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- Features
- Video Stories
- Photo Gallery
- News Archives
- Resources for Editors
- Noticias en español
- Korean News
- Contact Us
- Weekly Digest

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### Related Articles

-  A youth outreach ministry called 'Branches'?
-  Ministry impacts urban youth
-  Outreach ministry gives low-income families a hand after storm
-  Two churchwide ethnic caucuses call for immigration reform

### Resources

-  The Florida Conference

Home > News > News Archive > 2006 > May > Program provides oasis for children of low-income families

## Program provides oasis for children of low-income families

May 25, 2006

By Nancy E. Johnson\*

FLORIDA CITY, Fla. (UMNS) ? Children bolt off the yellow bus after school and run to a small, white structure that stands alone in an open field.

The outside of the building is covered with artwork of trees, symbolic of the work that the Branches ministry does in this poor South Florida community.

?We offer consistent love, no matter where the kids are from, no matter what's going on in their lives,? says Kim Torres, Branches coordinator. ?There are always people here who will love them and care for them..?

Branches is a United Methodist-sponsored program run by South Florida Urban Ministries. Based in Florida City, south of Miami, it offers after-school tutoring and mentoring to the children of Mexican farm workers and Haitian hospitality employees.

Children in kindergarten through 12th grade find an oasis and acceptance at Branches. Martine Daceus remembers vividly the isolation she felt when she and her mother came to the United States on a boat from Haiti. Her mother works long hours as a hotel maid in the Florida Keys. Daceus found her second home at Branches.

?It gave me a sense of belonging somewhere, a family and a lot of morals,? Daceus says.

Now in college, Daceus remains involved in Branches by helping children with their spelling and reading homework.

?When I see the little kids, I see myself coming in. Most of the kids are from other countries and have only been living in the United States about a year, two years,? she says.

### Giving back



A UMNS Web-only image

Ismael Ferniza (left) volunteers as a mentor for Branches, a ministry where he received tutoring as a child.

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-  Immigration Theme Page
-  Hispanic/Latino Ministries



A UMNS Web-only image

College student Martine Daceus helps a child in Branches.

Ismael Ferniza, also in college, has a similar story of struggle and triumph. His mother is a Mexican field worker who supports the family on her own. His father was killed in a drug-related shooting. Like Daceus, Ferniza is giving back to the program that gave him so much.

“It makes me feel real good because now the kids can come to me,” Ferniza says. “Others might ask them to sell drugs, but instead they can come to me.”

Branches offered Ferniza academic support and a safe place to fall. He’s glad to see other children benefiting from the outreach program.

“It brings them a lot of comfort because we’re friendly here. They might go home and their parents argue all the time,” he

says.

Torres believes it’s important for children who have gone through Branches to return and help other kids. Unfortunately, when people are pegged as poor, people always want to give to them, but they never learn how to serve or give back.

Many of the students come to Branches not speaking English, but they learn the language and much more through the patience and persistence of tutors. Ninety-six percent of those who stay in the program two or more years raise their grade levels by at least one letter grade. All of those who have graduated from high school are either attending college or vocational school.

“I was lucky enough to have people give me the attention so I could excel in school,” Daceus says. “I see myself as them. All they need is a little attention and they’ll excel too.”

\*Johnson is a Florida-based, freelance television and print journalist.

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