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MARIE CAPITA **SAVORS** THE TASTE OF IMMOKALEE

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Bringing Innovation to the Table

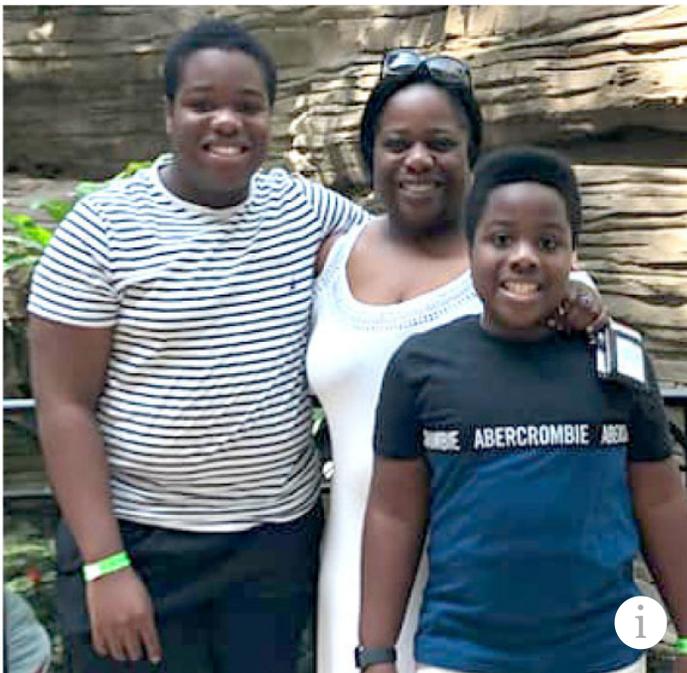
MARIE CAPITA SAVORS THE SWEET 'TASTE OF IMMOKALEE'



It is the age of Zoom, and Marie Capita summoned her young team leaders on a video call one Friday afternoon for a final planning session for Taste of Immokalee's summer internships. This is not how any of them had envisioned their season — a critical period for the student-run food company — but Capita, the executive director, was determined to make the best virtual learning experience possible.

"Like everything else, we'll bring innovation to the table," she told them and delved into advice on how to optimize the work-from-home situation: Hold daily Zoom calls with your teams. Keep structured hours. Create shared electronic documents. Hold everyone accountable.

This summer's 15-member cohort had much to do to maintain Taste of Immokalee's dizzying pace.



The company was born a mere six years ago, originally conceived as a short-term job readiness program supported by the 1 By 1 Leadership Foundation in Immokalee and a grant from State Farm. Instead, the concept morphed into something much bigger: a company that produces sauces and salsas from the town's bounty, generating revenue to be used for teen workforce training and to donate to Immokalee nonprofits.

Initially, the students retailed their products at 18 Collier County Publix stores. A year ago, that number exploded to more than 240, stretching from the Florida Keys to Tampa. Sales are up more than 140%. Capita led a friendly separation from 1 By 1, and created Taste the Impact, a new foundation that houses the entrepreneurship program, which

includes a rigorous apprenticeship and salaried internships. Expansion plans are in the works to broaden retail partnerships and to introduce the program in the counties where Taste of Immokalee products are sold.

Capita stresses the word "student" in student-run, but there is no question that she is the organization's heart, and there's no doubt that working with young people is an endeavor that stole her own heart.

ROADS TO THE FUTURE

Capita speaks to her students from a small satellite office she maintains in Naples. It's a nondescript place — colorless walls, lackluster furniture, glary fluorescents — a far cry from the glitzy law office she might have occupied.



Capita's parents immigrated from Haiti to Miami when she was 5. They'd been well-off in Haiti, but dreamed of a life with more opportunities.

But at first, there was much to endure. Capita remembers the social status drop and taunts from American classmates. Her dad died a week shy of her high school graduation, and Marie assumed responsibility for her mom. Nevertheless, she went on to law school and to practice real estate and family law. She moved to Naples 10 years ago to rebound after a business partner's deception, and because the environment seemed more wholesome for her three sons, whom she raised on her own. She continued practicing law, but it started to lose its luster.

"I went to law school, but I don't think I was meant to be an attorney," she says with a grin. She shared her talents in other ways, by teaching English as a second language classes and leading Junior Achievement programs at

Immokalee High School. Aware of her broad skill set, the former head of the Immokalee Community Redevelopment Agency asked Capita if she would direct a new, county-run business incubator in Immokalee. She jumped at the opportunity.

Five years later, 1 By 1 Leadership Foundation approached Capita about starting a youth entrepreneurship program.

"What started out as something that was supposed to be a project — just a couple of classes and workshops spurring them to entrepreneurship — ended up as Taste of Immokalee," she says.

But shortly before the foundation's offer, Capita had fallen inexplicably and critically sick. Lying in her hospital bed, two thoughts dominated: to live long enough to see her youngest son graduate and to find a way to leave her mark.

"If I died today, what will people say of me? 'Oh, she's a great attorney — she helped me through my divorce.' Did I really want to be known for this? I started reevaluating everything," she recalls.

RUNGS IN THE LADDER

Taste of Immokalee is a social enterprise — a for-profit company with a nonprofit mission. With the oversight of Capita and a volunteer board of professionals, 15 student interns manage all facets of the company.

These are all high-level responsibilities that give Taste of Immokalee graduates a serious leg up in college admissions and job applications. But Capita is most interested in the fundamentals. To her, job readiness programs have shifted too much toward grooming future company chiefs or arming young people with industry specifics. She wanted to focus on skills students need to succeed in any field, on any rung of the ladder.

"It's not to say they don't need a pathway to a career, but who teaches them those soft skills — like when they walk into an office, they have to look people in the eyes, and when they're sitting in a meeting, they have to be respectful and attentive?" she asks. She built her curriculum around the situations Taste of Immokalee interns experience — how to handle a dissatisfied customer, compose a professional email and initiate a sales call.

Capita breaks students of the competitiveness bred in classrooms and on athletic fields and extols the values of teamwork, group success and shared accountability.

"All of them have this idea that if they do something it's about their self-gratification," she says.

"It's not your company. It's not 'Marie Capita Google.' It's only Google. So why are you cutting someone's throat to be on top?"

Students may appreciate the group coaching, but what they really treasure is Capita's one-on-one attention.

"It took me a long time to realize everything that happened to me in life was God's way of preparing me for where I am right now."

STEPPING STONES

Over the phone one morning, Yvelande Astreide shares her Taste of Immokalee experience.

She's an ebullient young woman, utterly at ease, with palpable energy. She is not, she says, the girl she was a few years ago.

"I was the shyest person ever," she says. She joined Taste of Immokalee as a high school senior because she was interested in pursuing business. (Now 21, she's earning a bachelor's in supervision and management from Florida SouthWestern State College, while serving as Capita's administrative assistant.)

"I wouldn't talk to *anyone*. I hated (Capita) for this at the time, but every time someone came into the office, she wanted me to talk to them. I thought she was picking on me. I didn't realize it at the time, but she was trying to break me out of my shell."

It worked.

"I could not see myself where I am today when I was in high school — being so open, being able to speak my mind and share my opinion," Astreide says.

Not long ago, she identified another young lady struggling to speak up and started coaching her.

"The difference (Capita) made in me, I want to make in other students in the community," Astreide says.

To Capita, these are the things that matter. Taste of Immokalee isn't about wild profits or giant footprints, it's about instilling values, confidence, grit and independence in young people.

She thinks about a graduation speech by actor Matthew McConaughey.

"He said, 'Everything in our lives that happens — good or bad — becomes part of our resumé.' And it's so true. There is nothing that you have experienced in life that hasn't been part of where you are right now. They're all stepping blocks.

"It took me a long time to realize everything that happened to me in life was God's way of preparing me for where I am right now."

And right now, she is exactly where the region's young people need her.

STORY BY JENNIFER REED

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St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

Although she has not used the hospital herself, Capita appreciates St. Jude's mission and the way it supports parents while treating children. Her second son was recently diagnosed with a chronic illness, and she's acutely aware of how critical it is for health care workers to care for the entire family. "St. Jude's commercials always bring tears to my eyes," she says.



Passing the Torch ::
Guiding the Next Generation