



The Melissa Institute
For Violence Prevention and Treatment

Bully Pulpit: Teaching Peace

2016 Report to the Community



Dear Friends:

This year marks the 20th year that The Melissa Institute has been in existence. The average lifespan for nonprofit organizations is five to seven years. We have clearly surpassed that, and we are proud of the meaningful work we have done.

We couldn't have done it without you.

We deeply appreciate your essential financial support that has enabled us to accomplish so much toward reducing the incidence of violence and helping its victims. We are truly grateful that so much good has come out of the tragedy of our daughter Melissa's murder.



The following pages highlight just a few of the ways that we have helped to make our world a safer place. However, each success is colored by the enormity of the work still to be done. Current areas of focus include gun violence prevention, human trafficking, cyber bullying, literacy and much more. The challenges seem overwhelming. Yet these past 20 years have proven how much the Institute can accomplish, with your generous support.

We need you to continue as our partner to stem the tide of violence. At the end of the day, there is no better exercise for your heart than giving generously.

With deep appreciation,

Lynn Aptman
Founder and President

Michael Aptman, M.D.
Founder



On the Cover — Katherine Cruz-Alvarez, Maria Leite and Syanah Ramos (left to right) share a few minutes of fun on the Friendship Bench at Palmetto Elementary School. School counselor Julie Astuto said kids can sit on the bench if they don't have someone to play with, and their classmates are encouraged to invite the child to play. Empathy can help prevent bullying (see story on the next page.)

Bully Pulpit: Teaching Peace

Bullying takes many forms: name calling, harassment on social media, even physical harm. It begins early.

“We used to focus our educational efforts on middle school, but now we know we need to reach children in elementary school,” said Trish Ramsay, Melissa Institute Education Director. And those efforts are paying off. Several fifth graders who attended a daylong Institute conference on bullying prevention talked about their experiences.



Trish Ramsay

Matthew Savage said he was bullied when he was in kindergarten and first grade. “I would dread recess. Two boys would chase me and try to hurt me. “Eventually, Matthew told the teacher, who told the principal. The ringleader left the school after that year, and Matthew said the “bully’s sidekick turned out not to be a bad person. He became my



Joseph Maurovich, Oramys Collera and Matthew Savage (left to right) know how to deal with a bully.

friend.” There’s been no problem since, but Matthew says, “I know what to do if there’s a problem.”

Joseph Maurovich was also bullied, mostly in first and second grade. “I’m not the tallest person. People call me short. I’m small. When I played basketball, kids would tell me, ‘You’re too small,’ but I’d ignore them.” Joseph switched to soccer, and says that now “I have more friends.” He knows if someone is unhappy with him, “It’s their problem.”

One of the important things kids learn at The Melissa Institute conference is to intervene when they see someone being bullied. That happened to Oramys Collera. Some of his friends were left out when a group of boys were playing at the park. “One boy was crying, because the other boys were screaming at him, ‘Get off the field,’ and pushing him around. I talked to them, and convinced them to stop. Now they are all friends.”

Katherine Cruz-Alvarez also intervenes when she sees a friend being teased. “My training has helped me to know how to stop it,” she said. Maria Leite recalled a time when she stopped her friends from fighting. “I learned that you should help others when they are being teased.”

The Melissa Institute’s bullying prevention programs began nearly 20 years ago, before bullying was widely recognized as a societal problem. Frank Zenere, Ed.S., a psychologist who heads the district crisis management program for Miami-Dade Public Schools, said that bullying has been around for years, but formalized prevention techniques have grown since the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo. (In 1999, two teens killed 13 people and wounded 20 before killing themselves. It is believed the killers, social outcasts, had been bullied.)

“Prevention programs do reduce bullying,” Mr. Zenere said. He credited The Melissa Institute with providing him with “a lot of research-based knowledge on bullying prevention. They’ve given me tools that assist me in providing assistance to the schools.”

Bowling Against Bullying

A local high school service organization, Students Offering Support (SOS), has raised \$7,000 in recent years for The Melissa Institute’s bullying prevention programs. Lauren Archer, SOS president, said the group holds an annual Bowling Against Bullying event to raise money. About 60 people attended the last bowling fundraiser.

“Some of our members have been affected by bullying,” she said. “We want to raise awareness about the bullying problem, and do something to actively help. We had a great time for a great cause.”

Lynn Aptman, Melissa Institute president, accepts a \$2,000 donation from Students Offering Support past president Stephan Zachar and treasurer Sean Meager.



Helping Parents With a Tough Job

Any parent will tell you that parenting is a tough job, but it was especially so for Louis Indelli when he found himself a single dad at age 62, responsible for the care of his daughters, then 6 and 16.

“I was like a lost soul,” he recalled. “I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t spent much time with the girls before. I was asking people how to be a parent. It was kind of funny.” Luckily, he heard about a free parenting class called ACT (Adults and Children Together) Raising Safe Kids.

“It opened my eyes to a lot,” Mr. Indelli said. “I didn’t realize how sensitive kids are, and how you have to praise them.” The retired bricklayer, who lives in Islamorada, is a full-time dad to Virginia, who is now 9 and an avid equestrian. “She now has structure in her life,” he said. His older daughter, Nicole, attends school in Kendall.

The Melissa Institute’s Trish Ramsay serves as southeast regional director for the ACT parenting program, and has trained numerous facilitators for the classes. The program teaches parents how to cope with anger and provide positive discipline.

It also teaches skills for communicating with children. That helped Cassandra Jean Louis, a single mother of three children, 8, 13 and 18. Ms. Louis separated from her husband in October 2014, the same month she suffered a stroke at the age of 42.

“The stroke has affected the kids, too,” she said. “The ACT classes have helped me a lot with being able to talk to my children. “She said her middle child, a boy, is facing lots of changes with puberty. “It’s easier for me now to be able to talk to him,” she said.



Louis Indelli, with daughters Nicole (center) and Virginia.



Cassandra Jean Louis finds it easier to talk with her children (left to right) Myrtle, Jamie and Marcella.

\$8 Million Granted for School Safety

The joint efforts of The Melissa Institute and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) as participants in the Roundtable on Youth Safety last year helped get more than \$8 million in grants for Miami-Dade Public Schools to implement programs to counter violence, according to Deborah Montilla, Executive Director of School Operations.

“The Melissa Institute brought BCG to the Roundtable, and the data BCG collected for us was critical to our being awarded these grants,” she said. The Roundtable was convened by Mayor Carlos Gimenez and School Superintendent Alberto Carvalho after the horrific Sandy Hook School shooting in Newtown, Conn., that took the lives of 20 children and six adults. BCG provided its services without charge.

The largest federal grant, \$4.27 million, went to the school police for a five-year pilot program called Campus Shield, which will link law enforcement analysis and mental health services with the intent to identify and address school safety threats. Another federal grant of nearly \$3 million funds a violence prevention project to support students at selected schools exposed to pervasive violence by hiring more school social workers. The third grant of nearly \$1 million will enhance the abilities of staff and faculty to collaborate on reducing the incidence of student harassment, bullying, violence and substance abuse.

“I have profound respect and appreciation for the work of The Melissa Institute,” Ms. Montilla said. “They’ve been a wonderful partner over the years.”

The **ALPHABET** in My Mouth

Picture a classroom of 6-year-olds sitting in a semicircle. Their teacher leads the group singing to the tune of “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” The children’s version goes like this: “I’ve got the whole alphabet in my mouth, I’ve got the whole alphabet in my mouth, I’ve got the whole alphabet in my mouth, and I’m learning to read!” The song continues with the children singing each letter and its sound. They are excited and having fun – which is what learning to read should be.

The alphabet song is just one of 615 video lessons on The Melissa Institute’s literacy website for teachers, *ReadingTeacher.net*, which gives tips for teaching reading and writing. The website is growing in popularity, with 122,548 users in 2014, and there are 3,627 subscribers to the site’s YouTube channel. The alphabet song video, for example, has been viewed more than 4,000 times.

Using the talents of Dale Willows, Ph.D., a member of the National Reading Panel and the Institute’s Scientific Board, the site was launched in 2012. The Institute funded the site because students who do not learn to read on level by Grade 3 are much more likely to develop low self-esteem, drop out of school, and engage in antisocial behavior.

Miami teacher La-Shanda West is certified to teach reading for grades K-12. “Reading is a passion for me,” she said. “The website’s emphasis on the foundation of reading is critical. The site’s strategies can be used in every classroom.”

If you’d like to sing the alphabet song along with the kids, go to [YouTube.com/watch?v=ExhLDVva6YQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExhLDVva6YQ).

The Earlier the Better

About 2,000 babies born at Homestead Hospital have received their first book courtesy of The Melissa Institute. The bilingual books are given to encourage new parents to read to their little ones, establishing an enriching family experience.



Human Trafficking: Salvaging Lives

Sandy Skelany was once one of society's lost youths. For three years, she lived on the streets of New York City, dumpster diving for food and bathing in fire hydrants. Then, she said, someone reached out to her, and it changed her life. Now, the Yale graduate reaches out to teenage girls on the streets of Miami who are victims of sex trafficking and abuse. She told her story to about 225 people attending the 19th annual Melissa Institute conference at the University of Miami in May.

The Institute's conferences are known for focusing on current issues. So it was with the topic of human trafficking. Miami is the third most popular trafficking destination in the country, and violence is a normal part of the victims' lives, Ms. Skelany said. She described how she forms relationships with the abused girls, gaining their trust to help them.

Daria Valle, a licensed therapist, found the conference "very stimulating. The Melissa Institute conferences always keep me abreast of the latest information."

School counselor Susan Sirota agreed. "The conferences tackle out-of-the-norm issues you wouldn't expect, and the information has been very helpful," she said, recalling strategies she'd learned to assist a young child with gender identity issues.

And Nancy Ratzen, chair of Stop Sex Trafficking Miami, called the conference "the best overview of trafficking that I have attended in Miami."



Sandy Skelany: from dumpster diving to saving lives.



UrbanPromise Awarded

The Suzanne L. Keeley, Ph.D., Community Service Award honored UrbanPromise-Miami, which was co-founded by psychologist Ana Ojeda, Ph.D., and Kristy Nuñez, an assistant state attorney in charge of sex crimes. UrbanPromise is an after-school program in Little Havana that provides homework help and mentoring for children and teens, most of whom come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For many of the children, UrbanPromise is a "safe place."

Ana Ojeda, Ph.D., of UrbanPromise accepts the \$5,000 Community Service Award.





Peace, Harmony & Moonlight

The spectacular colored glass sculptures by artist Dale Chihuly sparkled in the March moonlight at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden during this year's annual Peace, Harmony and Moonlight fundraiser. More than 100 of the 240 guests toured the garden by tram, accompanied by Dr. Sam Steiner's knowledgeable narrative. A record \$92,337 was raised, including \$26,718 from the silent auction of 169 items. Harpist Katherine Honey and the Greater Miami Youth Symphony Orchestra provided the music, and everyone contributed to the evening's harmony.



Denise and Assistant State Attorney Gary Winston (left) and State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle.



The event's co-chairs, Laura and Dr. Javier Vilasuso.



Ryan Jurney, County Commissioner Sally Heyman and Judge Robert Luck.



Auction Co-chair Megan Cunningham (left) with Institute Vice President Karyn Cunningham.



Nannette Zapata, Fairchild Chief Operating Officer (left); Suzanne Keeley, Ph.D., Institute President Emeritus, and Auction Chair Grace Carricarte.



Board members Etiony Aldarondo, Ph.D., Penn Chabrow and Daniel Santisteban, Ph.D., director of the University of Miami's Community and Educational Well-being Research Center.

To view more photos of Peace and Harmony, go to MelissaInstitute.org.

Don't miss next year's Peace, Harmony & Moonlight, March 17, 2016!

Palmetto Bay Mayor Eugene Flinn, Pinecrest Mayor Cindy Lerner and public defender Carlos Martinez.



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The Melissa Institute for Violence Prevention and Treatment is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization. The Institute was established by Melissa Aptman's family and friends a year after her death. Our continuing efforts reflect the belief that each of us has the power to effect change and that we must work together for the betterment of our society.

The Institute's mission is to prevent violence and promote safer communities through education and application of research-based knowledge.



Melissa Aptman

As part of its commitment to research-based knowledge, The Melissa Institute awards scholarships to doctoral students who are conducting research relating to violence. The Institute has partnered with the Belfer Family Foundation to create a permanent endowment for the Belfer-Aptman Scholars Awards. Since the inception of the program, the Institute has awarded 44 scholarships. This year, two University of Miami graduate students, Johnathan Duff and Kritika Malhotra, received \$2,000 awards.

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