida Association for Media in Education (FAME). This award recognizes high school and middle school media specialists for developing programs that enhance and support the self-esteem and well being of young adults by creating exemplary environments where students are made to feel that they fit in and that they are part of their school.

Ms. Jarrett's award-winning program called The Red Umbrella Project was designed to "encourage students of all backgrounds to share their family story and follow their dreams" through literature. This program was collaboratively designed by Ms. Jarrett, the school's literacy coach Beth Davis, ESOL teachers, and reading teachers of all levels. Students in English For Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and regular reading classes read The Red Umbrella by Christina Diaz-Gonzalez as a novel study. The Red Umbrella tells the story of Operation Pedro Pan. During a two-year period from 1960-1962, over 14,000 children were sent to the United States without their parents in order to escape Castro's communist regime. Ms. Gonzalez's parents and mother-in-law were Pedro Pan children. This story was selected as one that is significant to the culture of the school, yet has rarely been heard of and is not found in the history books.

Teachers worked collaboratively to create a variety of lessons throughout the novel study. As a culminating event, author Christina Diaz-Gonzalez visited the school on May 4, 2011, to share the story of how she wrote the book, and more importantly, why she wrote the book. Participating students were treated to the author presentation and a luncheon in the school's courtyard, featuring salsa dancing led by a certified dance instructor and Cuban desserts. In addition to the author visit, ESOL students in all grades were invited to a presentation by Suzy Rodriguez, a Pedro Pan child. Ms. Rodriguez shared her story of coming to the United States from Cuba in 1961 at the age of ten with her nine-year-old twin brothers. Placed in a camp in South Florida, she was eventually sent to live in an orphanage in Indiana. After several years, she was reunited with her parents and now lives in Florida.

"Over 70% of the students at our school are of Hispanic background, with approximately 40% being born in a country other than the United States," said Ms. Jarrett. "These students have often experienced the same feelings as the characters in the novel: isolation, loneliness, fear, and ultimately, hope. Through reading The Red Umbrella, students at this school have connected with literature in ways unimagined. Our students have had their backgrounds and family stories reaffirmed as important and worthy through this project."

In addition to the daytime events at the school, a community event was also held in the evening as part of the project. Attended by nearly 100 students, parents, community members, and members of Operation Pedro Pan, everyone was amazed at the stories of perseverance, courage, and love. Guests were treated to a student performance of Latino music, a presentation by Bookends, the school's drama troupe that wrote their own Reader's Theatre performance of The Red Umbrella, and author Christina Diaz-Gonzalez. The highlight of the evening was the presentations by two Operation Pedro Pan children: Dr. Mercedes Rodriguez and Suzy Rodriguez. Both shared their stories of coming to the United States as children of Operation Pedro Pan and what has made them successful in America.

"This event had great impact on the students of Horizon Middle," said School Board Chairman Cindy Hartig. "Students are excited about reading, literature, and telling their family stories. They have been encouraged by the stories of our guests, realizing that America truly is a place where unimaginable dreams can come true."

As a recipient of this award, Ms. Jarrett will receive \$600 and a trophy in recognition of her outstanding program.