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BRIAN TIETZ/COURTESY PHOTOS

Southwest Florida's upcoming workforce captured in Pathways' inspiring career photo project

BY CARLIE ADMIRE

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A COMMON QUESTION ASKED of children is, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Their answers often range from doctors and astronauts to chefs, hairdressers and even whimsical roles like princesses and superheroes, reflecting their limitless imagination.

As they grow, these dreams evolve, shaped by new experiences and learning opportunities.

Recently, a group of young children from Southwest Florida had the chance to step into their dream jobs for a day — dressing up, visiting companies they could one day work for, and having their pictures taken by a professional photographer.

The unique opportunity, called the Brighter Futures photo project, was provided by the Pathways Early Education Center of Immokalee, which recognizes the vital role of early childhood education in shaping young minds, equipping them with the skills and confidence to reach their full potential.

SEE FUTURES, **A20** ▶

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BY MARY WOZNIAK

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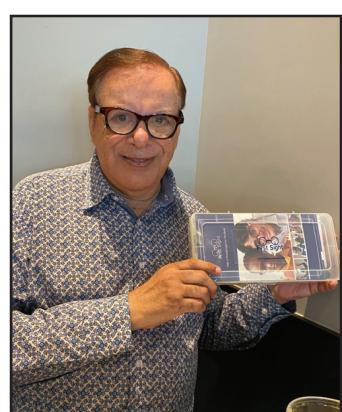
Developing countries around the world face numerous challenges, with hunger and poverty at the top of the list. But there is another issue that also impacts the ability of people in these countries to learn, hold down jobs and better their lives — impaired vision.

Nazir Mamdani and his wife Marsha are trying to fix that, one pair of eyeglasses at a time.

Their vision was to form a nonprofit to provide eyeglasses to underserved areas that are inexpensive to make and provided free to the people who will wear them.

There are about 1.3 billion people globally who suffer from nearsightedness and farsightedness and need corrective lenses, according to statistics from the World Health Organization and the Centre for Vision at Oxford. Many of them are in areas with little or no access to vision services.

SEE VISION, **A8** ▶



MARY WOZNIAK/FLORIDA WEEKLY
Nizar Mamdani, co-founder and CEO of First Sight Eyeglasses Inc., shows the eyeglass kit that is used to provide corrective lenses to people in underserved nations.

FUTURES

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"Every story has a beginning — let's make sure theirs begins with hope, opportunity and education," said Nyla Reyana, a Pathways alumna.

The organization's mission is to nurture future generations by meeting their essential needs for current well-being and long-term success. This commitment was pursued through the Brighter Futures project, which demonstrates that a single image can speak volumes.

"These kids are our future workforce. We look at those in our schools; they have big dreams. They all pick careers that give back to the community, from firefighters to teachers," said Ashlea Hanson, marketing and communication director for Pathways.

Founded in 1964, the center provides early learning and care for children aged four weeks to 5 years, creating a solid groundwork for both kindergarten readiness and lifelong success. The nonprofit introduced the Brighter Future campaign with the goal of raising \$2.25 million to increase its enrollment capacity. The endeavor is supported by a generous \$750,000 matching lead gift from the George and Cindy Rusu Family Foundation.

"Pathways has been around for a long time and has an average of about 400 kids on our waiting list," Hanson said. "Early education programs are limited in the Immokalee area, and about 90% of those children age off before we are able to reach them. We wanted to increase the annual enrollment by 30% through this drive."

As part of the campaign, a selected group of prekindergarten-aged children dressed up as future professionals and posed in their imagined work environments. This visual initiative aimed to highlight the significance of early edu-



BRIAN TIETZ/ COURTESY PHOTOS

tion; the contribution of local commercial photographer Brian Tietz captured the future business leaders. The photographs were showcased at the center's annual "Star Light, Star Bright" gala, which raised \$1 million.

"It's always rewarding to collaborate with a local nonprofit each year; it's a fun way to utilize my skills while giving back to the community. Projects like these really fuel my creative motivation," Tietz shared. "I volunteer my time to teach my children the value of giving back and to show different ways we can support our community."

During the two-day photo project, children from the Pathways Center explored the community, gathering for the photo collection at participating locations such as Arthrex, North Collier Fire Control & Rescue District, Collier County Sheriff's Office, Collier County Courthouse, Naples Airport, Elite Jets, Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens, DeAngelis Diamond, Physicians Regional Healthcare System, Tamiami Ford and Hoffmann Family of Companies.

"It was wonderful to witness the community come together to support this project," Hanson said. "For many of these kids who haven't had the chance to ex-

plore beyond Immokalee, visiting these different locations was an eye-opening experience."

The Pathways students and recent graduates engaged with a series of professionals, from first responders and pilots to zookeepers and other business executives.

"The judge photo was a blast. She had such a personality that showed through," said Tietz. "The kids really embraced their roles, bringing the characters to life. I especially loved the zookeeper shot with the giraffes and letting the kids feed them. They even brought out the dogs while visiting the local sheriff's office, which made for a fun photo opportunity."

Hanson and Tietz expressed that working with the children was an unforgettable activity. The kids highlighted different careers representing the community's future workforce, showcasing their interests and aspirations. Hanson emphasized that revealing the photos with the children and their families cultivated a deep sense of pride and joy, evident in smiles.



Isaac had the chance to be a zookeeper and feed the giraffes at the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens.



Eleanor was given the chance to experience what it would be like to be an engineer at Arthrex.



Milton was ready to take to the skies when he got dressed up as a pilot at Elite Jets at the Naples airport.



Sol looks the part as a judge outside the Collier County courthouse.



Samuel and Markencia had the opportunity to step into the world of construction management with DeAngelis Diamond.

"Brian (Tietz) is a talented photographer who wanted to help spread the message of promoting early education and our future generations. The kids really loved it, too," said Hanson.

The Brighter Futures campaign funds will also be utilized to upgrade the center's facilities, including plans to add a new wing of classrooms.

"We aim to enhance the space by renovating the playground and installing a new air conditioner. Through this, we want to continue to invest in our teachers, staff training and curriculum," Hanson said.

Hanson explained that Pathways students rank in the 90 percentile for kindergarten readiness. Children who participate in quality early learning programs are more likely to meet third-grade reading standards at grade level, which helps them progress successfully in their education. As a result, they are 25% more likely to graduate from high school and earn higher degrees and wages as adults.

"Children are expected to know how to count, write their names and meet other requirements. We help them achieve these milestones," she said. "For many children without access to early education, falling behind is a risk, and it may also be their first exposure to fully using the English language."

Pathways is recognized for its small student-to-teacher ratio and its use of the Creative Curriculum, an early childhood education program. The research-based syllabus is designed around 38 key objectives for development and learning, serving as strong indicators of future academic success. Pathways strives to uphold the highest educational standards as a nationally accredited institution through the National Accreditation Commission and a recipient of the GOLD Seal Certification from the Department of Education.

"We also look at social and emotional aspects for our students. We supply den-

tal checks and vision and hearing exams provided by the Lions Club. We care for the entire child," said Hanson. "We also partner with USDA food programs like Wheels of Hope and the Baby Pantry, Inc. to supply students with meals and after-school snacks."

Throughout the 2023-2024 academic year, students at the center have achieved over 80% growth in cognitive, language, literacy, mathematical and social development. The center highlights that 90% of a child's brain develops within the first five years. Hanson noted that over a million new neural connections are formed every second, shaping health, growth, learning, character and happiness.

"It was incredible to see these children in professional settings, and everyone was exceptionally generous in helping, knowing they are our future. Early education is important —we are laying the foundation for their future in their young minds," said Hanson.

"It was my first time working with young children dressed as future professionals, and it was such a fun experience," Tietz said. "They were wonderful to work with. I'm excited to see my photos used and watch this project come to life through the campaign and other marketing efforts. I especially love seeing large prints of these specialized projects."

For more information and donation opportunities, visit the Pathways website at pathwaysearlyeducation.org. Pathways emphasizes that investing in early childhood education yields a 13% return to society by benefiting students, parents and future generations, ultimately breaking the cycle of poverty.

"I loved seeing how this project brought together the community through different businesses and organizations. It all worked towards the common goal of showcasing students' potential and future success. Kids are our future," said Hanson. "An investment in them is an investment in our shared community." ■



Renata stepped into the role of teacher for a day at Pathways Early Education Center of Immokalee.



Samakia was ready to change tires and swap out transmissions as a mechanic at Tamiami Ford.



BRIAN TIETZ/ COURTESY PHOTOS
Ismael looks like he wants to take over the role of CEO of the Hoffmann Family of Companies.