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“INSPIRATION

comes from many sources when you can quiet the noise and listen.”

I am frequently asked, “What do you do for a living?” The simple answer is: For the past 15 years, I have managed early learning grant programs to meet the diverse educational needs of preschool children birth to age 5, their families and early childhood teachers. But there is so much more to that simple question. It is about my journey, and how I have secured the position of a lifetime, a job I was destined to hold but never knew existed. I’m sharing my story of how we are changing the landscape of early learning through strategic partnerships, innovative programs and a holistic approach.

I am tremendously blessed. My career has been a gratifying gift and rewarding experience, and my husband, Jaret, has always been supportive of me in pursuit of my career goals. Family time is everything to us, especially with our greatest gift, our 8-year-old daughter, Maeva, who teaches us new things about life every day. She serves as my muse, reminding me that inspiration comes from many sources when you can quiet the noise and listen. ✨

MARNI LEBOWITZ FUENTE, M.S., ED.S.

RIGHT: Marni with her husband Jaret and their daughter Maeva and dog Maxx.



ABOVE: Marni Fuente works for the Hillsborough Community College as Program Director of Quality Early Education Systems.

**MORE WITH MARNI FUENTE
CHECK OUT PAGE 20 AND 21**

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

HOW A PASSION FOR EARLY EDUCATION LED ME ALL THE WAY TO THE BEGINNING

By Marni Fuente

Looking back, I guess you could say early childhood found me.

I was raised by a single father who was my everything. When he passed away shortly after my college graduation, I was devastated. I found myself reconnecting with my inner and less secure 5-year-old self, full of vulnerabilities I hadn't experienced since early childhood. I felt anxious and worried—what was I going to be when I grew up? There was so much I didn't know. Would I make the right decisions? I had surviving supportive family members, but had lost my "rock," my dad who loved and guided me.

Now, when I reflect on the path that brought me where I am today, I have concluded that my own early childhood experiences shaped my life's direction, establishing my beliefs, values and mindset regarding what is needed to nourish critical developmental foundations in early childhood.

A few years (and many different positions) after my father died, I was trying to find level ground and discover my purpose when I landed in a preschool classroom by chance. The first day was indescribable. The children were eager to learn and embraced every learning opportunity with fascination and enthusiasm. I was helping them explore and solve problems and understand their worlds. Seeing the world through children's eyes is pretty special. At day's end, each child gave me a heartfelt hug. I made a connection and formed bonds, and I quickly realized I needed them as much as they needed me. Children taught me what was at the core of teaching—forming and maintaining meaningful relationships while learning through play.

“If we are Conscious (mindful of ourselves), we can provide Awareness to those around us as we are Learning to Model and reflect the change we want to see in the world—CALM!”

I pursued a graduate degree that inspired me to consider the impact I could have on early learners, their adult teachers, families and possibly early education policy. This experience solidified my decision to apply for and ultimately earn a teaching position in the Early Childhood Program at Hillsborough Community College (HCC). At HCC, I finally found my career niche and honed my passion for blending community-informed education and innovative early educational programs and initiatives in the service of children.

My latest project is the Quality Early Education System (QEES) initiative. Funded by the Children's Board of Hillsborough

County in partnership with HCC, QEES takes a holistic approach to early education professional development.

Trained professionals offer teachers continuing education and training in preschool management, literacy intervention and social-emotional education, positive psychology, mindfulness and developmentally appropriate practice. CALM (Conscious Awareness Learning Model) is a critical component of QEES, focusing specifically on early childhood social-emotional development as we integrate child-centered literacy academic programs. The goal is to engage everyone involved in the child's life in the acquisition of positive social-emotional strategies so the child can become a successful early learner. Over a decade of research in early childhood has demonstrated that young children are better learners if they have strong self-regulation skills. The stronger their "emotional intelligence," the higher their academic achievement. CALM is centered on the Conscious Discipline® approach of Dr. Becky Bailey.

CALM has been built on a community foundation that comprises the Hillsborough County early learning community, the School District of Hillsborough County, Hillsborough

Community College, diverse community cultural institutions and Tampa's business community. One of CALM's main goals is for the greater community and its subcultures to understand that raising our youngest citizens is a task that involves all of us and goes beyond the education children receive in school.

No matter your role (teacher, parent, grandparent, citizen), you can have a profound impact on a child. Everyone has the ability to help build a child's foundational character and his or her positive view of the world. What we say and how we say it as teachers, parents and mentors matters. How we treat each other and the world around us matters. And if we focus on the positive, we get more of the positive in return. At the core of this program is the belief that the potential of children is limitless if we believe in them and support them in safe, caring and respectful environments. Teachable moments are everywhere; we can shape and impact tomorrow's community in a positive direction. If we are Conscious (mindful of ourselves), we can provide Awareness to those around us as we are Learning to Model and reflect the change we want to see in the world—CALM!

Every day I feel so fortunate to have inspiration all around me—from those whom I mentor to those who mentor me. My dedicated team provides unwavering support in the pursuit of our mission to build strong preschoolers with a love of learning. We begin each school year with the premise that building relationships with the children, families and teachers we serve is the most critical path. As emotional beings, we must expose and share our own missteps and vulnerabilities in order to build trust and help teachers and students alike. If we all pursue meaningful, kind and helpful relationships, we can all be at our best to learn and be successful.



ABOVE: A commitment to the CALM method during a group session at teacher training. Teachers gather at an Hillsborough Community College training event.

“No matter your role (teacher, parent, grandparent, citizen) you can have a profound impact on a child.”



CALM FOCUSES ON

- Full immersion of Conscious Discipline®, as outlined by Dr. Becky Bailey, through participant training, on-site coaching and family support initiatives.
- Offering monthly HCC continuing education trainings to early childhood teachers and administrators, and delivering mentoring and coaching to teachers in early childhood classrooms.
- Providing training to families complete with support materials and activities to strengthen the home-school connection.
- Introducing mindful techniques and growth mindset practices while also building awareness county-wide through community programming.

Social-emotional children's books to read with little ones and build connections.

► **What Does It Mean To Be Present?** by Rana DiOrio, illustrated by Eliza Wheeler

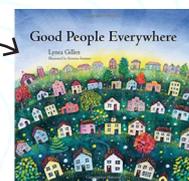
► **The Big Umbrella** by Amy June Bates and Juniper Bates



► **Stick and Stone** by Beth Ferry, illustrated by Tom Lichtenheld

► **How to Grow a Friend** by Sara Gillingham

► **Good People Everywhere** by Lynea Gillen, illustrated by Kristina Swarner



► **The Invisible String** by Patrice Karst

5 TIPS TO BE MINDFUL AT HOME

- 1 Encourage all family members to **take 5 minutes for themselves** daily.
- 2 Encourage everyone to develop through **positive self-messages and a positive mindset**.
- 3 **Forgive** yourself and others.
- 4 Practice **being present** with your family—it costs nothing.
- 5 **Enjoy playtime** with one another—everyone learns and everyone wins!