When we think of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, most of us think of our children. And if you grew up in this school district in 80’s, you reminisce about your own childhood along with the county’s vast cultural changes over the past thirty something years. Our school district is the fourth largest in the nation and serves over 340,000 students and their families throughout the county. Along with Miami’s growth, and the district’s continuous educational advancements and progress, someone’s dedication and commitment to our students’ future has remained constant. Advocating the implementation of programs that enrich student’s personal lives while safeguarding academic achievements is the cornerstone of this edition’s Volunteer in Action, Ms. Deborah A. Montilla; better known as “Debbie”.

Debbie was born of a loving home in Washington D.C. She shared a happy childhood with her parents, brother, sister, and extended family and cousins. During her school years, Debbie relocated to Florida to spend time with her mom’s side of the family. She has fond memories from her childhood; “I’m blessed to have healthy caring loving relationships all my life”, she reflects with thoughtful poise. With an affirming tone, she recalls a childhood full of warmhearted and tender moments, evoking memories of playing with her siblings and cousins, particularly during sport matches and games. While in college, Debbie met her husband, Manolo, an avid Jai-Alai player. They fell in love, married and started a family. An exploration of her history demonstrates how Debbie’s career choices were partially influenced by an upbringing based on strong family networks with relatives and friends: a hands-on healthy childhood full of positive life experiences all the way to the present.

She believes a child’s education is comprised of learning while developing positive social skills and integrating community service and civic responsibility, and its’ pursuit of the foremost importance. With this underlying philosophy, she undertook a lifetime career in Education; receiving a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Masters in Counselor Education and a Doctoral Degree in Educational Administration and Supervision. Now with more than 30 years experience within our school district, Debbie Montilla, is a change agent dedicated to improving the lives of Miami youths. Currently, she is the Executive Director for the Division of Educational Opportunity and Access for Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In this capacity, she works to further the department’s mission to provide an environment for all students to become responsible, productive citizens, lifelong learners and positive contributors to society. Unlike other professions with instant gratifications based on immediate performance, Debbie selected a career that sees the “fruits of her labor” as students successfully transition into adulthood. As she illustrated, nowadays, during district events, she’s always excited to meet former students with their adolescent children, and humbled by their acknowledgment, recognition and gratitude.

In addition to her work in the field of education, she has held numerous leadership positions in various youth-serving and community-based organizations across the county, including; Informed Families Inc.,
Drug Free Youth In Town, Lighthouse for the Blind, Miami Coalition for a Safe and Drug-Free Community, The Children’s Trust School Health Committee, and the College Assistance Program. Debbie served as President of the Florida Association of Student Services Administrators and the Dade County Association for Counseling. She was also appointed by the Superintendent to serve on the Addictions Services Board. Debbie is a frequent presenter at local, state and national conferences in her field. For her outstanding service she received the Champions for Children Health Connect in Schools Award from The Children’s Trust and the Miami Today’s Best of Miami Educational Leaders Recognition in 2007.

Today, we at The Miami Coalition would like to recognize Debbie Montilla, a true leader in Education in our Miami-Dade County Public Schools. With 32 years of dedicated service to the district, she’s made it her personal mission to enhance the personal and professional growth of our children. She has improved the lives of countless youths county-wide through her hard-work, consistency, and giving spirit.

Debbie recalls one of her most memorable professional experiences was the opportunity to meet the President and First Lady when they visited Coral Reef Sr. High in Miami. They were there to recognize the District’s outstanding efforts with the Nation’s FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) Completion Project”, an initiative from the U.S. Department of Education which gives students the opportunity to afford, attend, and graduate from college. But what’s in the future for Debbie? – continuing to identify and implement innovative educational initiatives benefiting the children of Miami-Dade Public Schools, AND most importantly, enjoy family time over dinner every night with her husband of 37 years, Manolo, her two adult children and grandchildren. She also has a bucket list, which she hopes to start working on soon!