

Riverbend



Friends

GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q4 2024 | WINTER NEWSLETTER

President's Message



Happy New Year Friends!

As we begin a brand-new calendar year, the Head Start program year is just hitting its stride. In the anatomy of a Head Start program year, we move through several stages. In the earliest days we enroll children, arrange service delivery modes and get to know children and their families.

Then we move quickly onto screening and assessment work. We screen children for health needs, behavioral health needs, dental needs, sensory needs (vision and hearing) and developmental functioning. At the same time, we work with the parents in their homes to screen and assess the family for things they may need such as the stabilization of housing, medical needs, behavioral health needs, education or vocational needs and employment needs.

Then we move onto the next phase of the program year that we have been heavily engaged with recently, which is to design services and interventions to meet the needs of our children, with a goal of preparing them for kindergarten and life beyond Head Start.

Between now and the end of the school year, we will work with families to meet goals and deliver the critical services that children need in order to be school ready, and to help set the entire family up for success.

This may include classroom support, dental restoration, glasses, hearing aids and outside support from the vast network of community service providers whom we are fortunate enough to partner with.

Central to all of these things is you, our community and mission partners who support our work. While some of the services mentioned above are provided by our funding sources, many are not. Your support helps us to provide warm coats, corrective glasses, hearing supports where needed, dental restoration costs, safe sleep kits for our newborn learners and a myriad of other things that families need in order to thrive. Together, we make Head Start work in building stronger communities through compassion and lending a hand up.

Thank you for your continued partnership!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gene Howell".

Gene Howell
President & CEO

**GCS Teacher Cory Nance
Featured in PNC Bank's Teacher
Appreciation Campaign**



"I know that what we do makes a difference in the lives of young children, and being recognized in this campaign definitely helped to give me a morale boost."

*-Cory Nance, Teacher
Granite City South*



Our very own **Cory Nance** (Granite City South) was one of five selected educators from across the country to be featured during PNC Bank's annual teacher appreciation campaign. Nance is being highlighted along with the other educators on PNC Bank's social media channels.

"I found out about the nomination about a month ago, but I had no idea it was a national campaign," said Nance. "There are so many great teachers in this agency, so I was honored to even be nominated. I was shocked when I got the news that I was also being featured in the national appreciation campaign."



*RHSFS Teacher Cory Nance receiving a hand-delivered gift from **Alisha Abbott** with PNC Bank. Abbott is the Assistant Vice President, Client and Community Relations Assistant Director for the St. Louis Region*



NOMINEES



Granite City South Head Start

Cory Nance – Teacher

I would nominate Cory Nance due to his energetic nature and appropriate emotional responses to children. He focuses that each child is an individual and tailors his day around every single child. He allows children to work through situations even if those behaviors may be challenging. Cory has even opened his home to provide a safe place for one of his own students as they work through the struggles of foster placement. I would nominate Cory because children that are in different classrooms even shout MR. CORY when they see him.

Collinsville Head Start

Amanda Van Giesen – Teacher Assistant

Amanda shows up on "GO." There's no pause once she walks in, from prepping for the day, creating activities, comforting children, having conversations, and overall showing genuine love and interest in the work she does. The care and genuineness spill over into her working relationships. Amanda is naturally caring and empathetic in her interactions with our team.

Collinsville Head Start

Jennifer Spengler – Teacher

Jen's excitement about educating our children is evident and intentional within her classroom. She provides many learning opportunities that allow our children to freely express themselves creatively which establishes a safe space for kids. Whenever I need an energy boost or smile for the day, I am sure to visit Jen's classroom.

Bethalto Head Start

Ashley Wells – Teacher

Valerie Hartley – Teacher Assistant

Tammy Fuller – Teacher Assistant

Ashley Wells, Valerie Hartley and Tammy Fuller work as a team every day to deliver quality services to their students.

This team builds the classroom foundation using social emotional skills. You will often hear "was that a kind thing to do?" Or "how did you think that made them feel?" And "how would you feel if someone did that to YOU?" emanating from their classroom. They truly scaffold their students' learning to build empathy - and as early childhood educators, they are aware that those skills pave the way for future success.

Ms. Ashley holds a Bachelor's degree in early education, and an IL state teaching license and has been with our agency for 12 years. Ms. Val holds a Bachelor's in Elementary Education, a state paraprofessional license in IL, and has been with our agency for 20 years. Ms. Tammy holds a Paraprofessional license in IL, has 20 years of childcare experience, and has been with our agency for 6 years.

Their skillsets truly complement each other, and they are able to build a caring community of effective learners, no matter the obstacles they face. We are fortunate to have them employed with our agency, as are the children who get to enter their classroom year after year.



NOMINEES

Edwardsville Head Start
Tia Ferrari – Teacher Assistant

Behind every teacher there is a teacher assistant, who may (or may not) get the recognition they deserve. When asked to nominate a teacher for the national teacher appreciation, I chose Tia Ferrari. Our center, being very small and having a strong teaching team, it's really hard to choose who has the biggest impact. However, Tia stands out amongst the strong teaching team.

Tia's energy is unmatched. Tia brings such a positive attitude to our Head Start family that you can see the impact in children, families, and staff. Not only is she always positive and cheerful, she provides the most consistent and lovingly secure guidance the children thrive upon. Tia also has a way of talking to the children and explaining things to them where they understand. You can see the excitement in the children's eyes when they are learning, and saying Ms. Tia, Ms. Tia come see.

Tia is always there for the families, she answers questions when parents ask how a child's day went and provides tech support to parents learning our new communication app, Learning Genie.

Since joining our Head Start family over two years ago, Tia has shown that it's not just a job, it's her passion for the kids which is why she always does her best.

There are many awesome teachers and teacher assistants in our program, but when you meet Tia she leaves a lasting impression. She has so much love for the children and demonstrates a passion for what she does.



PNC is passionate about showing our appreciation for early childhood educators and the positive role they play in developing young minds.



Pictured left: the Villalobos family, including parents Kelly and Steven, along with their children Addison, Kade, Ainsley and Nevaeh. Pictured below: Kelly & Steven at closing for their new Edwardsville home on November 22, 2024.



Head Start
Family Receives
New Home
For the
Holidays!



Villalobos Family Receives Habitat for Humanity Home

Prior to closing on their new Edwardsville home last November, the Villalobos family of six lived in a 930 square-foot house.

“We were basically right on top of each other all the time,” says **Kelly Villalobos**. “This means a lot to my family to have more space and more room for my kids to play and have their individual space. We’re very excited, this means so much to us.”

Kelly Villalobos has been a Head Start parent for several years now. She initially reached out to the agency when her youngest daughter was six months old.

“I noticed some delays she was having, including rolling over and things like that, so I got in touch with Head Start and they started coming to my house,” she says. “My oldest daughter is now six years old. I also have a four-year-old attending Head Start for the second year. And I have two foster children who are developmentally disabled. Head Start has been amazing to my family, helping me with issues that we’ve had to face and obstacles we’ve had to overcome.”

Villalobos found out about the Habitat for Humanity home from a flyer that was inside her daughter’s cubicle at Edwardsville Head Start.

“That’s when I went to the meeting and got all the paperwork,” she says. “I applied and I was chosen out of all the other families that went for it. Without Head Start, I would not have known this option was available to my family.”

The family closed on their new Edwardsville home on November 22, 2024 and was so thrilled to be in their new home just in time for the holidays.

“We were super excited to be able to be there for our first Christmas in our first home,” she says. “It’s great! I want to say a big thank you to the folks at Head Start for making the information available in order for us to have this opportunity.”

Home at Last



“Our house blessing was on November 17th and we closed on our home November 22nd which was less than a week before Thanksgiving. It was all very exciting!”

-Kelly Villalobos
Edwardsville Head Start parent



RHSFS Inaugural Showcase Week

October 21 – October 25, 2024



The week of October 21st marked our inaugural Head Start Show Case Week. Each of our six Head Start sites showcased something special about their program on a different day throughout the week. Those attending included local dignitaries: **Senator Erica Harriss, Representative Amy Elik, Alton Mayor David Goins, Alton Police Chief Jarrett Ford, and the Granite City Police Department**, among others.

“Showcase Week was a huge success! Each site spotlighted the essence of Head Start on their respective day. The week helped to educate the community about Head Start services and has inspired a series of collaborative efforts with community leaders.”

-Veneta Wadlow, Center Operations Coordinator

And the Winner Is...



The Telegraph's annual Best of the Best competition

Following weeks of voting, we finally have a winner! Our very own **Elizabeth Hill** was named Best Bus Driver on December 6th. The ceremony was held at the Hatheway Cultural Center, on the campus of **Lewis & Clark Community College** in Godfrey. Following a red carpet walk, each nominee received a swag bag full of goodies.

"Me and my family really enjoyed ourselves," says Hill. "We were very excited when we found out I had won."

Hill admits she was full of anticipation in the weeks leading up to the announcement, and was honored to take home the award.

"It was a great feeling to know I have a lot of support from my work family and community, it's a blessing," she says. "I can hardly wait until next year to nominate Riverbend Head Start as the best place to work! I truly enjoy my job of driving the kids to school and back home. They are a part of my family."



*Elizabeth Hill's supporters attended the December 6th ceremony with her. They included: **Jane Hicks** (mom), **Brandi Vester** (daughter), **Peyton Cross** (granddaughter), and **Brooklyn Bock Davis** (bus monitor).*



17th Annual



Helping to keep kids warm this winter.

Coats for Kids Drive is a Huge Success

Our 17th annual Coats for Kids collection drive was our most successful coat drive to date.

Because of your generous donations, we were able to purchase 368 brand new coats. Approximately 175 new or gently used coats were given to us, plus numerous hats and gloves.

In total, we were able to distribute well over 500 coats to our Head Start students and their family members. We extend our heartfelt thanks to those who showed up for our families in 2024!

Argosy Casino Donates Coats for Kids



Employees with Argosy Casino donate dozens of coats on Nov. 20th. Those coats were collected by their employees. Pictured from left to right: **David Moffett**, Compliance Manager, **Gene Howell**, RHSFS President/CEO, **Randy Peterson**, Vice President/General Manager, **Liquita Boyd**, Cage Manager, **Jeffrey Smith**, Facilities Manager, **James Genail**, Director of Marketing, & **Colton Short**, Director of Casino Operations.

RHSFS Celebrates Veterans at Essic Robinson

On Monday, November 11th, the staff and students at Essic Robinson gathered to honor some of our local veterans on Veteran's Day.

The event was the first of its kind for the agency, and was organized by two of our veterans, **Hannah Hook** (U.S. Army) and **Mitchell Bushnell-Chamness** (U.S. Air Force). Both are Family Advocates at Essic Robinson.

After receiving the red-carpet treatment, the veterans met with students and read books to them. Later, they gathered to get to know one another over lunch in the community room.

Both **Hook** and **Bushnell-Chamness** provided on-camera interviews to local TV station, KMOV channel 4, who sent a videographer to cover the event.

If you were unable to attend, additional photos from the event, and the red carpet honor walk are featured on our Facebook page.



Veteran's Day 2024



"It was an overall wonderful feeling to get to start this new tradition, while staying connected with that part of my identity. The best part, however, was teaching children how they could honor veterans by serving or taking care of their communities. When we came down the hallway and saw all of the students and teachers excited and waving their flags, it just felt really good to see everyone supporting each other."

-Hannah Hook, Family Advocate/Essic Robinson

"The Veteran's Day festivities were way more fulfilling than I would have ever imagined. Hearing my coworker, Hannah, talk about the importance of community service and work reinstated just how much I love working with people and giving back whenever I can. Also, that was my first time walking on a red carpet. I felt like a legit celebrity!"

*-Mitchell Bushnell-Chamness
Family Advocate/Essic Robinson*



Interactive Playground Opens in Edwardsville

Following months of planning and construction, the new nature-based playground in Edwardsville is open. The agency hosted an open house on October 7, 2024 and invited the public.

Planning for the interactive playground began about five years ago, according to Center Supervisor **Sammie Neumeister**, but it was delayed due in part to the pandemic.

Construction on the playground began last May and was completed in August. Those companies that took part in the construction of the playground include **Spaces for Play** and **Greenup**, both located in northern Illinois.

Funding was provided in part by donations from **Rooted in Play**, the **Junior Service Club of Edwardsville/Glen Carbon**, and the **PNC Foundation**. The latter also took part in helping to beautify the playground by providing volunteers to help install child-safe plants in the yard.



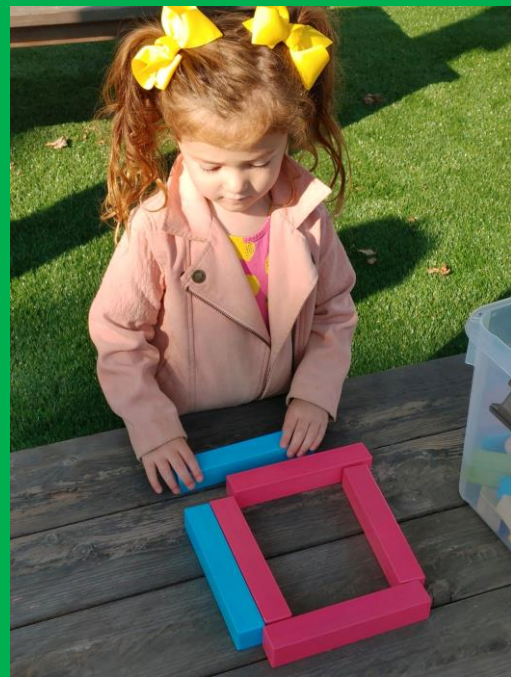
“Our new nature-based outdoor classroom provides a relaxed atmosphere for the children to learn in a new creative way.”

**-Sammie Neumeister, Edwardsville
Center Supervisor**

Interactive Playground Opens in Edwardsville



Those attending the Oct. 7th playground open house include (from left to right): **Nick Novacich**, former Granite City Police Chief, **Nathaniel Manning**, PNC Bank Manager in Edwardsville, RHSFS President/CEO **Gene Howell**, and RHSFS Board Chair **Monica Bristow**.



Wood River Refinery Employee Night In Godfrey

It's an annual event that hundreds of employees with the **Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery** look forward to in the fall.

The Refinery hosted Employee Night at the **Great Godfrey Maze**, and once again, RHSFS was invited to attend and host a table. Other **United Way** agencies also hosted tables at the event, with lots of fun activities planned for the kids.

The event was held on Thursday, October 17th at the **Robert E. Glazebrook Park** in Godfrey.

It was a chilly night, but employees and their families enjoyed the fun-filled evening. The kids especially enjoyed taking a ride through the haunted corn maze!

Our employees who attended include: RHSFS President/CEO **Gene Howell**, Public Relations Director **Melanie Steen**, and Essic Robinson Family Advocate **Hannah Hook**.

According to one of the organizers, **Katie Bennett**, approximately 639 guests attended the event in 2024, which is up from 530 in 2023!



FACE PAINTING



RHSFS Family Advocate Hannah Hook handles face-painting duties on October 17th for dozens of kids. The private event is held for families of the Phillips 66 Wood River Refinery annually at the Great Godfrey Maze.



A Letter from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

Happy New Year! I hope you enjoyed a wonderful holiday season with family and friends. Whether it was a relaxing time for you, or a hectic one, we all have something to be grateful for. The new year is certainly a time to reflect and think about what we want the next 12 months to look like. Did you make a new year's resolution? About 3 in 10 of Americans made one in 2024.

The most popular resolutions for 2025 include: saving money, improving physical health, exercise, improving happiness, and eating healthier. Those are the top 5 resolutions for those who made one for this year. Which one of those resonates with you the most?

We know that the past couple of years have been financially tight, and that's why we appreciate you for remembering our students and their families - now more than ever! From monetary donations, to in-kind contributions, or volunteering your time, we are truly thankful for you your ongoing support.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melanie Steen".

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Development Director

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