

“This article was written by a local reporter in Bradenton, FL who recently toured our **Richard Milburn Academy** and spoke with students, faculty and our School Director. I think it captures the essence of what we do in each of our Richard Milburn Academies. Our commitment is *to help students learn...no matter what it takes.*”

~Donna Eldridge, Vice President of Milburn Schools

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Section E1

## Fighting for the Forgotten

By ROBERT NAPPER

**MANATEE — Her students at times are desperate.**

*Desperate for someone to talk to.  
Desperate for someone to care.  
Desperate to learn.*

And most of all, Krista Morton’s Richard Milburn Academy students are desperate for someone to give them one last chance.

At Richard Milburn, a Bradenton alternative high school for troubled teens and young adults, students up to the age of 21 still have a shot at a diploma. Most have already either dropped out or have been expelled from other schools.

“Most of the kids here have burned all of the bridges,” said Morton, Richard Milburn director. “It is really their last chance.”

Morton has made it her career’s work to extend her hand to those who have had the roughest go at life, and have made the worst decisions.

It has not always been easy. Since her days as a rookie teacher working with teens in a residential psychiatric facility, her decision to try to lift up those in the most peril has been fulfilling, but at times dangerous.



Morton has literally taken the punches and the kicks from students she is trying to bring around. Her car has been vandalized, her life threatened. She knows what it’s like to have to put a violent teenager in a full-body restraint.

But the good far outweighs the negative, because Morton says she knows it’s not personal. She knows the kids she works with are angry, often in pain, but like anyone else they have hopes and dreams.

“I have had students who are homeless and desperate, but turn things around and flourish,” Morton said. “That is what it is all about.”

After receiving a bachelor’s degree in education, Morton began focusing on special education, earning a master’s in the field from Central Connecticut State University, in her home state.

“I have had students who are homeless and desperate, but turn things around and flourish,” Morton said. “That is what it is all about.”

She took a job in a psychiatric facility for teens as a teacher and her love for working with special-needs kids began, she said.

“I just found out I really liked it,” said Morton. “It is always such a challenge. Once you think you have everything figured out, you have to change to adapt to a new situation that arises.”



**Krista Morton, School Director,  
Richard Milburn Academy**

In 2004, Morton’s husband, Lance, took a job in Tampa, so the couple and their four children relocated to Florida. Morton quickly got a job as assistant director at a Richard Milburn school in Tampa, before being promoted two years ago as director of the Bradenton school.

As usual everyday is a challenge at the school — the metal detector in the door is the first sign of that. All of the 230 student enrolled at the school enter through the detector each morning, and also have their pockets searched. But most of them do not mind, Morton said. Of those students enrolled this year, 70 are former dropouts who Morton recruited walking door to door twice a week looking for kids not in school.

“We are a voluntary school, so these kids are all working hard to better themselves,” she said.

But that does not mean the students don’t bring serious problems with them. On Tuesday, a 17-year-old boy sat on the “time out bench.” He had gotten a refer-

ral from a teacher for misbehaving in class and had a meeting scheduled later for Morton.

The boy has been in and out of foster care for much of his life and both his parents are drug addicts and in jail, Morton said.

“His life is as tough as it gets,” said Morton.

“But with some time out here to cool off, talk about things, he will probably be able to go back to class and finish out the day.”

Class changes at Richard Milburn are very regimented. Security guards with radios confer with each other and steer kids between classes with stern discipline.

Seeing Morton in the hall, it is obvious the students have respect for the fact that she cares for them even though she doesn’t have to.

“We love you Ms. Morton,” a boy twice her size walking in the hallway exclaimed.

Morton said the kids in her school are savvy and can smell someone who is fake a mile away.

“I am real and they know that. I am going to be honest with them about what they are doing and how they can improve themselves,” she said.

Of course, Morton’s vision is only as strong as her teachers, she said.

“We have the most dedicated teachers I have ever seen here. This is a tough place and they choose to be here, just like there students,” Morton said. “It is inspiring to work together for a common goal.”

Social studies teacher Ebony Whitfield agrees.

“These kids have hardships and difficulties that most could never understand,” she said.

“We know Director Morton cares about these kids and wants to do everything she can to help them succeed, and that helps us do our job.”



Richard Milburn Academies are located in Florida and Texas and operate as public charter high schools. Enrollment is free to all eligible students. The current school locations are:

**In Texas:**

Amarillo, Beaumont, Corpus Christi,  
Fort Worth, Houston, Killeen,  
Lubbock, Midland, Odessa

**In Florida:**

Bradenton,  
South Daytona,  
Fort Myers, DeLand