



COURTESY OF CLAYTON FERRARA

Terra Firma Institute founder Clayton Ferrara.

On Solid Ground

By Kevin Fritz

The Terra Firma Institute instills eco-friendly values in children.

The exuberance of youth is alive and well in Central Florida. And they have their sights set on how we educate our children.

By forming the Terra Firma Institute last June in Winter Park, a team of recent college graduates are laying the groundwork for something quite extraordinary: creating a generational change in the way we teach by returning to our roots and offering a better quality of education that emphasizes self-expression and instills eco-friendly values. This is far from a bunch of free-thinking antagonistic radicals—but they are out to change the world.

Founded by Clayton Ferrara of Winter Park, a 25-year-old 2009 Rollins College alumnus with degrees in biology and environmental sciences, the Institute will accomplish its mission through a boutique eco-daycare, tutoring and teaching others its methods.

Ferrara chose the phrase Terra Firma—Latin for solid earth—since he believes education needs to do a better job at grounding us and concentrating more on the environment. For example, he believes algebra could be taught by figuring out kilowatt hours or how much life a stream can manage. The teachings will be conducted mainly through hands-on education in science, music and art.

“Science is what my degrees are in, but education is my real talent,” explains Ferrara. He decided to forego graduate school at MIT to be the director

of education and head curator at the Oakland Nature Preserve in Central Florida. For two years, he honed his skills that would lead to launching the Institute.

To assure his vision comes to fruition, Ferrara turned to some of the finest young talent in Central Florida. Chris Castro, a 2010 graduate of the University of Central Florida (UCF) with a Bachelor’s in environmental science and a minor in energy and sustainability, is on board. The 23-year-old co-founded IDEAS (Intellectual Decisions on Environmental Awareness Solutions) as an undergraduate at UCF, a concept that has blossomed to 16 chapters at campuses nationwide. In December, he was honored for his work by President Barack Obama at a White House holiday reception. He currently works for Orange County as an energy specialist evaluating buildings for efficiency.

Castro explains that the work of Terra Firma and IDEAS is a perfect marriage, noting the IDEAS chapters make a great source of employees for the Institute when it opens.

“Terra Firma fills an incredible niche in the sustainability and environmental movements,” says Castro. “It will take generational shifts instilled in our current and younger generations.” ■

For more information on the Terra Firma Institute, visit CentralFloridaLifestyle.com.