

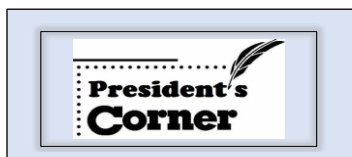
# Riverbend



# Friends

GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q3 2023 | NEWSLETTER



Greetings,

In our last communication, we discussed the full-on effort to enroll children for the 2023-24 school year. As that process closes, we transition to implementing the truly transformational services that Head Start brings which define us differently than other preschools and child care programs.

We often state that Head Start is a “comprehensive program.” This means that our services go far beyond the classroom. As soon as possible following enrollment, we conduct a comprehensive assessment of our children and families to identify strengths and areas where they need our support.

For the children we conduct developmental screenings to determine if they are functioning at age level cognitively and emotionally. We conduct vision and hearing screenings to rule out any sensory issues, we conduct oral and nutritional exams to address any underlying dental or dietary needs and we measure their height and weight to determine if the child is growing at the anticipated rate. With families we meet with them in their homes to identify their strengths and set goals they may have. Once this information is gathered, we create a plan for intervention and as the school year progresses, we monitor for positive movement with a goal to have all of our children and their parents “school ready” for their transition to kindergarten.

Stay tuned in upcoming newsletters to see progress - which is made possible by your support and partnership in building strong communities starting with our youngest members!

Thank you,

A handwritten signature of Gene Howell.

Gene Howell/President & CEO

## Setting Young Men Up for Success

In September, RHSFS employees **Cathy Blevens, Crystal Jennings, Sarah Perkhiser, Kristy Smiley** and **Veneta Wadlow** along with our STG T/TA **Jan Brown** took part in the Region V Community of Practice on Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys in Chicago, IL.

The initiative began in 2013 in response to national data demonstrating educational inequalities facing these children. Head Start took notice and began working on ways to raise staff awareness and provide tools to support the building of a culturally responsive strength-based approach. From September 26-28<sup>th</sup>, a total of 16 programs from Region V began the journey of exploring this work, where our programs are, and where we want them to be.

Over the next year, a team from RHSFS will have the opportunity to explore strategies for the development of Culturally Responsive Strength-Based Practices through training offered by Region V.



### Having a Blast at the Back to School Bash

A group of employees from Central Office and Essic Robinson recently took part in the Back-to-School Bash that was held on Thursday, July 20<sup>th</sup> at the Boys & Girls Club of Alton. The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual event was presented by the Telegraph and its parent company, Hearst Communications.

The family-friendly event is a way to celebrate kids in a safe, fun atmosphere. Organizers say it's also a way to give back to the community. Some of the fun activities for families this year included: carnival games, a dunk tank, petting zoo, hula hoop contest, cake walk, and water blaster painting, just to name a few!



**Tasha Haynes**, a Social Emotional Specialist at Central Office stepped up to the dunk tank to give it her best shot at dunking Alton Mayor **David A. Goins**. After a couple of attempts, the mayor was submerged into the tank. Just check out Tasha's right arm, the mayor didn't stand a chance! He appeared to take it all in stride, though. And with temperatures in the 90's, we're guessing he had no problem taking a dip in the nice, cool water!

**Teresa Braswell**  
**Program Aide II, Essic Robinson**

Teresa Braswell joined the agency in March 2009. She is the first person that parents and children see when visiting the Essic Robinson site in Alton. Everyone can agree, Braswell exudes a warm and friendly spirit, and instantly puts visitors at ease.

For the majority of her 14 years with the agency, she's been a fixture at Essic Robinson. She did however, spend a summer working at our Bethalto location.

"The best part of working with Teresa over the years has been seeing her connection to the children, families, and staff," says former Center Operations Supervisor, Amy Cornell. "She loves greeting the children and parents and having conversations with them. She also takes great pride in her work and helping others."



In addition to greeting the children and parents as they arrive, other duties include answering the phone, opening the doors, preparing sign-in sheets, updating emergency cards, putting files together and attendance, and that's just for starters.

Her co-workers are quick to praise her can-do attitude, and say that Braswell works very hard to ensure things are running smoothly. Since the beginning of the program year, she has been pulling double duty by working in the kitchen, in addition to her regular duties.

"This is no small feat, considering the size of Essic Robinson," says Amy Cornell. "Teresa is an asset to the mission to serve children and their families. Her many contributions display the true definition of a mission partner."

"The best part of my job is greeting the children and parents," says Braswell. "Giving the kids high fives and calling them by name and saying good morning to the parents and welcoming them to the center."

In addition to the high fives, Braswell says it's those unexpected moments that make her smile.

"This year, a repeater came into the kitchen to give me a hug and she was very shy last year and had a yard time with transitions," says Braswell. "To see her grow has been such a joy. Another boy this year who hasn't said a word to me yet, took my hand. Wow! That touched my heart."

## RHSFS Appearance on Riverbender.com

On Friday, August 11<sup>th</sup> Central Office employees **Veneta Wadlow** and **Crystal Jennings** took part in a live radio interview/podcast for *Our Daily Show* alongside host, **CJ Nasello**.

Their talk included an introduction to Head Start and our unique multi-generational approach in helping local families. Veneta explained how her love of the mission dates back to the days when she was also a Head Start student. It's why she's such a fierce advocate, and was able to discuss the importance of advocacy at the local, state and federal level.

Crystal discussed the enrollment process for interested families, what documents are needed for those in the application process. She also outlined how easy it is for parents/caregivers to enroll their child(ren) in our Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

If interested in watching the podcast, please visit the press & media page on our website:

<https://riverbendfamilies.org/news-press/media/>



## Personal Hygiene Supplies Drive

*By Judy Gann*

In July, I received an email from Lisa Nolan, a teacher at Essic Robinson, asking if the agency could host a personal hygiene drive. If so, it would be similar to last December's food drive. My first thought was, what an awesome idea. I already had a flyer that I created for another drive, so I tweaked it. I then ran it by Gene who said we should go for it!

The idea would end up being a part of our August 14<sup>th</sup> employee in-service, so that staff could bring their donations with them that day. As you can see from the photo below, we collected quite a bit, including paper products and cleaning supplies, as well as personal hygiene items. The items collected have been sorted and sent out to the centers, courtesy of our very helpful maintenance team: Matt, Ben and Scot.

The supplies will be given to those families who need them. As you might already know, these items cannot be purchased with the Link card and can get pretty costly. With your generosity, we're able to provide our Head Start families with personal care and cleaning items that they might not otherwise be able to purchase.

Thanks again to everyone who contributed!



## Christmas in July Raffle & Fundraiser

The annual Freer Auto Body “Christmas in July Raffle” was held in July and our employees showed their generosity by buying a ticket – or several of them – helping the agency to raise \$2,420 for the fundraiser!

In all, we sold 242 tickets at \$10 each. Special recognition goes out to IT Specialist **Karla Hurley** for selling more than a third of the grand total (92 tickets totaling \$920!).

Each year, employees with Freer Auto Body hold the raffle as a way to raise money to buy Christmas presents for local children in need. They have even donated some of these presents to our agency in year’s past.

Up for grabs this year was lodging for getaways that included: Panama City Beach, Lake of the Ozarks, Salida, Colorado and Blue Crab Shack. There were also ticket giveaways to see the St. Louis Cardinals! These getaway destinations and prizes were donated by caring companies and individuals including: **Darel & Vicky File, Mighty Rivers Recycling, Axalta Coatings, Reda & Tammy Iskarous, Jayne & John Simmons, SWMW Law**, and contest organizer **Freer Auto Body**.



**Christmas in July Raffle**  
**\$10.00 Each**

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7 Nights 2BR, 2 bath condo sleeps 8, Panama City Beach mutually agreed date.  
 Donated by Darel and Vicky File

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7 Nights Lake of Ozarks, lakefront 3 BR, 3 bath sleeps 8, mutually agreed date  
 Donated by Mighty Rivers Recycling

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\$2500 cash Donated by Axalta Coatings

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5 days Blue Crab Shack, 2 BR, 2 Bath sleeps 8 with fishing pier, Carrabelle, FL mutually agreed date  
 Donated by Reda and Tammy Iskarous

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4 Cardinal Green Seats, Sept 20, Cards vs Brewers,  
 Donated by Jayne & John Simmons

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4 Cardinal Tickets with gear, Aug 1, 6:45 Cards vs Twins,  
 Donated by SWMW Law, LLC

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Rustic Home Salida, CO, sleeps 9 with 4 passes to Hot Springs, mutually agreed date.  
 Donated by Mighty Rivers Recycling

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\$1000 Cash Donated by Freer Auto Body

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

*Winners to be Announced at July 21st event  
 Make checks payable to: Community Christmas*

Freer Auto Body making a generous donation to RHSFS in 2020

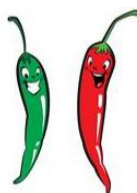


## Donor Appreciation Dinner – Taco Tuesday

On Tuesday, August 1<sup>st</sup> the agency hosted its first in-person donor event since the end of the pandemic. With that in mind, we wanted to make it more casual than our previous annual fundraiser, Circle of Care.

We utilized the empty space at Alton Plaza, and brought in a taco truck, the Fairview Heights-based company, Takozz. The Alton-based outdoor venue, Flock, served drinks during the two-hour event. Both internal and external donors were in attendance. Those who spoke during the event included: **Gene Howell**, President/CEO, **Jen Weber**, Board Chairwoman, and **Monica Bristow**, Board Treasurer. Operations Director **Cathy Blevens** served as our emcee.

Attendees were encouraged to “come as you” are in *classroom casual* attire. In addition to our individual donors, more than 40 corporate sponsors have donated to the fundraiser. We’re thankful to all of the donors who continue support the agency and its mission. We appreciate you!



## Ms. Lawanna Retires from Granite City North

To know Ms. Lawanna is to love her. Lawanna Chatman started her career as a Food Handler at Riverbend Head Start & Family Services in August 2003. Back then, she worked at Head Start in Venice, IL. But she would go on to spend the majority of her time at GCN.

Ms. Lawanna grew up in East St. Louis and currently lives in Belleville. The 77-year-old says it was the commute that prompted her to retire. It was a decision that she wrestled with for a long time.

“I’ll miss it, I’ve been missing it ever since I decided to retire,” says Chatman. “I know I won’t get to see my kids or the teachers anymore. I’m gonna miss it cause this is the longest job I’ve ever had.”

Ms. Lawanna says she’s had many memorable moments over the past two decades. Receiving the **IHSA Support Staff of the Year** award in March was certainly a great way to cap off her career. She says the IHSA recognition was “quite the surprise...”

Aside from that, she chuckles when she talks about how the kids (and their parents) would stop by and praise her cooking.

“A lot of the parents don’t realize that I don’t cook,” says Chatman. “A lot of times they’ll say, Ms. Lawanna, what are you cooking today? And I’ll say, you know I don’t cook. And they’ll say oh, we didn’t know that.”

Chatman recalls a time when one of the students encouraged his Mom to talk to her to get the details on how she cooked a particular dish, which he found to be quite tasty. So that’s exactly what his Mom did, or at least tried to do.

“I guess he wanted his Mom to know how to cook it, but he didn’t realize that I didn’t cook the food,” says Chatman. “That’s why they call us food handlers, we just handle it.”

While the student found the dish to be quite memorable, Ms. Lawanna says she can’t recall what the dish was. But there are other memories that will definitely stick with her for years to come.

“The kids, the staff, I’m so used to working with them,” Chatman says. “The kids, they’ll come and hug and kiss you (laughs).”



*From left: Lawanna Chatman receiving the IHSA Support Staff of the Year award in March 2023. Center photo: GCN Center Supervisor Jody Warren, Lawanna Chatman & President/CEO Gene Howell. On the right: Ms. Lawanna opening her presents at a retirement party thrown by the staff at Granite City North in August.*



## It's All in the Family

Having a baby and becoming a new parent is often a very exciting time. But it can also create stress and a bit of anxiety for some expectant mothers. Enter Prenatal Health Advocate **Julie Mouser**. Mouser has been with the agency for 12+ years and was recognized as our Employee of the Month in January 2023.

In August, she visited a home in Cottage Hills with a family that's enrolled at Bethalto Head Start. It was Mouser's second in a four-visit series where she teaches infant massage to parents. The child's mom took this candid photo (below).

"Mom enjoys the Infant Massage sessions and looks forward to our visits," says Mouser. "Infant Massage has several advantages that include interaction, stimulation, relief of common infant discomforts, and relaxation. It helps with the unique relationship between caregiver and infant. Touch is a powerful element in human bonding, and supports both verbal and non-verbal communication/infant cues."

Not only did the mom gain valuable skills during Mouser's visits, but so did the baby's 3-year-old big sister. Siblings can learn through observation how to touch or interact with the infant safely, which helps to promote sibling bonding.

"I think it's important for the sibling(s) to be a part of the visits to promote inclusion," says Mouser. "I always ask them to get a doll or I'll bring extra dolls so everyone is included in the activity. I welcome all family members to participate in infant massage as it is a great way to interact or bond with their infant. I think my largest was with a family from Collinsville where all six family members participated!"



## A Note from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

We hope you've enjoyed our third quarter newsletter! We greatly appreciate your support and input this year and hope it will continue.

On Tuesday, August 1<sup>st</sup>, we hosted our first in person fundraiser (post-pandemic) at Alton Plaza, which will eventually be the home to our central office location.

The after-school event was our way of saying thank you. While the event is months behind us, our corporate sponsors continue to support Riverbend Head Start and its mission. To date, 40+ local businesses of all sizes have stepped up to get involved. We know that you have many options when it comes to annual giving or other philanthropic efforts, and we appreciate you.

Because of your ongoing generosity, we're able to continue helping Head Start and Early Head Start students and their families in Madison County, IL.

If you would like to see the mission in action or to arrange a donation, feel free to reach out to me directly at: [msteen@riverbendfamilies.org](mailto:msteen@riverbendfamilies.org). Thanks again for your involvement in Head Start, and showing your support!

Melanie Steen  
Public Relations & Development Director

## Venice Township Food Bank Donates Diapers to Riverbend Head Start & Family Services



*Pictured left:*

*Lisa Brumley, a  
Family Advocate  
with Granite City  
South receives diaper  
donation*

In mid-August, the **Venice Township Food Bank** food bank received a pallet of diapers as a donation. Because most of the clients they serve are senior citizens, they decided it was best to donate the diapers to Head Start.

The very same day, an employee with the food bank graciously delivered the van full of diapers to Granite City South (GCS). Some of the diapers were given to GCS clients, some were transported to the Granite City North Head Start location, and the rest were dropped off at Essic Robinson Head Start.

This is a great example of community partners looking out for one another!

### Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

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