Supporting RE: An investment in Miami— and beyond

A well-known alumnus joins forces with a new parent to help REinvent Excellence

Jeffrey Miller ’79 and Constance Fernandez represent the old and new at Ransom Everglades. Miller and members of his family have served the school for decades through volunteerism, philanthropy and their constant and cheerful presence on RE’s campuses. Fernandez, a Michigan native, belongs to one of the school’s newer families. She and her husband have provided critical support to countless organizations and causes in Miami, but it wasn’t until their youngest son Cristofer Fernandez ’22 joined the RE community as a sixth grader that they began to realize the remarkable return offered by an investment in Ransom Everglades School.

Miller, a longtime trustee and former chair, persuaded Fernandez, a fellow trustee, to join him as a co-chair for the REinventing Excellence campaign that was launched last fall. They have since worked together to generate enthusiasm for the $75 million campaign, which is designed to elevate all of RE’s programs and bring about a significant makeover of the Upper School campus. Despite their different backgrounds, both share the belief that Ransom Everglades is much more than a school; it is a force for good that drives the entire Miami community.

This winter, they agreed to share insights into their favorite common cause. They met at the La Brisa property the school acquired in June 2016.

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Jeffrey: I have a long history with Ransom Everglades, and the Ransom School before that. I went to high school here, Class of ’79. My brother (Stuart Miller ’75) and sister (Leslie Miller Saointz ’77) went here. Both of my children have gone to Ransom Everglades; one (Anthony Miller ’15) graduated, one (Lenny Miller ’21) is in ninth grade. Nine nieces and nephews have attended, and I’ve served on the board for 10 years or so, and I’ve also chaired the board. So my involvement has been pretty consistent over the years. I see Ransom Everglades as an integral part of my own life, and a pillar of the community. It’s not only a great high school and middle school, but it’s really a community builder.

Constance: I didn’t volunteer for this, I was recruited by Jeff – but happily. It’s an honor. As I listen to Jeff describe his long connection to Ransom Everglades, it occurs to me that I’m a good complement. My family doesn’t have the legacy that his does here at this institution – of course, that is my hope in the future for our family. We are a new family here. I was born and raised in Michigan. After earning my MBA from the University of Michigan, I moved to Atlanta to open several restaurants and clothing stores. From there, I moved to Fort Lauderdale and then Miami, where I worked as a marketing director at a healthcare company. That’s how I met my husband, Mike, who also was in the healthcare industry. That was 18 years ago. This is a school I wish I could have attended, and I’m very happy to provide this opportunity for our youngest son, Cristofer. This was the school of choice. It is a perfect fit for Cristofer, and I feel that Cristofer adds to the Ransom Everglades community. Our family supports many philanthropic and worthy causes here in Miami, but this particular investment is very special to me. What better place for me to spend the next five years, as my son finishes his schooling here, and at a pivotal time for Ransom Everglades? What a great institution this has been for the past 100 years. To have the opportunity to contribute to a major transformation – one that will reverberate throughout the city of Miami – is inspiring.

Jeffrey: I was involved during the last capital campaign, which provided new fields and facilities to the Middle School. I’ve been involved in upgrades to the athletic buildings and the construction of the Ansin Aquatic Center on the Ransom Campus. This particular revitalization – which we are calling REinventing Excellence – is especially exciting because it’s going to expand the Upper School campus with the inclusion of the La Brisa property. It will also be transformative for the Upper School academic buildings – which is long overdue. We haven’t had a new academic building on the Ransom Campus for over 40 years.

Constance: REinventing Excellence is about more than just buildings – I want to emphasize that – but it will bring new buildings, and I am very excited about that. Why? For me, the attraction to Ransom

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Everglades wasn’t that it was a beautiful facility, or had these gorgeous new buildings. It was the core of the school, and what was inside. The academics. The seriousness of it. The faculty. The curriculum. That’s what brought my family to Ransom Everglades. We don’t like to talk about rankings, yet I can’t help but mention that Ransom Everglades has been ranked the No. 1 school in Florida for years. It’s hard to stay No. 1. You have to be ahead of the curve to stay No. 1. I feel our students and faculty and administration made us a No. 1 school. We owe it to them to give them the classrooms and facilities they have earned and deserve. We absolutely should build that around them. Imagine where that will take us? We already have what it takes to be No. 1. The physical enhancements will elevate our academic program. They will enhance our curriculum. Great facilities will help us keep and attract the best and brightest teachers. The entire institution will benefit. We will lift the level of excellence in every facet.

Jeffrey: We are starting by building a STEM Center – a science, technology engineering and math building. We expect to start construction this summer. The STEM Center has been designed in such a way as to make it flexible so that as our world changes and as education changes, the facility is adaptable enough in design to incorporate those changes in that building. So regardless of what is happening 10 years from now, this building will be able to adjust to that. It’s really exciting that we’re undertaking something with the understanding that we’re trying to look forward and not build just for our needs today.

During this campaign, Ransom Everglades is not going to change in terms of substantially growing in numbers. We’re going to remain about the same size. That’s a remarkable thing. We are adding seven acres of land, but there is not going to be a big push to have another 1,000 kids here. We like our size. We like the intimacy of our classrooms. We like the community atmosphere that develops in each class. And we want to add more green space. We want our students to enjoy an expansive property that feels like a college campus.

Constance: We’re paying forward. This will benefit many of our current students, but it’s primarily a gift for our next generation. There is no question this is a critical time: we will need to be educating this next generation for careers we don’t even know about yet. They need to be well-rounded. We need to prepare the whole child intellectually, socially, athletically. They must be well-rounded to best handle what they are going experience, what has yet to be seen. It’s scary, but it’s also exciting.

Jeffrey: Education is the key to every aspect of a community being strong and vibrant. Education, whether it be in public schools, charter schools, magnet
schools, private schools, universities and colleges, is key to the quality of community and how we grow our community. A community builds, and builds well, based on its education, and its level and quality of education. Ransom Everglades plays a major part in education throughout our entire community. It’s not only educating our kids, it’s reaching out to the community, it’s helping inner-city kids, it’s creating collaborative partnerships with universities and other pieces around our overall community.

We have in our budget every year $5 million in financial aid that goes out to balance our student body. The board is consistently raising that budget so we bring people from all walks of life and all financial places into Ransom Everglades. That’s really a goal and something the board is tuned into and wants to make sure happens. We’ve seen it happen. The Ransom Everglades community has changed and evolved over the years. I have been directly involved with RE for over 40 years. Our board chair, Rudy Prio Touzet ’76, may have been the first, or one of the first, Cuban-American families at Ransom. Today, Ransom Everglades is over 50 percent Latin American and, really, what has evolved is diversity, diversity on every front. It really is a microcosm of what Miami-Dade County is as a whole. We represent all facets of life whether it be cultural, religious, lifestyle. It’s something that we embrace.

Constance: When I was at the University of Michigan’s business school, all of my friends were from out of the country, international students. I did not have one friend from the United States of America. That really opened my world at a pivotal time in my life. It added to my learning experience, and it also showed me that the world was bigger than I had previously understood. I had friends from Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong. International exposure is built in to Ransom Everglades, because of its location in the heart of such a diverse city.

Jeffrey: South Florida has obviously increased in diversity, but it’s also changed in other ways. It’s interesting, when I graduated and went to college, many of my fellow students and fellow classmates went off to college and never came back to Miami. There wasn’t tremendous opportunity down here. Right now, Miami is an emerging scene of business. Miami has always been a real estate mecca, but there is so much more now to Miami, whether it be around technology, whether it be around the medical community.

Constance: As more and more companies relocate to Miami or start businesses here, they come with families and children who are concerned about education. I speak from experience; we were one of those families! As Miami continues to grow in sophistication and culture – we’ve seen the rise of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Frost Museum of Science, and the Institute of Contemporary Art – our

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school must continue to grow with it. We need to keep raising the bar for education as our city raises the bar in so many other ways.

**Jeffrey:** The other element of that is there is so much business happening around Miami, students graduating from RE are going off to college and finding opportunities to come back to Miami. They don’t have to go off to San Francisco or New York or Boston; there’s opportunity here in South Florida. That’s an exciting part of Ransom Everglades: we are building future leaders, leaders who might come back and share their talents and the benefits of a Ransom Everglades education with this community. We already have an incredible alumni community. Obviously, if people are here in the local community we can re-engage them in Ransom Everglades life.

**Constance:** Many alumni – like Jeff – serve Ransom Everglades as board members or in other roles. Our board members are an amazing group: alumni, community leaders, past and current families. We have 100-percent participation from our board in the REinventing Excellence campaign. The board alone has raised more than 50 percent of the school’s campaign goal of $75 million. That in itself speaks volumes about the board’s commitment and heart for this. We do invite the entire Ransom Everglades community, and the Miami community, to join us.

**Jeffrey:** This is not just about technology. This is not just about building a STEM Center, or even about stepping into the future. What Ransom Everglades is trying to do is build for the future while harnessing our legacy, and our past. We want to harness the spirit of our school and passion of our school. As we move forward, as we anticipate where our world is going, we will also remain consistent to our values. We will tap into the humanities and the heart of what makes Ransom Everglades special. Constance and I are so convinced of the value of this campaign, that we’ve already committed to it ourselves with significant gifts. We can’t ask people to contribute if we don’t do it ourselves. We want people to follow suit.

This is the perfect time to get involved. This is an important juncture of time for our community, whether it be current parents or alumni or grandparents or whoever has been touched by Ransom Everglades. We need the involvement of all of those who care about this school.

**Constance:** If you’re a past, current or future parent, or alum, this is an investment in Miami. We believe this transformation will reach far beyond the gates of Ransom Everglades School and into the City of Miami. And even beyond!

For information about how you can get involved with REinventing Excellence: The Campaign for Ransom Everglades, contact Director of Advancement Greg Pollard at gpollard@ransomeverglades.org or call 305 460 8820.

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Sir Ken Robinson brought his powerful message about transforming education through innovation and creativity to the Lewis Family Auditorium on October 17, 2017, captivating hundreds of members of the RE community and setting the tone for the launch of REinventing Excellence: The Campaign for Ransom Everglades.

Robinson, considered one of the world’s foremost experts on education, advocated for schools that are more individualized and less conformist. He called for more emphasis on creative thinking and less preoccupation with test scores. Robinson addressed an appreciative crowd of alumni, parents, board members, administration, faculty, staff and RE friends for more than 90 minutes.

“The human imagination is the seed of every form of human achievement,” he said. “We can’t afford to neglect it.”

Earlier that evening, RE’s Chair of the Board Rudy Prio Touzet ’76 introduced Ransom Everglades’ $75 million capital campaign, announcing that $40 million had already been raised, including $30 million in gifts from the school’s trustees. Head of School Penny Townsend also addressed the crowd, explaining why even the nation’s finest institutions must seek reinvention in many realms.

“What kind of curriculum is appropriate for a society in which traditional work, career ladders, even entrepreneurship are radically different?” she said. “How do we factor in something as potentially world-changing as artificial intelligence? We don’t know any of the specifics. All we do know is that test-centric teaching, perfectionism, and complacency will sink us. A lot needs to be reinvented.”

REinventing Excellence will usher in that wide-ranging reinvention, starting in the summer of 2018 with the construction
of a STEM Center on the Upper School campus as the school gradually incorporates its plan for the La Brisa land — which won City of Miami approval in January 2018 (see page 30). The La Brisa property will eventually include a new student commons that will replace the current dining hall, and the La Brisa home will be repurposed for academic and administrative uses.

Robinson, the author of Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That’s Transforming Education, met with RE’s faculty in a private reception that lasted more than an hour before his evening appearance. He touched on a range of topics, including the testing mindset in education that he described as a “toxic culture,” and the necessity of replacing outmoded ways of teaching with more effective strategies and approaches.

“The system is changing — and it has to,” he said.

Robinson’s provocative message and the night’s campaign launch left the RE community abuzz and excited.

Townsend reaffirmed her commitment to the path of innovation described by Robinson in a letter to the RE community the next day. She wrote that the talk by Robinson “was not a wake-up call so much as affirmation that we are on the right path — and a reminder that we need to be constantly vigilant about staying there. Being an innovator is not a passive proposition. We need to continue to think outside the box, continue to innovate and continue to reach the whole student.”

For more information about supporting REinventing Excellence, contact Director of Advancement Greg Pollard at gpollard@ransomeverglades.org.
La Brisa Approved

Miami City Commission lauds Ransom Everglades for its plan for the new property

Ransom Everglades’ plan for incorporating the La Brisa land into its Upper School campus won unanimous approval from the Miami City Commission on January 25, 2018, setting the stage for the gradual integration of La Brisa’s seven acres into student life.

Photographs by Suzanne Kores
The decision at Miami City Hall concluded a lengthy approval process that began soon after the school purchased the property along the northern edge of the school’s Main Highway campus in June 2016. Commissioners indicated they supported the RE plan because it not only ensures the prosperity of generations of students but also enables RE to continue to be an active and generous community partner while respecting the natural riches of Coconut Grove.

The school’s plan envisions the addition of just one new building — a future student commons — on the La Brisa property as RE adapts the 1920s home on the land so that it can serve academic and administrative purposes. The extensive mangroves and tree canopies on the property will be preserved. The plan, which was lauded by the Historic Preservation Society of Coral Gables for “good stewardship,” calls for tree-lined quads, expansive lawns and additional landscaping on the current Upper School campus.

The approved plan represents the merging of RE’s vision for the La Brisa land with the school’s previously approved plan for the existing Ransom Campus. That proposal won approval by the Miami City Commission in 2014 and includes a proposed STEM Center. The addition of the La Brisa property nearly doubles the size of the Ransom Campus.

Commissioner Ken Russell applauded Ransom Everglades for resisting the temptation to maximize to every corner of the La Brisa land in terms of density, parking spaces and construction additions.

The decision “validates the 19 months of hard work and thoughtful planning that went into presenting our vision for the future of our school,” Head of School Penny Townsend said in a letter to the RE community. “I am proud that, throughout this process, we remained faithful to our school’s values.”
Dozens of members of the RE community attended the hearing, and nearly two dozen addressed the commissioners during the public comments session. Commission Chair Keon Hardemon was so impressed with the eight RE students – Tomas Gomez '18, Chris Kucera '18, Lauren Marx '18, Alex Mendelson '19, Paulina Pages '18, Juan Roca-Paisley '19, Ryan Sears '18 and Hannah Tacher Lois '18 – who spoke on behalf of the school he invited two of them, Sears and Tacher Lois, to serve as honorary co-chairs.

The city’s approval also paves the way for the revitalization of the existing Upper School campus through the school’s REinventing Excellence campaign, beginning this summer with the construction of the new STEM Center. The school’s campaign is guided by the five initiatives Townsend crafted with the board’s support soon after her arrival to the school in 2014: Enriching the curriculum; building the best faculty; integrating technology creatively; upgrading buildings, facilities and spaces; and developing RE as an institution.

After the hearing, Townsend offered her personal thanks to many who contributed to the effort, including the legal team led by John Shubin ’79, Amy Huber and Rachel Streitfeld; the architectural team directed by Carlos Prio-Touzet ’72 and Jacqueline Gonzalez; attorney W. Tucker Gibbs ’72; landscape architect Jennie Rogers; arborist Lisa Hammer; traffic engineer Joaquin Vargas; master planner Cal Bowie; parking expert Tom Butcher; land surveyor Anthony Campanile; entrepreneur Jose Goyanes; and engineer Joaquin Mojica.

Many of that group participated in RE’s 20-minute presentation at the hearing.

Townsend also thanked board Chair Rudy Prio Touzet ’76, Vice Chair Andrew L. Ansin ’81, and the rest of the board for their leadership, vision and dedication; Jim Cowgill, RE’s Chief Financial Officer, for his tireless work on the project; and the entire RE community for its support.