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Their time to SHINE



ABOVE: From left: Faith Pierre, Addison Kenney, Morgan Zuch, Tracy Benizzi and Nancy Zuch celebrate graduation at The Morgan Center, a preschool offered to children with cancer and other illnesses that prevent them from attending a traditional preschool, on Wednesday in Orlando.
TOP: Mateo Aviles, 4, and his mother, Christina Aviles, pose for pictures with him wearing his cap and gown after graduation.

WILLIE J. ALLEN JR./ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS

The Morgan Center, a preschool for kids with cancer and other illnesses, hosts a graduation for its 21st class of children

By Michael Cuglietta
Orlando Sentinel

Chrystina Paxson searches for empty playgrounds where she doesn't have to worry about her son Mateo being around other children. The four-year-old has a rare blood disorder that makes it hard for him to fight germs.

"I try to let him live as normal a life as possible. But if I see someone sick or someone sounds sick at the playground, I will take him and go home," Paxson said.

But on Wednesday morning, Mateo attended his preschool graduation with 11 other kids — each battling their own illness — and their families. Judging by the smile on his face, he was thrilled for the company.

Since 2003, The Morgan Center has offered free preschool to children with cancer and other diseases that compromise their immune systems, making it risky for them to attend regular school classes. The nonprofit, which started in New York and expanded to Central Florida in 2020 when its founders moved here, offers in-person and virtual classes out of First Baptist Church of Orlando.

For the in-person classes, there are strict hygiene protocols to protect the kids — including the frequent use of hand sanitizer and rigorous daily cleaning of the classrooms. No one with symptoms of cold or flu is allowed in.

Virtual options are available to children for whom even those safeguards are not enough. They also allow the center to expand its reach beyond its two physical locations in Long Island and Orlando.

To date, the nonprofit— funded mostly by private donors — has enrolled more than 560 kids nationally, including 70 in Central Florida. The center has the potential to reach more if it had money to expand. But leaders at the center say inflation has raised their operating costs, making it harder just to maintain their current classes.

"The reality is, there are probably several thousand children across the country who need this. We do have a national plan. It's just that we can't execute it because we're just trying to keep the doors open," said Rod Zuch, who founded the center with his wife Nancy Zuch.

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“Emotional and social growth is tremendously important for any kid, but especially kids with cancer because of the limited world that they’re in.”

— Teacher Morgan Zuch



Addison Kenney, 4, in her cap and gown, is led to the graduation ceremony for The Morgan Center, a preschool offered to children with cancer and other illnesses that prevent them from attending a traditional preschool, on Wednesday in Orlando.

WILLIE J. ALLEN JR./ORLANDO SENTINEL PHOTOS

Graduation

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The nonprofit is named after Rod and Nancy Zuch’s daughter, Morgan Zuch, who was diagnosed with leukemia when she was 2 years old and spent three years in and out of chemotherapy. Her cancer is now in remission.

Morgan Zuch, now 26, does not have many memories of being sick.

“But I do remember a very isolating childhood, like I was in the hospital all the time,” Morgan Zuch said.

And she vividly recalls the trauma of going to school for the first time.

“I was really scared because everybody knew what to do, and I definitely felt like the odd one out,” Morgan said.

That traumatic transition inspired Morgan Zuch to get her master’s degree in educational psychology and go to work as a teacher and counselor at The Morgan Center’s Orlando preschool, where she draws on her education and her personal experience to help other sick kids.

“Emotional and social growth is tremendously important for any kid, but especially kids with cancer because of the limited world that they’re in,” Morgan Zuch said.

Mateo has been to the hospital so many times, his mother has lost count. In the last six weeks alone, the child spent nine nights at Arnold Palmer Children’s Hospital over two separate stays.

“For any fever he gets, he has to go to the emergency room, and usually we’re admitted for a few days, and there they give him IV antibiotics, they do blood work and cultures,” Paxson said.

The Morgan Center is



From left: Teacher Morgan Zuch, student Greyson Alexander and lead teacher Tracy Benizzi pose for a photo after the graduation ceremony.

where Mateo can safely interact with others and learn how to behave in a classroom, so he doesn’t start kindergarten behind his healthier peers.

“He has such a bright spirit. He loves making friends. He loves the teachers there. He gives them a hug every time he leaves,” said Paxson, who is still trying to figure out how to handle kindergarten for her son. “I definitely don’t let him hug everyone. But the teachers there, I let him hug.”

Greyson Alexander was pulled out of preschool when he was diagnosed with leukemia at the age of three. He then spent six months in the hospital after getting a severe stomach infection while undergoing chemotherapy. During that time, he was isolated from everyone but hospital staff and his immediate family.

“There’s not a lot of interaction in the hospital, because everyone keeps their distance,” said Greyson’s mom, Brittany Rotarius.

One day, teachers from

The Morgan Center came to the hospital and invited Greyson to attend their virtual preschool at no charge.

Students in the virtual class are given a box containing all the materials they need for school, including sock puppets, markers, crayons and construction paper. After getting his box, Greyson streamed the classes from his hospital bed.

“He could still interact with the teachers, and he could still see the other kids. He loved being able to see the other kids on the TV screen,” Rotarius said.

Greyson’s recovery was long and grueling. He was intubated for more than seven weeks and had a tracheotomy.

“He’s had to relearn to walk again. He’s had to relearn to sit up again. He’s had to relearn everything again,” Rotarius said.

The preschool brought some joy during that otherwise tough time, Rotarius said.

When Greyson was released from the hospi-

tal, he began going to The Morgan Center’s in-person classes.

He is now 6 and in kindergarten. But because he is still in treatment and his immune system is compromised, he is being homeschooled. The Morgan Center is also allowing him to participate in the preschool for an extra year, so he doesn’t lose that social interaction.

The class on Wednesday was the 21st class to graduate from the Orlando center. Graduates wore white caps and gowns and, before accepting their diplomas, treated their families to a sock puppet serenade.

Mateo had a green dress shirt and black bow tie sticking out from under his gown. He tied the ensemble together with a pair of black high-top Converse All Stars. While his classmates sang “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands,” Mateo sat silent with a smile that grew wider as the music sped up.

“It makes me happy seeing him so happy and being able to socialize,” Paxson said.