

## Big Crowd, Big Celebration at 2008 Family Expo!



African storyteller Madafo used his instruments and tales to entertain children and families.

The children sat at the feet of African storyteller Madafo, their eyes watching his every move and big smiles spread on their faces as they listened to "The Green Hyena." He finished the story by emphasizing its moral – "always make good decisions and don't be greedy," then asked for some music volunteers. He showed the kids how to beat out rhythms on an assortment of African instruments – a go-go bells, calimbas, rattles, shakers and drums – as the audience clapped and sang along. When they'd finished, it was time for the children to celebrate their performance.

"Now, take a bow for your partners, for your community, for the Family Expo, for your self," Madafo told them.

There were plenty of bows and lots of fun to be had at The Children's Trust 2008 Family Expo. Lots of learning, too, and giveaways and, well, lots of people. As many as 30,000 children and families flocked to the extravaganza held Saturday, Sept. 13 in Arnold Hall of the Miami-Dade County Fair and Expo Grounds.

More than 200 exhibitors staffed booths and handed out information and explained their services to the many interested parents and caretakers.

Kassandra Barrios, 28, brought her 1-year-old son Dominick. She waited in line to receive one of the thousands of free books donated by the Miami-Dade Family Learning Partnership. Both Barrios and her husband, who are hearing impaired, though their son is typically functioning. She came to the Expo to find information about home schooling.

"I'm a member of a home-schooling group, but I want to find out more," she said. "I really want to be involved in watching my son grow up."

Nellie Nosco, 23, came looking to find out more about The Children's Trust and its work in the community. Originally from Peru, Nosco was hoping to find a mother-and-daughter dance class near her home in North Miami. She planned to visit The Trust's new Web site with its searchable funded directory of after-school and summer programs.

Rhonda Smith, the director of Fit Kids which partners with FIU-ENLACE funded by The Children's Trust, stood behind the crowd gathered at the Expo's center stage. About 15 dancers in black t-shirts and shaking pom-poms, led by two instructors, twirled and twisted, and moved in unison on stage to the reggaeton beat. Their performance, demonstrating fun aerobic fitness, rippled through the crowd where parents and siblings swayed and sang along with the popular song.

"We will always have camp now – we should be celebrating," Smith said, referring to the Aug. 26 election where Miami-Dade County voters overwhelmingly reauthorized The Children's Trust. Smith has directed her program, located in the heart of Westchester, for the past 11 years. With support from The Trust, the program accommodates 100 children, encouraging them toward healthy lifestyles by motivating and teaching participation in dance, racketball, volleyball and other physical activities.

Smith said they are fortunate to have their own in-door facility, but said the need is so great in the community that there could be 500 children in the program, if funding were available.

As part of the festivities, The Children's Trust gave away 1,000 backpacks and stuffed pencil pouches to the first arrivals at Family Expo. More face-painters were added to the fair this year, still they kept busy all day as parents and children waited to have magnificently colored butterflies and curvaceous cats etched on their

faces. The lines for the bounce houses and for children to have their photos taken with Maya and Miguel, the Rugrats, Clifford the Big Red Dog and other popular characters remained steady throughout the day. The need to expand this event next year became clear.

Raymond Alvarez and Lester Ayala of Family Counseling Service discussed their efforts to reduce gang participation, crime and youth violence in South Dade communities.

The two facilitate 12-session youth groups for middle through high-school students. At once-a-week meetings, they invite the teens to recognize feelings, deal with potential anger and conflict, and encourage neighborhood safety.

Lauren Cortinas of Elevate Miami instructed those who stopped at her booth on the City of Miami program that is increasing technology access for all ages in the municipality. Launched in 2004 as part of Mayor Manny Diaz's initiative, the program now operates in 12 City of Miami parks and provides services to 400 seniors.



Kids participating in a hands-on science experiment.

"There's such a great need in this community to educate our children, their working-age parents, as well as their grandparents in how to utilize technology," Cortinas said.

Technology coaches, many of them Miami-Dade College students, provide trainings in the afternoons and early evenings at park facilities around the city. The program also provided computers for middle school students through its "6th Grade Rites of Passage" program.

As 2008 Family Expo neared its end late in the afternoon, most of the remaining crowd gathered around the center stage for raffle prizes.

Nazer Haman and his wife Marilyn Castiglioni, who moved to Kendall from Venezuela four years ago, brought their 9-month-old infant and visited the booths for several hours.

"We really didn't know much about the fair, but came out to see what was here. There are lots of services we didn't know about," Haman said, adding, "we're fortunate, we don't need services right now, but life changes so quickly - it's good to know what's out there."

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