

Preparing Students for the Game of Life



Former pro golfer Chi Chi Rodriguez believes in taking children with a lack of interest in academics and placing them in programs where they will receive individual attention to help them become productive citizens. Photo courtesy of the Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy.

The Mission of the Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy & Golf Club

By Garth A. Boline, Superintendent

When I left Feather Sound Country Club in 1989 for another new grow-in adventure, little did I know how many other things were in store for me out of the norm of a superintendent's daily job duties! As it turned out, I would become the superintendent of The Chi Chi Rodriguez Golf Club.

It is the first public golf course with a school on the grounds and the first and only golf course in the country with a publicly funded partnership school located on a golf course. The golf course is a part of the Chi Chi Rodriguez Youth Foundation, a non-profit 501(c3) tax-exempt foundation that operates on private donations and public greens fees. The Foundation began on a small, par-3, city-run golf course called Glen Oaks in 1975, which the City of Clear-

water leased to the Foundation for a dollar a year.

Young kids from the nearby schools were transported by Foundation vans to Glen Oaks after school for golf lessons, mentoring and tutoring. The after-school program followed its founder Chi Chi Rodriguez's motto: "Arm kids with clubs instead of arming them with guns and knives."

The program grew and the need for a larger course became evident. In 1989, the Chi Chi Rodriguez Golf Club opened on North McMullen Booth Road in the Countryside area of Clearwater. The course averages 45,000 to 55,000 rounds a year. In 1993, growth was again necessary. The public partnership school, The Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy was born.

The Foundation, in partnership with the Pinellas County School Board and the City of Clearwater, opened the facility with 36 students consisting of one 4th- and one 5th-grade class of at-risk students. In 2007, the Academy expanded to serve even more at-risk students and today it serves 95 students in grades 4 through 8.

Kids have always been a part of what goes on here. Twice a week, during the school day in a program we call "shadowing," students are assigned to "shadow" an employee to learn how a facet of the business operates. Students can be found working in the pro shop, administration office, snack bar, and cart barn or golf operations. Students also have the opportunity to "shadow" a department head and receive adult sup-



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The 1st Tee Program at Chi Chi's Golf Club helps school youngsters embrace the nine core values of character and good citizenship. Photo courtesy of the Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy.

port and mentoring in the process.

Supporting the children is at the core of everything we do at Chi Chi's. To be a student at our school, their zoned or home school must refer the child. Specific guidelines are used to identify students who are in danger of becoming high-school dropouts.

Chi Chi is all about taking children with a lack of interest in academics or who have negative home situations which make it difficult to adjust to

classes

and

inserting them into

a program where

they receive more individual attention, positive adult interaction and guidance in making positive life choices or, as we call it, "Preparing Students for the Game of Life." Incorporating a sense of community and pride through working with plants and vegetable gardens is an ongoing concept that we instill in our students.

Two years ago, the Foundation took over a run-down driving range across the street from the golf club. We have upgraded the range with three new greens; two shade-covered hitting stations, and improved turf management overall.

Every day, the children are intro-

duced to the game of golf with its core values as set forth by the First Tee Program. We introduce kids to the game and have a regular golf instruction session during the day taught by our golf professional.

We recently held a summer camp for children of all ages. It was highly successful and we had a waiting list. We are now host to the First Tee Program of Clearwater, which serves many more area children and opens the

door to the great game of golf.

The Chi Chi Rodriguez

"We are working to create citizens who are tax payers not tax burdens." – Chi Chi Rodriguez

Golf Club has been a working member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for golf courses since 1998 and became fully certified in 2001. Our students, working with teachers and volunteers, put in a lot of hard work planting wetlands, littoral shelves and erecting wooden birdhouses on the course. In addition, students are involved in a bird inventory each year as well as maintaining an accurate wildlife inventory of all the different animals that call the golf course home.

We are fortunate to have three Master Gardeners help out each week. Working with me and students in



The Chi Chi Rodriguez School is also a member of the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program. Here students help create a sustainable butterfly garden on campus. Photo courtesy of the Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy.

each class, they have planted vegetables, woody plants and made a rain barrel to capture rainwater for irrigation. They also helped us attain Audubon re-certification by assisting in creating a sustainable butterfly garden for the school courtyard areas.

At the Chi Chi Rodriguez Academy and Golf Club we strive to build character in our youth or, as Chi Chi himself has often said, "We are working to create citizens who are tax payers not tax burdens."

By learning the great principles of golf, they grow in strength by learning to handle the ups and downs of golf and life. We see all our students as capable of learning and guide them every day to make them part of the next generations of golfers and responsible citizens.

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