

# Kids Club partners with Sheriff to transcribe books for the blind

## Female inmates learning Braille

### SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

The Winning Kids Club, Braille Institute of Florida, and the Lee County Sheriff's Office have formed a partnership to reach out to the community and provide books for blind and low-vision children.

Female inmates are learning the basics of the Braille code and have already transcribed one child's book into Braille. Some of the incarcerated have even written their own kids Braille tactile picture books and poems. They plan to distribute their books next spring, after the first class graduates.

"It's sad that blind children do not have many books to read," said Sgt. Catherine Cottilli, LCSO's Program Facilitator for the inmates. "Not only does this program provide more Braille books for children, but it prepares the inmates for useful employment when they go back into the community."

Most of the twelve inmates in the program have small children waiting for them, Cottilli said.

"The inmates can't wait to start studying each day, even on days when there are no classes," she said. According to Cottilli, the inmates are becoming more self-confident and proud of their work. "They truly want to help kids get their Brailled books," she said.

The program, spearheaded by Gail Ghigna-Hallas, president of the Winning Kids Club, is conducted at the Lee County Corrections Facility on Ortiz Boulevard and run by Capt. Edward Leavens.

"We are happy to be joining forces with the Winning Kids Club and Braille Institute to provide this program," Leavens said. "What a great way to turn the inmates' interest in a positive direction. And the most important outcome is that the Lee County Sheriff's Office is providing Braille materials for children who need them most."

According to Ghigna-Hallas, research indicates that when inmates are involved in education and vocational training while incarcerated, they are less likely to return to prison after they are released. She said that Sgt. Cottilli has done wonders with the group of inmates in getting them to understand the reading needs of blind children.

"Here in Lee County, we are beginning to make headway, because it takes sighted community leaders like those here at the Sheriff's Office, to inform the public. It's also going to take sighted government officials, educators, and the publishing industry to bring blind children anywhere close to the same educational level of sighted children," she said.

Three years ago Ghigna-Hallas lost sight



COURTESY PHOTO

**Winning partners kick off Braille for Kids Program at Lee County Sheriff's Office, Ortiz Corrections Facility. Pictured seated: Inmate students enrolled in the Program. Back row, shaking hands in unified partnership: Sgt. C. Cottilli, LCSO Braille Coordinator; Capt. E. Leavens, LCSO Braille Program Director; and Dr. Ghigna-Hallas, President, Winning Kids Club/Braille Institute of Florida.**

in one eye from an injury while teaching children to rollerskate. Since then, the former pediatric nurse has used her education and experience to educate the public on the needs of blind and low-vision children. Her dream is to obtain a mobile unit, Good Bumps on a Roll, which will go into the community and give eye exams, as well as provide mobile classroom and Children's Library.

"Unfortunately, most people don't want to talk about these issues," said Ghigna-Hallas.

Ghigna-Hallas says that there is an overlying myth that blind children don't need to learn Braille. "It's the attitude which causes 96 percent of blind kids to grow up

illiterate. What if we suggested that sighted children don't need to read and write?"

Debbly Brackett, president of the National Federation of the Blind's Parents of Blind Children of Florida, says "Literacy is critical for everyone. Books in Braille are critical for our children who are blind. They can't just walk into a library and pick up a book." Brackett's 7-year-old daughter Winona, blind since birth, recently won a national Braille Readers are Leaders Award for reading over 1,000 pages in Braille.

For more information on how you can help the cause, or to make a tax-deductible donation, contact the Winning Kids Club; phone 671-0946, or e-mail Literacy4Kids@WinningKidsClub.org. ■

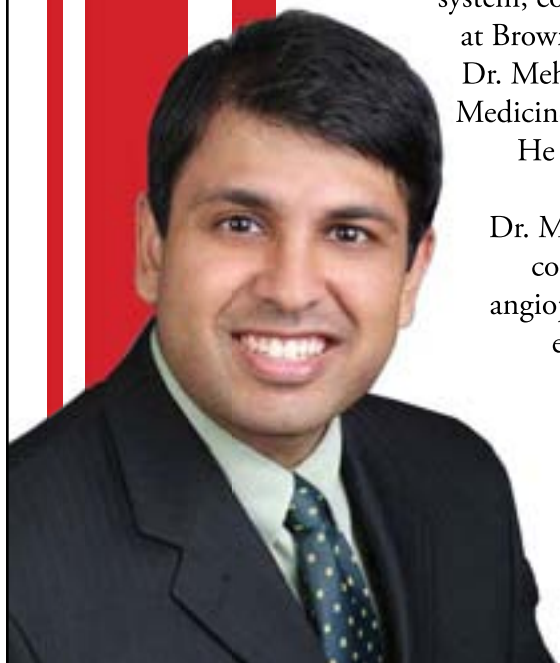


### Physicians & Staff are pleased to welcome their new associate, Dr. Shalin B. Mehta.

Dr. Mehta was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Maryland in 1996. He was awarded his medical degree from the University of Maryland School of Medicine in 2000. In 2003, he completed his Residency in Internal Medicine at Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio. He subsequently completed a Cardiology Fellowship at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island in 2006. He remained within the Ivy League system, completing an Interventional Cardiology Fellowship at Brown Medical School/The Miriam Hospital in 2007. Dr. Mehta is certified by the American Board of Internal Medicine. He is Board eligible for cardiovascular diseases.

He is a Diplomate of the Certification Board of Nuclear Cardiology.

Dr. Mehta's interests include cardiac catheterization, coronary angioplasty and stenting, peripheral angioplasty, consultative cardiology, transesophageal echocardiography, and nuclear cardiology.



Shalin B. Mehta, MD

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