

Riverbend Friends

GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q1 2024 | NEWSLETTER



Greetings Friends!

With a very busy beginning to the new year, we are pleased to share a couple of proud moments happening at Riverbend Head Start & Family Services.

After many months of planning, our agency has transitioned our transportation services from contractual to being provided by agency staff. We are confident that our services will reflect excellence in timeliness, safety and engagement of our students. This transition ensures critical support to our children and access to their classrooms daily.

On a statewide level, each year the **Illinois Head Start Association** hosts an annual conference. A portion of that conference is dedicated to recognizing employees across the state who demonstrate excellence in their work. This year, we are excited to share that we have two staff members who were chosen from Head Start staff nominated across the state. Operations Director **Cathy Blevens** was chosen as the Illinois Head Start Association's Administrator of the Year. Cathy has worked very hard in partnership with program and agency administrative staff to navigate challenging times over the past couple of years by helping to place our program as one of the highest performers within the state, region and in the nation. Congratulations to Cathy on a well-earned recognition!

We are also excited to share that Essic Robinson Teacher **Lisa Nolan** was selected as our state's Teacher of the Year. Lisa routinely goes the extra mile to meet the needs of the children and families that she serves. Lisa will blush and express a genuine surprise at being chosen for this honor as she says, she has done nothing special and really just shows up each day and "does her job". Indeed, Lisa does do her job, and she does it on a level distinguishing her among her peers locally and across the state.

Wishing you a safe and renewing spring!

Gene Howell/President & CEO

Congratulations to Lisa Nolan!



Below is an excerpt from the letter of support from her colleagues that helped **Lisa Nolan** become the Illinois Head Start Association's (IHSA) Teacher of the Year.

Lisa Nolan started at Riverbend Head Start and Family Services over six years ago, but has been an early childhood educator for over 30 years. She started her journey with the organization as a Teaching Assistant where she immediately excelled at enriching our student's lives and empowering families to better themselves. For the past year and a half, she has been working as a lead teacher in a part-day classroom. As well as her normal duties, Lisa is always willing to step up and help in any way she can such as providing a helping hand at parent's nights, leading summer programs, co-planning an amazing family reading night, and covering for other teaching staff without any hesitation.

Lisa Nolan received the Teacher of the Year Award during the IHSA's annual conference which was held in Springfield, Illinois, on Wednesday, March 13th.

"I was very surprised, I didn't expect it," says Nolan. "This is just what I do, and this is what I'm very passionate about. So, I was really surprised, I wasn't expecting it. I felt very humbled."

Nolan has devoted her life to being an educator. But she admits that receiving the award was a bittersweet moment. She got a little emotional while talking about her parents who laid the foundation for her.

"They were very proud," says Nolan. "Both of my parents have passed away and my Dad wanted one of us to be a teacher. I'm the only one that ended up being a teacher in the family, and this would make my Dad proud, so proud..."

The staff and students at Essic Robinson helped to celebrate the occasion. Alton's Mayor **David Goins** and Police Chief **Jarrett Ford** took time from their schedules to stop by Essic and help celebrate Nolan and her accomplishment. RHSFS Board Member **Monica Bristow** was also in attendance for the festivities.

For Nolan, the work continues – with each day offering something exceptional to be a part of.

"The best part of what I do is seeing my friends come in on a daily basis," she says. "I also love seeing the kids come into the classroom. I get to love on these kids and spend time and interact with them. I feel like I appreciate them for allowing me to be a part of their lives."

Congratulations to Cathy Blevens!

Administrator of the YEAR

Operations Director **Cathy Blevens** is a longtime employee of RHSFS. She began working for the agency on September 27, 1999.

Her various positions have included: Early Head Start Case Manager, Case Manager, Lead Case Manager, Family Engagement Specialist and now, Operations Director.

"I truly believe in the mission of the agency and absolutely love working with the parents," says Blevens. "When you believe in the mission it is really easy to enjoy coming to work each day."

Blevens enjoys seeing the growth in our parents as they work to support their children. It's rewarding to experience the parents through Policy Council. She says the interaction feeds her soul.

"I was lucky enough to encounter three families that I worked with over 20 years ago at what I would call a low time for me," she says. "Each one shared their story and reminisced about the impact the home visits had on them. We do not always know the impact we have on others, but when you get the chance to be reminded - it fuels you to keep focusing on our mission."

While there have been plenty of rewarding moments throughout the years, she admits the job is not without its share of challenges. But she tries to not sweat the small stuff, and keeps her focus on the bigger picture.

"The most challenging part of the job is balancing the schedule of what you intended to do, vs. what you end up doing," she says. "I have learned to expect the unexpected and what was important today, may not always be important tomorrow."



RHSFS Operations Director Cathy Blevens receiving the IHSA Administrator of the Year award on March 13, 2024

In addition to being recognized this year by the IHSA, Blevens says she's also proud of completing the UCLA Head Start Management Fellows Program in June 2017. The program is hosted through the John E. Anderson Graduate School of Management at UCLA. She says it was a "challenging, yet rewarding experience" and feels fortunate that she was able to participate in it.

As for the IHSA Administrator of the Year award, Blevens says that she is "truly humbled and honored" over being nominated.

"I know we have such an extraordinary group of people that work our mission every day, and without all of the staff here I cannot even begin to do my job," she says. "I feel this award is in recognition of the agency that I have been fortunate enough to work for."



Cathy Blevens pictured with current/former RHSFS employees

**Alton's Mayor and Police Chief Visit
Riverbend Head Start & Family Services to Help Celebrate Lisa Nolan**



- Back row, pictured from left to right:*
- **RHSFS
President &
CEO Gene
Howell**
 - **Alton Mayor
David Goins**
 - **Essic Robinson
Teacher Lisa
Nolan**
 - **Alton Police
Chief Jarrett
Ford**

It's a Head Start Parade at Essic Robinson for IHSA's Teacher of the Year!



All of the students at Essic Robinson gathered for a mini-parade for Teacher Lisa Nolan on Thursday, March 14th. Alton's Mayor David Goins and Police Chief Jarrett Ford also took part in the celebration!



TEACHER of the YEAR

In recognition of outstanding contributions
to the academic achievement
and personal growth of

Illinois Head Start Association

Lisa Nolan

is hereby declared

Essic Robinson's Head Start's
teacher of the year *Margaret Anderson*

IHSA

Presented To:

Lisa Nolan
Riverbend Head Start
& Family Services

Teacher
of the Year

March 13, 2024

IHSA Conference – 2024 Presenters



Pictured from left: Julie Mouser, Tasha Haynes, and Casey Cope

Three of our employees at Central Office were featured presenters at the IHSA Annual Conference on March 13, 2024 in Springfield, Illinois. They included **Julie Mouser, Tasha Haynes** and **Casey Cope**.

Health Specialist **Casey Cope** and Health Advocate **Julie Mouser** gave a presentation on prenatal programs.

“Our group was small, but full of conversation,” according to Cope. “We were able to discuss the vast difference in all of our programs and brainstorm on some of the obstacles that other programs are having.”

You’ve Got a Friend in Head Start was the theme of this year’s conference.

“We are very fortunate to have the prenatal program and that we’re able to provide this service, thanks to our amazing staff and the partnerships we have made in the community that believe in our program and our mission,” says Cope. “We were honored with the opportunity to be able to share our prenatal program with other programs across the state. This is always a great conference full of information and connecting with other Head Start staff.”

Building Strong Foundations

By Tasha Haynes, Social-Emotional Specialist

The title of my presentation was - Building Strong Foundations: Nurturing Attachment and Utilizing Existing Tools for Challenging Behaviors.

I explored effective strategies for supporting positive behavior and social-emotional development in early childhood settings.

Key highlights included:

Understanding Attachment: I delved into the importance of caregiver-child attachment in shaping children's social-emotional development and behavior regulation, emphasizing the role of secure attachments in promoting resilience and well-being.

Utilizing Existing Tools: Participants learned about the value of utilizing tools and resources readily available in early childhood settings, such as visual schedules, picture cards, and social stories, to support positive behavior and address challenging behaviors effectively.

Strengths-Based Approach: We discussed the benefits of adopting a strengths-based approach, which focuses on identifying and leveraging children's unique strengths, talents, and interests to promote their overall well-being and resilience.

Collaborative Strategies: Collaboration between caregivers, educators, families, and other stakeholders was highlighted as essential for creating supportive environments and implementing effective behavior support interventions.

About 25 people attended my session comprised of Head Start parents, teachers, supervisors, and mental health providers.



Tie-Dye Fridays

The mini movement known as “Tie-Dye Fridays” was created by IT Specialist, **Karla Hurley**. She has proudly promoted the unofficial day since the start of the New Year. She enjoys seeing the support it’s received. That includes support from our President & CEO.

“I thought that’s kind of cool,” says **Gene Howell**. “Knowing that Karla likes music and is a musician I figured this was tied to that.”

Then, Howell said he learned the true meaning behind Tie-Dye Friday’s through the January employee newsletter.

“Karla’s idea, while subtle, is actually pretty profound,” according to Howell. “When we think about a culture where everyone wants to feel seen, heard, and included – simple statements of broad inclusion can be hard to come by.”

The next time you look at a tie-dye design, take a moment to notice all the colors of the various ribbons we wear to show support for causes that are close to our hearts. For example, we wear blue to bring awareness to child abuse prevention, pink elevates breast cancer awareness, yellow/white elevates bone cancer awareness, red elevates addiction awareness and green ribbons represent mental health awareness. The list goes on and on.

“As you can imagine, the individual challenges our staff carry within themselves goes on and on,” says Howell. “Within our organization, we have mission partners and co-workers battling personal or family challenges every day.”

To quote a cancer survivor in our midst, **Lisa McKee**, “no one should go through this alone.” We may not know what a person is personally dealing with, but how easy would it be to wear a cool tie dye shirt once a week to remind others that whatever they’re going through, your work family is here to support you and to let you know, YOU’RE NOT ALONE!

So, if you’ve got it, WEAR IT! If you don’t have any tie-dye, why not get with the movement? You never know who’s heart you may touch when they need it the most. Just the act of choosing a piece of tie-dye clothing once a week with purpose tells our work family, you matter and I care. Could there be five more powerful words in the English language?



*IT Specialist **Karla Hurley** is rockin’ one of her many tie-dye tee shirts!*



***Amy Cornell**, Instructional Support Specialist, recently showing her support of Tie-Dye Fridays!*





Chianne Marlow
On-Call Teacher Assistant

All things considered, you might say that **Chianne Marlow** is a new/newer employee at RHSFS. But that hasn't stopped her from shining her bright light at our Collinsville Head Start site!

Marlow joined the agency in October 2022. She currently works as a Teacher Assistant, while also attending SIUE to obtain her Early Childhood Teaching Degree. She will graduate from the program in January 2025.

"Chianne really gives her all when she's here," says Center Supervisor **Ashley Washington**. "She creates the most unique activities and classroom décor, and she always has a smile on her face and is ready to jump right in."

Chianne's responsibilities include: assisting her classroom's teacher, helping with lesson plans, supporting the children and their families, and giving them additional attention and helping them to understand instructions.

And the best part about coming to Riverbend Head Start?

"The children, of course," says Marlow. "The staff as well. Everyone is like family and we work really hard together to ensure the students are successful!"



TA Chianne Marlow is pursuing a degree at SIUE, while also working at the agency!



We're Making it Rain...Pennies!

The annual Penny Rush/Dollar per Child campaign was held over four weeks, beginning on Monday, January 29th and concluding on Monday, February 26th.

The goal for 2024 was to raise \$2 per child, or \$1,518. But everyone went above and beyond, raising just over \$1,612!

The money collected was turned over to the nonprofit **Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA)** in Springfield. IHSA is a non-partisan association serving as the voice of Illinois' Head Start/Early Head Start programs, staff and parents. IHSA and the **National Head Start Association** use these resources to educate Congress, and advocate for funding of Head Start programs.

As you can see from the totals below, Penny Rush keeps building momentum as time goes on. Thank you so much to our community supporters, employees, parents – and of course the students – for making this year's campaign better than ever!

2024 - \$1,612.81

2023 - \$1,001.35

2022 - \$716.16



It's a Total Eclipse of Head Start

On Monday, April 8th, a group of employees at Head Start's central office gathered to watch the solar eclipse at the Alton Arboretum. In preparation of the event, they ordered matching t-shirts with Eclipse 4.08.2024 on the front and "A Total Eclipse of Head Start" on the back.

The event was made even sweeter as there was homemade cheesecake involved for spectators. And more importantly, safety first! All of those viewing the eclipse made sure to wear their special sunglasses for the occasion.

"Thank you everyone," said HR Assistant Rosemary Mann. "What a fun day!"



PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Tia Ferrari has been with the agency less than two years, but is already making a big impact!

Ferrari joined RHSFS in August 2022. She has excelled in being a part of the classroom, while working towards her CDA. She has also been a part of the PPI (Promotion, Prevention & Intervention) Leadership Team.

“This year, Tia helped another teaching team member with Learning Genie,” says Edwardsville Center Supervisor **Sammie Neumeister**. “She has also helped many of the parents with using the app, or helping them complete NFS (non-federal share) paperwork if they were unable to complete their assignments on Learning Genie.”

Because of the smaller staff at Edwardsville, Ferrari is able to really dig deep into relationship building with those all around her.

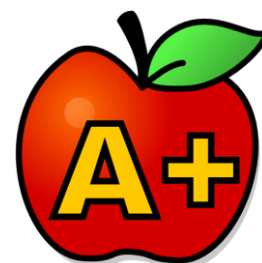
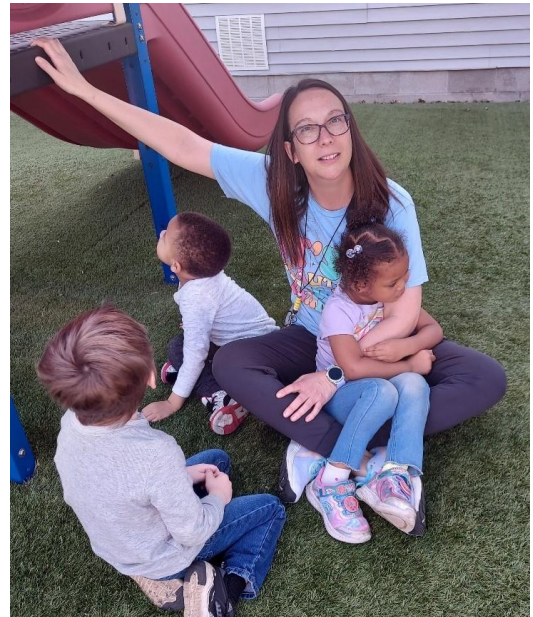
“It’s all about the relationships,” says Ferrari. “The relationships I’ve created with my co-workers, the kids, and the families, it’s the best part of my job!”

And like any job, there some days that are more challenging than others, but it seems Ferrari is just taking it all in stride.

“The biggest accomplishment is that Tia has helped to develop a great classroom atmosphere,” says Neumeister. “She has such a positive attitude with the kids and the teaching team.”

Tia Ferrari

Teacher Assistant II, Edwardsville



A Note of Thanks to the RHSFS Transportation Staff

By Lori Bostick, HR Director

On November 13, 2023, **Chad “Chuck” Hancock** started his first day as a Transportation Coordinator for our agency. Fast forward five months and 22 additional transportation staff later, the Riverbend Head Start & Family Services transportation department is fully staffed and ready to roll!

After going through the processes involved with interviewing, hiring, onboarding, completing multiple trainings and plenty of paperwork, our first official bus route was activated at our Granite City South location on March 18, 2024.

This group of staff have been EXTREMELY patient with the start-up process ever since they came onboard. The amount of documentation required by Head Start, the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services Licensing, the Illinois Dept. of Transportation, the Illinois Secretary of State, etc., was quite impressive. But this group would not be daunted.

Plus, there was the wait time for several required clearances to be returned to the agency for each employee. All of this before they could begin to do the job of transporting our most precious cargo: our Head Start students.

Through it all, this group of employees remained upbeat and positive. I would recommend for anyone needing a “boost” to their day to visit the transportation staff at the bus depot. You’ll definitely have your spirits lifted by the time you leave.

They are all a great addition to the agency!



Kelly Chamness

Program Aide II, Granite City North

Kelly Chamness was hired at the agency more than 25 years ago (August 1998) as a Food Service Worker at Granite City South. She was first introduced to the agency as a Head Start parent in the early 90's. She also did a short stint on Policy Council.

Chamness has been in her current role for 20+ years and prides herself on being a caregiver.

"My most important role is taking care of my co-workers," says Chamness. "I try to make sure they have everything they need. I also meet and greet the kiddos and their families every day."

"Kelly has many years of dedicated service with the agency," according to Center Supervisor **Jody Warren**. "She has made her office very kid-friendly with her many sloths! Kelly is always cheerful and helpful to everyone. She is our official greeter and enjoys close relationships with both parents and kiddos. We are lost when she's not here!"

Chamness says there's so many things to love about her job, including the relationships she's developed.

"Being there for the parents when they need to talk," says Chamness. "For some reason, they just know that I'm there without judgement. Watching the children grow and learn. I love my job, there are so many favorites. My co-workers are the best. There isn't anything that we wouldn't do for one another. No one is an outsider in our building, we are all one!"



A Letter from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

Spring is here! It's a time of new beginnings. We thank you for your support of our e-newsletter as we made the transition from paper to digital over the past 12 months.

Before we know it, summer will be upon us. It's a time to hit the road for vacation, or plan something closer to home with a staycation.

As you make your summer plans, we hope you'll keep Head Start in mind. We're already planning our Back-to-School and Donor Appreciation event. This year, it will be held on **Tuesday, August 27th**. The theme is Taco Tuesday! We will send you an invitation with all of the details in the coming weeks.

Because of your ongoing generosity, we're able to continue helping Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families in Madison County, IL. We hope you'll mark your calendar, and join us for food and fellowship as we show our appreciation to you, our amazing donors!

Once again, thank you for caring about Head Start, and showing your ongoing support for the families we serve!

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

550 Landmarks Blvd., 3rd Floor

Alton, IL 62002

(618) 463-5946

www.riverbendfamilies.org



Proud member of

United Way
of Greater St. Louis

