The Best of All Worlds

A Conference has the distinction of offering constituents a wide variety of options, ranging from the nearly 650-student Forest Lake Education Center (L) (North American Division’s largest schools) to Okeechobee’s student population of 7 in a one-room school (R). And the Cheshire family has enjoyed both extremes.

“Children are so blessed,” says Denise Cheshire, mother of sixth-grade Laney and eighth-grade Deric, who transferred from Forest Lake Education Center (C) to Okeechobee Adventist Christian School last year. “Their experience has just been so rich.”

The family moved from their home in the Orlando area to a new residence 25 miles north of Okeechobee last year, Denise began home-schooling her children that there was an Adventist school within driving distance. Visiting different churches in the area, the Cheshires eventually discovered Okeechobee and getting to know the teacher and found that John Sufficool is a fine and caring person,” Denise says. “As we came to church each week, we became more intrigued with the idea of putting our children in the school.”
The family talked, Laney and Deric became very excited. Before the school year ended, they had transitioned from FLEC to home-schooling (with Deric’s help) to their new classroom of 7 students in grades 4 to 8. “It was not a hard transition at all,” Denise reports. “The Adventist curriculum is basically the same thing, the whole thing has been a win-win.”

The Cheshires speak highly of all the Adventist teachers they have encountered in Florida Conference. “We have the utmost confidence in John Sufficool,” says Denise. “He is dedicated, sincere, and 100% there for the students with his whole being. Our kids love being there…being mixed in with different age groups and learning to get along with everybody on a daily basis. It’s just so rich.”

When asked about their experience at a large school, Denise is equally as positive. “They had a wonderful experience at FLEC,” she says. “The teachers are highly qualified and whenever anything comes up, they are right on top of it. It’s clear they are there for the benefit of the children.”

But the Cheshires do anything differently? Definitely not. “Laney and Deric are prepared for everything,” Denise reports. “They can go into a large college classroom and deal with a wide range of people of all ages and learning styles in a small setting. They’ve had the best of all worlds.”

Florida Conference Welcomes New Associate Superintendent

As the school year is up and running, there is another set of wheels rolling down Florida roads. Officially hired on June 1 to lead our 170 early childhood teachers, Associate Superintendent Lori Thieme brings passion and vision to the position. With experience as a classroom teacher, early childhood program director, and voluntary pre-kindergarten director, Lori knows the ins and outs of the early childhood system.

“We are so fortunate to have Lori as part of our team,” says Arne Nielsen, Vice President for Integrated Youth Ministries. “Her background is a perfect match for the challenge of casting a vision that will impact more than 800 young lives.”

Having worked with young children since 1997, Lori embraces her position with zest and vigor. “I love serving in this field,” she says. “I found young children to be so open and hungry for new learning. I have also found they are the most easily impacted by the message of the gospel and it is not uncommon for these little ones to share their faith with their family members. In essence, they are perfect little missionaries.”

All to be Associate Superintendent of Education for Florida Conference took Lori totally by surprise. “I was not expecting this,” she says. “I feel very honored and excited about the opportunity to bring professionalism and cohesiveness to the 25 Florida early childhood programs we serve.”

Lori’s vision does not stop with Florida. “Because I’ve served on PreK curriculum development committees for the past fifteen years, I have a view of the larger picture and how it fits into the SDA framework,” she says. “It is my dream to expand what I do here to benefit the Adventist early childhood world at large.”

When she is not traveling down the I-4 corridor to consult with teachers and directors, Lori finds herself involved in her “hobby” of making a difference in her world through working with people,” she says, joyfully talking about the Bible study for young adults she leads at her home each Friday evening. “I feel very passionate about ministry and living life on a mission. I believe that everyone is called to be a disciple, wherever they are.” As a member of a mission church sponsored by Florida Conference, Lori reaches out to the less fortunate in the Altamonte Springs area, providing food, childhood programs, and hope to members of the community.
Florida Conference Enrollment Soars

Total enrollment in Florida Conference has risen for the third year in a row, reports Arne Nielsen, Vice President for Advancement Youth Ministries.

Enrollment in grades K-12, coming out at more than 3,100 students, represents the largest number of students enrolled in Adventist schools throughout the state since the economy took a downturn in 2005.

“I want to praise God for this increase in enrollment. This is just a reminder that God is good,” notes Nielsen. Frank Runnels, Superintendent of Education, and Nielsen believe that there are several reasons for the increase, all of which they attribute to the cohesive team effort in the Florida Conference.

“We are thankful for the leadership and support of the officers in Florida Conference,” Nielsen and Runnels note. “They believe very strongly in Adventist education and have provided encouragement, support, and resources.”

Nielsen and Runnels go on to cite the positive contributions of the pastors of our church schools, whom they call the gatekeepers of our institutions, and the contributions of Florida Conference teachers and school administrators, whom they rank among “the finest in the nation.”

Nielsen and Runnels also point out that the widely publicized results of the Cognitive Genesis Research have provided parents with a renewed trust in the quality provided in Seventh-day Adventist education across the board. “It is now clear that a one-teacher school and a twenty-teacher school both provide quality of academics and spiritual growth,” they state. “The Cognitive Genesis Research has proven that our system is based on effective results in all types of Seventh-day Adventist schools.”

Another factor that Runnels and Nielsen cite as contributing to the significant enrollment increase is the corporate tax dollars scholarship known as Step Up nutrients which allows more of our parents to take advantage of Adventist education.

With the growth in our K-12 system, Florida Conference is proud to note the surging interest in our early childhood program. Enrollment numbers for our early childhood centers will be reported later in the month, but Runnels reports that it is safe to say that a healthy increase will be noted there as well.

Most important part of the enrollment increase in all of our schools is that more children will now be able to hear daily about Jesus, their friend and Savior, runnels.

Learn more about education in the Florida Conference, visit our website at www.floridaconference.com/education.

Print this article
Florida Conference Teachers Embrace Training

Well-known for our diverse and effective professional development opportunities, Florida Conference has been in full swing this summer and fall. More than 100 teachers from across the state, along with a number of people from other conferences, participated in our trainings on the campus of Forest Lake Education Center this summer. Principals and teachers from all disciplines benefitted from our TRENDs class, where they planned units for all learning styles; Responsive Classroom; Developmental Designs intensive training, with their positive social learning and logical consequences approach; We Are Workshop, which offered both teachers and students the opportunity to learn together; and Crucial Conversations designed to open up dialogue under the toughest of circumstances.

Our summer trainings had barely come to an end when it was time to pack up and head for the North American Division Teacher’s Convention in Nashville. Florida Conference was represented by 328 attendees, who enjoyed everything from the breakout sessions to the hundreds of booths in the exhibit hall. “It was a lot of work to get everything organized for the event, but the appreciation expressed by the teachers made it well worth it,” says Cheryl Gold, Administrative Assistant, who spent many late nights in the office, working beside Administrative Assistants Alejandra Torres and Betty Jean McGowan. “We are here for our teachers and it is always gratifying to know they are benefitting from what we do.”

The beginning of the school year has not slowed down professional development in Florida Conference. September has found our principals being trained in policy and procedures, a group of teachers taking advantage of CrISS (Creating Independence through Student-Owned Strategies), Special Needs Coordinating, where teachers and principals learn differentiated instruction strategies to help all students learn, and the start-up of our school-wide study groups. “One of our newly hired teachers was overheard saying at the CrISS training. “That’s one of the reasons I wanted to come to Florida. You just keep learning.”

Student Endorsements Published on Book Jacket

Middle-school students across the conference are immersed in the book Finally Free: The James Finley story, authored by Associate Superintendent Sandra Doran. Originally published in 1982 as Nobody’s Boy, Doran recently re-published the book, adding pictures and an Afterword to coincide with the North American Division Teacher’s Convention.

“The most enjoyable part of the whole thing was working with the students who ‘test drove’ the book before publication,” says Doran. “In Coldren’s fifth-grade class at Orlando Junior Academy ‘piloted’ the new edition, engaging in an integrated unit involving Social Studies (World War II), Language Arts (writing and reading comprehension), Bible (tithing, state of the dead, the Sabbath), and art. Two second-grade students from OJA wrote the winning entries that appear as endorsements on the back of the book. “Nobody who has ever had trouble of any sort should read this book,” writes Gabriella Perez. “It will change the way you act and see the world. On a scale of one to ten, I give Finally Free an eleven.’

The winning writer Niara Joseph created this crisp statement, “James Finley had every reason to give up and stop trying, but he made the most of his life. He shows that despite what you go through, you have to do your best and give it all you have.”

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