BridgeBuilder | Branches
Trish & Dan Bell Family Empowerment Centers
Summer 2026

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MISSION STATEMENT:

Branches partners with families to build educational and financial assets, community and hope.

GET INVOLVED:

If you would like to know more about how to donate and/or volunteer, please contact us at:

(305) 442-8306
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Miguel Ferniza as a child in Homestead, Florida.

A Message from the CEO

Serve, Love & Repeat

Dear Friends,

Summer Shade Camp at our 3 sites is buzzing with over 450 children learning and growing every day! But years before 'Summer Shade' when our service to the community was but a fraction of what it is today, we relied on volunteers, for example to drive the couple dozen kids on field trips during the summer. Those volunteers served with love and intention just like we continue to do today.

One hot summer morning back in the 1990's, the Branches' volunteers were discussing that not everyone had a reliable car and there would not be enough space for all the children. One boy, Miguel Ferniza, was listening to that conversation and in his heart dreamed that one day he would donate money and help Branches in order to help kids like himself.

Miguel did not forget and in fact made it a part of his personal mission to be able to one day give back and make an impact. This past year, he made an incredibly generous $45,000 gift so that we could expand the shade system over the entire Branches Florida City playground. Wow?!

Of course there is much more to this story all of which is covered in the video from our 2026 Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala. **Scan the QR code below to watch Miguel's story**.

It is a privilege to serve and love children and families each day and over the years and decades. It is a remarkable gift to see the goodness that comes from this service. I am grateful to each of YOU for the creative and consistent ways you make love real in the lives of children and families through Branches!

With Hope & Gratitude,

Brent McLaughlin
President & CEO

Scan the QR code to watch his story

Miguel (back left) as a Branches student in Florida City.

Branches Florida City Playground Shade System Ribbon Cutting with Miguel Ferniza and his family.

Miguel Ferniza (2nd from left) and his family at Branches' 2026 Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala.

Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala

Branches celebrates its first $1 Million Dollar Gala!

On Saturday, May 2, 2026, at the JW Marriott Marquis Miami, Branches celebrated its 24th Annual Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala and achieved a historic milestone, its first million-dollar gala. More than 650 guests stepped into an enchanted forest and enjoyed a magical evening under the stars. This sold-out event brought together local philanthropists, business leaders, and community partners for a night where generosity blossomed.

This year's Gala was led by Philanthropic Chairs Trish and Dan Bell and Gala Chairs Leah and Phillip Sylvester. Trish and Dan Bell also generously provided a dollar-for-dollar matching grant for all gifts made during the evening's appeal, doubling the impact of every donation. A highlight of the evening was the presentation of the 2026 Trish & Dan Bell Community Empowerment Award to Dr. Jose L. Dotres, Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, in recognition of his leadership and commitment to expanding opportunities for students and families throughout our community.

The Gala supported the critical services Branches provides to more than 15,000 individuals each year. These programs include daily after-school enrichment, tutoring, and college and career preparation for more than 550 students, along with financial coaching, micro-business support, free tax preparation, and emergency assistance for thousands of adults. Through the generosity of our supporters, Branches can continue partnering with families to build educational and financial assets, strengthen community, and inspire hope. Every dollar raised helps us build brighter futures for children, adults, and families across South Florida.

Gala Chairs Leah & Phillip Sylvester, Branches' President & CEO, Brent McLaughlin and Philanthropic Chairs Trish & Dan Bell

Eduardo Dominguez & Board Member Nidia Ruiz with Erbi Blanco True & Alex True

President & CEO, Brent McLaughlin, Dr. Jose L. Dotres, Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools and Trish & Dan Bell

Andrei Savtchenko, Brittnie Bassant, Laurie Jennings & Josh Salman

George Marakas, Pat McEnany & Shawn Blandine

Branches 2026 Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala Committee

Branches students celebrating its first ever $1 Million Dollar Gala!

Top Sponsors of Branches' Black Tie & Blue Jeans Gala and Auction included:

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THANK YOU to all our generous sponsors for their incredible support!

Scan the QR code to watch our Gala Recap video!

Please visit branchesfl.org/2026gala to learn more.

Branches' Happennings

Branches' Youth have a memorable spring break camp and Micro-Businesses Program launches new AI workshops

"Pressed yet not crushed" - Branches' Oasis Spring Break Camp

This spring, nearly 300 middle and high school students, staff, and volunteers from Branches traveled to Warren W. Willis United Methodist Camp in Leesburg, FL for our annual Oasis Spring Break Camp. Centered around the theme "Pressed Not Crushed," the week encouraged students to see life's pressures as opportunities for God to strengthen their faith, build their character, and reveal His purpose.

Between kayaking, sailing, fishing, zip lining, go-karts, and team games, students enjoyed an unforgettable week of adventure and connection. Through worship, personal testimonies, and small group discussions, they explored real-life challenges such as academic pressure, relationships, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future while learning that God remains faithful through every season.

A special addition this year was the presence of licensed Mental Health Therapist Shenicah Tulloch, who provided training for our team and support for students throughout the week. As Shenicah shared, "Mental health wellness enriches every part of our lives," helping reinforce the importance of caring for emotional, psychological and spiritual well-being.

This impactful experience would not have been possible without the generous support of Trish and Dan Bell. Thank you for helping create a space where students can grow in faith, build meaningful relationships, and discover that with God, they can be pressed, but not crushed.

Micro-Business launches new Gen AI Workshops for Small Business Participants

The business landscape is changing rapidly, and Branches' Micro-Business Program is helping local entrepreneurs stay ahead of the curve. Through an exciting partnership with the Barry University AI Center, participants are gaining practical knowledge and hands-on experience with artificial intelligence tools designed to help small businesses operate more efficiently.

This year, entrepreneurs have participated in a series of monthly GENAI workshops, innovation labs, and collaborative learning experiences focused on applying AI in real-world business settings. Participants receive individualized support from Barry University students who work directly with business owners to explore solutions, test ideas, and strengthen their operations.

For many entrepreneurs, the program represents a full-circle opportunity to learn and grow. Michele Tirado, a Branches Micro-Business Program participant and Founder of Bellezza Miami, shared, "The foundation Branches provided is what made everything I've built possible. Being able to share what I've learned with others on the same path means everything."

This innovative work would not be possible without the support of our valued partners and funders. We are especially grateful to Barry University for its collaboration and to JPMorganChase for its transformational investment in preparing small business owners for the opportunities and challenges of an AI-driven economy.

THANK YOU to all our generous donors for supporting Branches' programs!

All other donors from the current Fiscal Year (1/16/2026 - 6/19/2026) are listed at branchesfl.org/our-stories under Newsletters

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Thank You, Branches Donors & Stakeholders!

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Back to School BASH

Wednesday, August 5th, 2026

University of Miami Newman Alumni Center
6200 San Amaro Dr, Coral Gables, FL 33146
6PM - 8PM

Join us as we celebrate 10 years of Branches' Back to School Bash! Enjoy an evening of networking, light bites, drinks, and hands-on impact as we help prepare over 550 students for a successful school year.

Scan to get your tickets!
Cost: $50 Donation / $60 at the door