

MERIDIAN LIFE 2014-2105

# MERIDIAN LIFE

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## **Bridging the Gap**

### **Giraffe Laugh Preschool Makes it Possible for Children from Difficult Circumstances to Receive a Quality Education**

By Tricia McMasters

According to the old adage, “Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.” And at Giraffe Laugh Preschool, there are lots of current and former acorns who have big plans. These include two four year old kids named Simon and Harmony, who want to be a veterinarian and a nail painter, respectively. There’s Gabriella, 13, who hopes to become a Google creative technologist, and Emory, who is studying engineering at the University of Idaho.

And what about little acorns who have grown into adults? They work in careers from engineering to event planning.

Giraffe Laugh boasts numerous success stories of children who have gone through its early education program, thrived in elementary and high school, and gone on to college and careers. But there was a point in the lives of many of those kids when their parents, including numerous single moms, didn’t know how they would ever be able to afford quality childcare and pre-K education. Some of them didn’t even know where their next meal would come from, or where they’d sleep at night.

Fortunately, Giraffe Laugh was there to help, and it still is. As a non-profit early education provider, the school serves over 200 students and their families. 45% pay regular tuition prices, everyone pays something, and the organization makes up the remaining costs through donations from generous community members.

Instead of sending out mailers to solicit money, Giraffe Laugh does something different. In 2013, the organization started conducting “Little Shoes, Big Dreams” tours, which give people the chance to see one of the facilities and learn about the school’s successes firsthand. The tours are held bi-monthly on Thursday nights at 6:00 p.m., in Boise’s North End. When you attend, you’ll be treated to a plate of hors d’oeuvres and hear stories that bring tears to your eyes. Executive director Lori Fascilla says an average of 15 people attend each tour.

Lori has worked in early childcare education since 1986, and she begins the tours by telling attendees about herself. She says that when her son was two years old, she became a single mom, and although certified as an elementary teacher, she couldn’t find a job. She ended up working in retail, and enrolled her son in the best daycare program she could afford. It didn’t take long, however, to realize that the care was inferior and she needed to look for another option. She found a preschool teaching job at a large for-profit childcare center, and took it because her son could attend for free.

It was there that she began to understand the importance of pre-K education. “I realized that all the problems I’d been trying to solve in elementary school could be fixed in the first five years of life,” says

Lori. She became an administrator at the facility, and in 1991 switched companies to become the Director of Giraffe Laugh.

Amber Murray is the school's Donor Relations Officer. She takes the floor after Lori, relating a similar story about how she got involved with the organization. She then guides attendees through various classrooms, where they listen to several stories about the difference Giraffe Laugh has made in people's lives, including the little three year old boy who couldn't seem to get enough to eat at the school's breakfast each day. Lori and Amber talked to his mom, and discovered that the two had just escaped a domestic violence situation.

They were "couch-hopping," staying with different friends each night, people who didn't have much to eat themselves. The Giraffe Laugh employees introduced the young mom to their food pantry, and recommended resources that helped her find a home and a job. The little boy is now thriving, and his mom has a much better life.

"We have a lot of stories similar to that one," says Amber. Tour guests also listen to one from Trina, a mom of two who will always be grateful to Giraffe Laugh for helping her children find stability when their parents divorced, and a teen mom who learned how to be a mother through Giraffe Laugh's parenting classes at Marian Pritchett High School.

By the end of the tour, there's generally not a dry eye in the room, and attendees wish they could pay for each of the 550 children on the preschool's waiting list. But even if they can't, there are other ways to make a difference. The school has many volunteer opportunities and a long wish list that can be accessed on its website.

According to Lori, "When children start kindergarten academically behind, they rarely catch up and often don't graduate." Idaho is one of only six states without funding for pre-K education, and Giraffe Laugh is trying its best to make up the gap. Visit [www.giraffelaugh.org](http://www.giraffelaugh.org) today to sign-up for the next "Little Shoes, Big Dreams" tour. There are lots of little acorns who need your help to become mighty oaks!