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# Children of Milagros: Bringing aid to a community center in need

Matthew Ashley

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Children of Milagros: Bringing Aid to a Community Center in Need

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
Honors College  
James Madison University

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by Matthew C. Ashley

April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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Accepted by the faculty of the Honors College, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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**PUBLIC PRESENTATION**

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the James Madison University Honors College Symposium on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

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## **Abstract**

Children of Milagros, Inc. (COM) was organized for the charitable purposes of providing tuition for educational and developmental services to underprivileged children in the Dominican Republic. Currently COM offers aid to a sole beneficiary, Espacio Infantil Madison (EIM). EIM is a community center in Gurabo, Dominican Republic that provides a safe, educational environment for young children of low-income families. To establish a rationale for funding the space, this project explores the needs of the community as well as the present and future benefits of early childhood education and socialization for individuals. The remainder of this project discusses the founding of a non-profit organization to legitimately fundraise and support future growth of community centers in the Dominican Republic.

## **Introduction**

Motivation for the creation of Children of Milagros, Inc. (COM) arose from a desire to aid in sponsoring the tuition of young children of the Dominican Republic to an educational community space while their parents go to work. The children in our target demographic are generally from low-income families and often have no other option for early childhood care and education. Our short-term goal is to fund a current community center, Espacio Infantil Madison (EIM), located in Gurabo, Dominican Republic.

The building for Espacio Infantil Madison was constructed roughly 4 years ago by prior JMU Honors College Global Studies student fundraising. To this point, the space has been operated by a mother-daughter pair, Milagros and Corolla. These women are working with minimal income to provide a safe, educational space for their community's youth. With their whole family often pitching in resources, they run the community center on a day-to-day basis. The women do all they physically can to educate and enlighten the youth of the town. Milagros is viewed as a wise educator by Gurabo residents and feels it is her duty to provide these children a chance to grow and prosper safely. She donated the last tiny portion of land on her small property for this space to be built and altruistically wants to see it flourish and reach its full potential.

In the summer of 2017, I spent slightly less than a month living with the family and helping at the space to better empathize with what they do and how it impacts the community. After this trip, I developed a growing motivation to establish some structure of aid for their cause. With help from COM to fund the space and the early childhood care and education services offered, we are hoping to foster the growth of children's minds and bodies, when they otherwise may not be able to receive an education or have proper nutrition. After establishing a

successful model, we hope to expand the opportunity into other disadvantaged communities across the nation and eventually the regions of Central America and the Caribbean.

## Literature Review

### *Understanding the Needs of The Community*

The Dominican Republic is a developing nation that has continually struggled with socio-economic inequality. While the wealthy can easily find ways to receive quality educations, high paying jobs, and receive more than adequate healthcare, those on the other end of the spectrum are left searching for a hint of opportunity to rise from their inherited situations. Without successful elders to influence children through guidance or direction, the young population of the poverty-stricken communities tend to follow in the steps of their family members down paths leading to hardship.

Poverty is a problem that plagues much of the country's population, especially those in rural and developing urban areas. Over half of the country does not have access to clean water or sanitary toilets, and in 2016 more than 30% of the population was living below the poverty line ("Dominican Republic - The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency [WFBCIA]," 2019). Approximately 20% of the country survives on less than \$2 USD per day (Alkire, Sabina, & Santos, 2010). In a system where the highest 10% of the population earns 34.7% of all income, the lowest 10% only earn 1.9% ("WFBCIA," 2019). This structure of the economy does not provide ample opportunity for emerging out of the cycle of poverty breeding poverty, as the rich use their status and fortune to hold back the large low-income population and exploit their situations for cheap labor.

The Dominican Republic's economy focuses on major sectors such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and tourism that are labor intensive and often offer very low wages. (*Dominican Republic Economic Report 2018*, 2018). Instead of receiving a traditional education,

having the chance to earn a higher paying job, and moving up in society, many young people in these disadvantaged families begin working at an early age to try and help support their household. This has exacerbated the issue of illegal child labor. The Dominican Republic Child Labor Survey states it believes close to 15% of all children between the ages of 5-14 are engaged in some form of labor activities (*Dominican Republic: 2012 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor*, 2012).

When children enter the workforce early, many end up dropping out of school. Only 13.4% of children age 10-14 continue to attend school while working (*Dominican Republic: 2012 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor*, 2012). This can have many profound effects on an individual's development as the lack of education can later impact their potential income level, psychological and overall health, social life, and general competence. While children may believe they are doing what is best to support their struggling families, these practices actually take away from their later potential to affect much greater change on their family's situation.

During my experience visiting Espacio Infantil Madison, I was able to learn first-hand how many of these issues stemming from poverty impact the function of the community center. Through informal conversation with parents whose child either presently attended the space or had in the past, I only found one parent that claimed to have another option for their child to receive some form of care and education at a facility; this was based solely on the issue of cost.

From a financial standpoint, parents must pay a monthly "tuition" fee, equivalent to approximately \$90 USD. Parents are also supposed to send supplies, such as food and diapers, with their children to the center each day. However, because of the varying financial situations of these parents, many simply pay when they can- whether it be weekly, biweekly, or monthly. Additionally, parents often cannot afford to provide enough diapers, food, or water for the day

and send the children without any supplies. In these all-too-frequent instances, Milagros and Corolla are forced to spend unforeseen money on diapers, water, milk, and food just to provide the students with these necessities. With parents only paying as they can, regular bills often become difficult to pay on time. This causes Milagros and Corolla to cover even more costs that are not provided for by the monthly parental fees.

Along with the lack of full payment from families actively using the service, there has recently been a drop-off in the total number of children enrolled. When asked, many of these families say they wish they could keep their child at the space but can no longer afford to pay even the minimal cost of attendance each month. Instead, during a work day these families will have to leave their child at home with a friend or relative. Sometimes, parents may even have to choose between employment and taking care of their child because they have no other option of care. The situation occurring at EIM is another example of how parents who are trying to help their families and children have a new opportunity to escape the grasps of poverty are held back; this problem is due to the financial constraints brought about by the cycle of poverty breeding poverty in Dominican communities.

### ***Early Child Care and Education Creating Opportunity***

While early childhood care and education is not a complete solution to the issue of poverty in the Dominican Republic, as there is no single answer, I believe that it is a great starting point. Early childhood care and education is proven to have the ability to directly impact certain skills and attributes that later indirectly create future opportunities in many aspects of life (Friedman-Krauss, Bernstein, & Steven Barnett, n.d.; Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health [VCUCSH], 2014). The ability to have a profound effect on the child depends not only on whether they receive care, but also on the quality of care received

(Shonkoff, Phillips, & National Research Council (U.S.). Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development., 2000).

Direct positive impacts of child development programs include cognitive skills, social-emotional skills, mental health, and physical health (Friedman-Krauss et al., n.d.). The indirect effects of developing these skills and healthy tendencies include but are not limited to having: better overall health and well-being as an adult; a better chance to earn a higher education; and eventually the chance to be hired to better and higher-paying jobs as a result (VCUCSH, 2014). For example, providing proper nutrition and care prevents malnutrition or obesity from occurring in children. This also has the potential to increase the rate of cognitive development (Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey, 2001). Down the road, these children also may have avoided potential mental health and emotional issues due to inadequate physical health (Friedman-Krauss et al., n.d.). While directly affecting the physical health through nutrition, it can increase cognitive development now and build a mentally stronger individual for the future.

Investments into a child's development in the first 3-5 years of life have been shown to disproportionately impact a person's life in comparison to the later years of schooling and life (Raby, Roisman, Fraley, & Simpson, 2015; Arriagada, Perry, Rawlings, Trias, & Zumaeta, 2018). The gaps that develop in cognitive, health, and emotional skills appear well before entering primary school (Conti & Heckman, 2012). There are indications that developmental differences can occur based on socioeconomic status leading to a difference in a child's home environment and early care. Certain biological changes may also be evident due to a lack of quality upbringing and adverse environment (Braveman, Egerter, & Williams, 2011). Each of these differences appear to be strongly associated with how an individual reacts to stressful situations later in life (Shonkoff et al., 2000). Studies show that although there are opportunities

for intervention later in childhood, the use of programs developed by educational centers to nurture and stimulate children's minds have a much higher potential of resolving some of the effects of low-income life on a child's cognitive, emotional, and physical development (Braveman et al., 2011; Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). This speaks to the necessity for the care and education to be of great quality and not simply available, because once the early years pass there is no way to efficiently regain what has already been lost (Shonkoff et al., 2000).

During the first year of life, sensory pathways are established during human brain development even before language and higher cognitive function (Arriagada et al., 2018). Countries that do not sufficiently fund early child care and education programs are eliminating much of the nutrition, early stimulation, early learning, and nurturing care that allows children to reach their full potentials (Britto et al., 2017). An increase in funding for the early years could allow for less of a need to invest in later programs (Karoly et al., 2005). Remediation of disadvantaged individuals through avenues such as public job training, adult literacy and math programs, criminal rehabilitation programs, and healthcare for chronic conditions due to incompetence are much more expensive than an original investment in child development programs (Conti & Heckman, 2012). While it is cost effective due to a much higher return on capital, child development programs clearly could also be one of the smartest investments for helping to corner extreme poverty and reduce inequality (Arriagada et al., 2018). Not only can funding early care and education lead to a healthier population, it can also lead to a more productive population and create opportunities for disadvantaged children (Britto et al., 2017). Similar to how it is often said that poverty breeds poverty, research has proven that through these types of programs the concept of "skill begets skill" as stated by James Heckman, can initiate a trickledown effect over an entire country's well-being (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov,

2006). There is no way to prevent a child's birth into a disadvantaged situation, but the opportunity to influence a child's skills can matter greatly in working out of inherited inequality (Conti & Heckman, 2012).

### ***Previous Studies Validating Early Child Care and Education***

Realizing the benefits a country receives through early childhood care and education is not a revolutionary concept. Since the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, many programs have been established all around the globe to address the issue of disadvantaged children receiving inadequate developmental care. Through a review of multiple previously completed studies examining intervention with high-quality care before the age of 5, investment into early childhood care and education has been validated as an intelligent use of resources.

To demonstrate how the direct effect of early cognitive development influences future academic performance, The Abecedarian Project examined over 100 participants from early infancy until the age of 21. Beginning with high-quality early education care as infants until age 5, the project explored its effects through cognitive and academic testing. Results from testing showed that direct cognitive gains established during the period from infancy until age five indirectly, positively affected development of reading and math skills academically (Campbell et al., 2001). At the 21-year-old check in, the individuals in the treatment group had a higher rate of acceptance into higher education than the control children who did not receive care from a child developmental program. The children in the control group also on average were younger when the birth of their first child occurred (Campbell et al., 2001; Canada, 2009). This can be indicative of uneducated decision making versus thoughtful life planning.

The Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk tracked 243 individuals from birth until the age of 32 to understand the effects care and educational interactions between parents and children. The study concluded that approximately 10% of someone's success academically had a correlation to the quality of care they received until age 3. The study claims the other 90% stems from chance, later experiences, and genetic make-up (Raby et al., 2015). This shows that quality early intervention has the potential to disproportionately influence academic success in a positive manner (Conti & Heckman, 2012). Other similarly arranged studies show positive cognitive development during early years may also lead to better health due to establishing a stronger trust in scientific health recommendations, knowing how to make healthier life-style choices, and being more likely to follow assigned medical treatments (Anderson, Foster, & Frisvold, 2009; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2012).

Economic performance as a result of early child care and education was explored by The High/Scope Perry Preschool study. This study began with 123 low-income African-American children, each of whom were considered to be at high risk for educational failure. Approximately half of the group was randomly selected to receive the treatment of a high-quality preschool program, while the others remained the control. Data was collected from ages 3-11 and then again throughout the rest of their lives until the age of 40 (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Results showed increased educational performance through higher rates of graduation from high school by those that completed the program as well as higher scores on intellectual and language tests throughout the years of review (Schweinhart et al., 2005). Economically, a significantly larger grouping of the program children were employed at the age of 40 than those in the control. The treated participants at age 40 also showed a cost-benefit return of \$12.90 per dollar spent on the program (Canada, 2009). Socially, there was a much lower incidence of involvement in the

criminal justice system as well as a lower likelihood of being identified as requiring special education aid (Canada, 2009; Schweinhart et al., 2005). This study assessed many of the indirect, applicable outcomes of an early childhood care and education program and for each of the criteria found a notable or significant difference between the treated and control participants.

The Abecedarian Project, The Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk, High/Scope Perry Preschool study, and many other similar studies all show positive economic, health, educational, and emotional development after participants had taken part of a high-quality early child care and education program. While none of these studies took place in the Dominican Republic, the results appear applicable to any cultural population. In cultures like those that exist in disadvantaged communities of the Dominican Republic, such as parts of Gurabo, the people are extremely nurturing and family oriented. Throughout adequate funding for participation at community centers and the use of a high-quality early child care and education programs, I believe communities would rally around the new opportunity and begin to see success as has been found in many other previous instances.

## **Addressing the Issue**

### ***Determining an Approach***

Once establishing that education and, more specifically, early child care and education was where I wanted to focus my efforts, determining the best way to do so was not a simple answer. I knew that I wanted to use the existing entity of Espacio Infantil Madison to continue their efforts already in action. To do so, originally three options were considered for how to best offer aid: design a program to send volunteers to the Dominican Republic and help out at the space; design a business plan for Milagros and Corolla to use at the space to better use the money they collect from parents and ensure they are accurately tracking expenses; trying to personally fundraise with my connections.

After thoughtful consideration and discussions with my advisors, fundraising for the space appeared to be the best way to help. It became clear that sending volunteers to help in the community center would not be very beneficial. Often in philanthropic or service situations, offering certain types of help to others can instead make accomplishing their objectives even harder. Sending volunteers would not create a better educational environment or ease the financial hardship of attending the space. In fact, volunteers being present would actually cost the space more resources in terms of electricity, water, and time to manage teaching volunteers the best ways to work with the children. This realization allowed for the elimination of the idea to create a volunteer program.

Designing a business plan appeared to be a good part of the initial efforts and had the potential to help the space drastically, so it became one of the first objectives for my project. As time went on, before I started that portion of the project, plans changed. Milagros and Corolla

began working on gaining legitimate non-profit status in the Dominican Republic. During the process of these efforts, they began to develop a business plan on their own. Upon learning this, that objective was crossed off the list.

All that remained was the idea to fundraise for the space. Realistically, this was the best option to address the economic barriers at EIM. Neither a business plan nor volunteer program could address the lack of an ability to pay the cost of attendance for a child by parents or the need to fund the continued development of the space to be more functional. Once the decision was made to help through financial aid, determining how to best do so offered its own set of perplexities.

In general, informal fundraising is not difficult to accomplish. There are many ways to go about simply asking for money from friends, family, and acquaintances. Trying to establish a system of fundraising that would result in substantial donation and have the ability to impact a cause is much more involved. The first solutions that came to mind were: crowdfunding through a reliable and notable established online company; creating an independent website and having the option to donate directly to us without using another company; using a fiscal sponsor to handle the capacity of operating a charitable organization to gather donations; or establishing a non-profit organization (NPO) in the United States and having EIM as a beneficiary.

Crowdfunding was easily ruled out as it would not be in any form a long-term solution for funding the EIM. Along with this, the idea of simply a website was taken off the table. While it would be easy to create a website with a short description of the mission and the function to accept payments, the donations would not have been tax deductible. Donors also would not have felt the security of donating to a legitimate organization where they know their money is being put towards the stated cause. In today's world where anyone can create a website and put

anything they like out on the internet, why would anyone believe a simple website with no backing? It likely would have been hard to convince individuals to donate for both of these reasons.

Lastly, it was determined that the use of a fiscal sponsor would not be the best solution. Initially, we felt as though it could be a great option to be able to offer tax deductible donations and raise funds legitimately allowing us to circumvent the need to establish a new non-profit entity. Eventually the realization arose, without a donor base established use of a fiscal sponsor could be too expensive to maintain; to receive the benefits of their administrative services and non-profit status, the user must pay a handsome fee. Elimination of this idea led to the decision to found a new non-profit organization.

### ***Beginning a Non-Profit Organization***

As the most viable option to help more children receive care and education, the decision to establish a new NPO was one that came with many benefits and many more complexities. The clear benefits included: having the ability to ensure donors their money was going to a legitimate cause; allowing for tax deductions for each donation; there are multiple stakeholders in the cause; and once established, the NPO could exist perpetually and establish long-term goals to be able to offer aid to more than just a single beneficiary.

To begin the incorporation process, Robert Dewar of Williams Mullen agreed to take on the job on a pro-bono status. The first step was to choose a name for the organization and then fill out the basic questionnaire as seen in Appendix A. Instead of choosing a name by myself, I decided to establish who would make up the founding board members and then come to a consensus on our name together. The team of four founding board members includes myself and

three other competent individuals: Christopher Ashley; Felix Wang; and Jason Good.

Consideration of who should join the board stemmed from wanting to combine differing relevant skill sets and expertise to offer beneficial viewpoints to each decision-making process. To begin operations without creating the need to pay employees, I was chosen to accept the responsibilities of the offices of President, Treasurer, and Secretary. Christopher Ashley was chosen to accept the responsibilities of office of Vice President.

With the board and positions now established, the process of choosing a name began. The main criteria we agreed must be considered were to demonstrate the charitable purpose and to use the word “Milagros”. It was important to use this word since while it means miracle, it is also the first name of the woman who is the driving motivation behind the entire charitable effort through beginning the original community space. Without her efforts to philanthropically provide for and educate her community, this project would not have existed. Using her name, quickly we agreed on Madison Milagros because of its clear translation to Madison Miracles and our beginning at James Madison University. Luckily, before committing to the name we discussed concerns about being tied to JMU by using the word “Madison”. As a board, we decided that it would be in our best interest to remove the word Madison from the name. To allow the charity to have its greatest potential to grow to reach a larger donor base and expand its purpose, we did not want to psychologically limit ourselves to the JMU audience with a name. After exploring a couple of new options and with the help of public opinion through informal polling, we settled on Children of Milagros (COM).

The next steps of incorporation included the drafting of articles of incorporation, bylaws, and organizational minutes stating the actions of the board. To complete the articles, a general purpose for the organization had to be stated. With long-term goals of growth in mind, our

statement reads, “The corporation is organized exclusively for charitable, educational, or scientific purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as now enacted or hereafter amended (referred to herein as the “Code”), including, without limitation, (i) providing educational and developmental services, opportunities and tuition to underprivileged children in the Dominican Republic, and other Caribbean and Central American countries; and (ii) the acquisition of land and construction of one or more community spaces in the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean and Central American countries”. Using a broad statement like such allows us to expand the reach of COM without having to amend the articles.

After approving, signing the documents, and filing for incorporation in Virginia, we completed the process of applying for an employer identification number (EIN) with the IRS. On February 1, 2019 the Commonwealth of Virginia’s State Corporation Commission issued the certificate of incorporation for Children of Milagros, Inc. (Appendix B). With the certificate of incorporation, articles of incorporation, and EIN finally in hand after 4 long months, I was able to open the organization’s bank account so we could start the process of accepting donations. Once choosing our marketing plan of action, we hope to begin collecting funds during April of 2019. With the help of Meg Dewar of Kirkland and Ellis, the process of filing for non-profit status as a 501(c)(3) organization using the IRS Form 1023-EZ is underway. This allows for donations we receive to be deemed tax deductible once documents process. In the meantime, COM must be careful to not advertise tax-deductible donations, but instead include the statement, “Children of Milagros, Inc. has applied with the Internal Revenue Service for recognition of its tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, but has not yet received a determination letter confirming such status. Please consult your own tax advisor regarding the timing and amount of any income tax deduction available as a result of a

contribution to Children of Milagros, Inc.”, to ensure our status is clearly understood. COM is also in the process of filing as a charitable organization with the state of Virginia using Form 102. This will state that we are a non-profit organization and plan to fundraise in the state of Virginia. To be able to collect donations from the entire country, we are going to have to take the next step of filing nationally after raising funds to cover fees.

## **Final Reflections**

Now as a functional organization, COM is preparing to address the short-term goal of sponsoring the tuition of children to attend Espacio Infantil Madison. After we are able to fund a full class of children in the small space at EIM and know we are helping the community by giving their children the socialization, nutrition, and early childhood education they need to prosper, we plan to address the first of our long-term goals. The established long-term goals are to: (i) Move EIM into a larger building. This would allow for the accommodation of more children and would employ more people from the community. To achieve this, there is a plot of land we have explored purchasing and building a school, but there are also several other options of already constructed buildings that could be purchased and renovated; (ii) Begin to utilize a fully documented and laid out program focused on the development of the children through early child care and education. To achieve this, we could either purchase educational plans and tools that are already designed or work to create our own process; (iii) Expand the reach of Children of Milagros, Inc. into other similar disadvantaged communities within in the Dominican Republic. This would only occur once establishing a model that could be replicated and seeing positive results from that model; and (iv) Expand the reach of Children of Milagros, Inc. into other countries in the region that have the similar need of impoverished communities whose children are not able to receive proper socialization, nutrition, or early childhood education. In time with ample support and good will, I believe each of these goals are more than within reach and I am excited to learn more each day as the process continues.

This project has been an extremely educational experience. I have been able to recognize that throughout the project there were many obstacles that led to alterations in many objectives from the original proposal. Due to these unexpected developments, as the project progressed, I

learned to adapt my objectives to best address the issues at hand. This project has increased my understanding of many areas including: the benefits of high-quality early childhood care and education; the process of creating and beginning to operate a non-profit organization; and how working with other cultures, can be both challenging and rewarding. There may be some difficulties in ensuring legitimacy and documentation for each part of the process as we coordinate more with Espacio Infantil Madison when we begin to transfer funds and thus bring children to the space. Through this experience I hope to learn much more about what it means to work with another culture and not cross boundaries while trying to offer a helping hand.

I have an entirely different outlook on my goals with this project continuing than I did when it began. There is now significant reasoning why I believe our aid is necessary. This organization is no longer just something I want to create for the community of Gurabo because they can't afford early child care and education on their own, but because I believe it has the potential to change many lives for the better. In today's world where many of the roads to success begin with education, there should not be financial barriers restricting the lower class from receiving such education and getting their opportunity to improve their position in society. I believe that early child care and education programs offered in these communities, free of charge, will be part of the solution to help breaking the cycle of inequities.

I believe the project has been a success to this point, but there is still much more work to do. I am glad the mission will not stop here and will continue through Children of Milagros, Inc. Reaching this point would not have been possible without acknowledging the benefits of working to grow and leverage my personal network for assistance and advice when dealing with adverse conditions. As I continue this journey as the President of Children of Milagros, Inc., I

will embrace each obstacle as a new opportunity to gain greater understanding and will continue to seek the help of those around me.

## **Appendices**

### ***Appendix A***

1. Full names and addresses of initial board of directors.
2. Full names, titles and addresses of initial officers. We need at least two people to hold the positions of President and Treasurer/Secretary. One person can hold multiple offices simultaneously.
3. Total number of employees expected in the next 12 months, if any.
4. General purpose of the entity. I may need additional information depending on the description of the purpose.
5. Phone number of responsible party that the IRS can contact for additional information.
6. Physical principal address in the United States, if known. If you do not have a current address, we can use the address of the registered agent that you are required to appoint in each jurisdiction.

Commonwealth of Virginia



STATE CORPORATION COMMISSION

Richmond, February 1, 2019

*This is to certify that the certificate of incorporation of*

**Children of Milagros, Inc.**

*was this day issued and admitted to record in this office and that the said corporation is authorized to transact its business subject to all Virginia laws applicable to the corporation and its business. Effective date: February 1, 2019*



State Corporation Commission

Attest:

*Joel H. Beck*  
Clerk of the Commission

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