

# Riverbend Friends



GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q1 2023 | NEWSLETTER



*Pictured front row: Loretta Holmes/Associated Bank, Del Tegtmeier/Regions Bank (ret.), JoAnn Dimagio/SBDC, Nikki Woelfell/Carrollton Bank. Back Row: Gene Howell/Riverbend Head Start, Ted Gibson/FNB Waterloo, Walt Williams/Madison County NAACP, Linda Kunz/FCB Banks and David Chesley/BOS.*

## Riverbend Receives a Donation for Financial Literacy

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services (RHSFS) received a donation in the amount of \$630.65 from the partnership that's formerly known as the Metro East Lenders Group.

The Metro East Lenders Group has partnered with RHSFS on several occasions to provide financial literacy to parents. They've also interacted with some of our Head Start students through storytelling.

Moving forward, the Metro East Lenders Group will be known as the Metropolitan St. Louis CRA Association – Illinois Committee. They will continue to serve those businesses and nonprofits that are based in the metro east.

In addition to RHSFS, other businesses that received a donation include: MAPCO, Amare, Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) and the Madison County chapter of the NAACP.

## President's Corner



Greetings Riverbend Family,

What a wonderful time to be in Head Start! Breathing freely now in a post pandemic world, we're able once again open our doors to families, visitors, volunteers, local dignitaries and those who support us in Congress.

With spring right around the corner and a renewed energy, we're excited to begin building next school year's class lists and staff are excited to be back in the community spreading the word about Head Start!

Please reach out and find the many ways to interact with us. You can schedule a site visit, learn how to volunteer, or simply keep up with us as we move our newsletters and annual report digitally by sharing your e-mail address with us. As you can see, there are lots of wonderful things happening!

*Gene*

## Recruitment Day!

Friday, March 3, 2023 was considered a dreary day filled with clouds, cold rain, and lots of puddles. But that didn't stop our Head Start staff from bringing the sunshine! They gathered early to brush up on their Head Start trivia, fueled up, then grabbed their signs (and rain boots) and headed out to canvas their respective neighborhoods.

Even though they had hoped for better weather, the rain didn't dampen their spirits. Lots of new contacts were made via telephone, social media and in person, making this year's annual Recruitment Day another smashing success!







*Pictured from left:  
RHSFS President/CEO  
Gene Howell, Cathy  
Blevens/Operations  
Director, U.S.  
Representative Nikki  
Budzinski, Hannah  
Asbeck/GCN Center  
Supervisor, and  
Veneta  
Wadlow/Center  
Operations  
Coordinator*

## **Illinois Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski Visits Granite City Head Start**

On Monday, February 13<sup>th</sup>, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services welcomed U.S. Representative Nikki Budzinski to our Granite City South location.

In late January, Rep. Budzinski launched her inaugural “Valentines for Veterans” program, encouraging families across Central and Southern Illinois to show appreciation for local veterans by making homemade Valentine’s Day cards. Following a tour of the GC South facility, Rep. Budzinski joined our RHSFS students in making Valentine’s Day cards.

“What really struck me was that there was a lot of joy in all of the rooms,” said Rep. Budzinski. “The children were kind of fearless. And I think it really underscores the importance of programs like Head Start, and the great teachers that are in those classrooms that give these kids an opportunity to learn, to have fun, and to be kids.”

Budzinski says she has several public school teachers in her family, including her grandmother, who was very involved in Head Start programs throughout her career.

“I just come from a long line of educators so I think that education should start really early,” said Budzinski. “It should start before kids walk into a kindergarten classroom. And that was exactly why I wanted to come to a program like Head Start, to really underscore the importance of Early Childhood Education.”

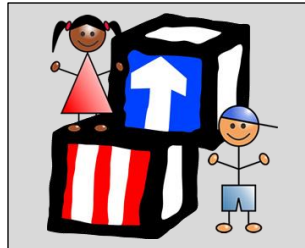
The public was also invited to create and drop off or mail Valentine’s for Veteran’s to Budzinski’s office. Those cards collected – including those from our Head Start students – were distributed the evening of February 13<sup>th</sup> to the veterans at the VFW Lafore Lock Post 755 in Springfield, IL.

“We all have, in some way, a veteran in our family and know the importance of not just the veteran’s service, but the families’ service,” according to Budzinski. She adds that both of her grandfathers were World War II Veterans.

Currently, Budzinski represents Illinois’ 13th Congressional District and is a member of the House Agriculture Committee and House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. She was first elected to the House in 2022 and came to Congress to fight for working families.



**Congresswoman Nikki Budzinski  
Visits Granite City Head Start (cont.)**



## New Police Chief Visits RHSFS

The recently appointed Alton Police Chief, Jarrett Ford, visited with staff and students at Riverbend Head Start & Family Services on Tuesday, February 21, 2023. The Alton police department is located next door to the Essic Robinson location on E. Broadway.

Also in attendance was Lieutenant Mike O'Neill and Sergeant Joel Bromaghim. The three officers visited all of the classrooms at Essic Robinson, handing out honorary police badges and other small toys to the Head Start students. In turn, they were met with lots of questions and hugs.

"I wanted to go and to show the kids that police officers actually are just human beings," said Chief Ford. "I just want them to know that police officers are people that they can trust and we can help them."

Ford is an Alton, IL native and an 18-year veteran of the Department, who was appointed to Chief from Deputy Chief in November 2022. He says that he's done "practically every job" at the Department during his time there. In his new role, he admits that he's learning more about what's going on at City Hall and all of the work that's being done to attract new businesses and jobs to the area.

"I see all of the efforts being made and I feel like there's just that momentum of bringing it back to being great," says Ford. "I'm just excited to be a part of that."

Prior to joining the Alton P.D., Ford worked in finance but knew early on that it wasn't the right career fit.

"I had never thought about being a police officer," he says. "I just knew what I was currently doing at the time wasn't for me and I always contribute it to God's plan. So, He was certainly guiding me."

The visit was a part of an overall plan to build new and strengthen existing relationships with various businesses and groups within the Alton community. Because Essic Robinson is next door, it seemed like a great time to make an introduction. Ford says the response from the kids is what he'll remember most about that day.

"Definitely the love that they showed, seeing their smiles and obviously, that's contagious," says Ford. "The hugs and the smiles and thank you's, it was the best part of the visit."

During their visit to our Essic Robinson site, the officers also discussed safety measures with Center Operations Supervisor, Amy Cornell.



## New Police Chief Visits RHSFS



## Introducing... Julie Mouser *Health Advocate*

In the summer of 2021, members of the Health Team decided to restructure and try something new. Their goal became to help grow the prenatal program. That's when Health Advocate Julie Mouser was moved from our Essic Robinson location to Bethalto. This allowed her the opportunity to scale back her center duties, while being able to focus more on prenatal. Mouser is now the health advocate that services all our expectant moms in the agency.

Julie Mouser joined the agency more than 11 years ago. It was on August 2, 2011, which was also her birthday. Since joining RHSFS, Julie has attained several certifications including: Certified Lactation Consultant, International Infant Massage Instructor, PSI Certification, Certified Child Passenger Safety Tech, Shaken Baby Prevention Certification, and CPR Instructor, just to name a few.

When an expectant mom enrolls in our program, Mouser will visit with them at least once a month. During these visits, clients will receive prenatal education, maternal health monitoring, PMAD's assessments, oral health education, and transportation services.

"The knowledge I have gained working with Riverbend Head Start made me eager to spread it all around," says Mouser. "I like finding out what's important to parents and supporting them as much as I can."

Once a baby is born, Mouser will complete newborn services including Health Assessments, Weight Monitoring, Nutrition, Importance of Staying Up to Date with Health Visits, SUIDS Risk Reduction Education, Safe Sleep Program, Environmental Safety, Oral Health, and Developmental Milestones. She can also provide father/partner engagement with the families.

Since she transitioned into this new role, Mouser has worked with nearly 70 expectant mothers.

"The most rewarding things are walking into a home and seeing an infant sleeping on their back, or watching a mother become confident in her breastfeeding abilities," adds Mouser. "Some changes made through education can positively affect generations to come. I am a true believer in planting seeds, and I'm lucky enough to see some of them bloom."



*"Helping one person might not change the world, but it could change the world for one person." -Anonymous*







On February 15<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> our President/CEO Gene Howell and Center Operations Coordinator Veneta Wadlow took part in a pair of interviews with local radio station, WBGZ. 107.1.

During the first interview, Gene discussed Children's Dental Health Month (Feb.) and how RHSFS works to help Head Start kids and their parents who might need dental treatment. Veneta talked about how we're ramping up to recruit families in the coming weeks/months. Sara McGibany, Executive Director of Alton Main Street extended the invitation for us to join in during her weekly segment.

On the 27<sup>th</sup>, Gene and Veneta were given more time to devote to discussing our mission and all the ways the agency is working to assist Head Start and Early Head Start families. They also discussed the need to recruit and retain thoughtful and dedicated employees.

Another topic that was covered was how to get involved in the mission. From becoming a volunteer to joining the Board of Directors, or making a donation – there's plenty of ways to get involved! Both podcasts have been shared on social media, and are also available on the radio station's website: [www.advantagenews.com](http://www.advantagenews.com).





## Gold Circle Approved!

We are thrilled to announce that all six Riverbend Head Start & Family Service sites have received the Gold Circle of Quality distinction from ExceleRate Illinois, the State's Quality Recognition and Improvement system for early childhood education and care programs.

"Riverbend Head Start and Family Services always strives to provide the highest quality for children, families and staff," said Veneta Wadlow, Center Operations Coordinator. "Just knowing that all six of our locations are consistently awarded the Gold Circle rating through ExceleRate demonstrates the commitment of staff, and I feel honored to work for a program that supports high standards of service."

Each site will be able to proudly display their certification alongside their DCFS license.



## Paying it Forward

In mid-February, students and staff at Essie Robinson held a canned food drive. Their goal was to raise a hundred cans to coincide with the 100<sup>th</sup> day of school. The idea came from one of the teachers, who simply wanted to give back. Everyone quickly got involved, including the kids. In total, 170 cans of food were collected, far exceeding their goal!

"With the Crisis Food Center being located right down the street from us, we knew we had to donate to them," said Amy Cornell, Center Operations Supervisor. "It's important to teach children and families that there are always others who are in need. Any one of us, at any given time, could need the support of a food pantry."

Prior to the donation, an official at the Crisis Food Center had reported a bigger demand for food donations, especially after SNAP benefits were cut.

Since the need is ongoing, Cornell says they're looking for ways to donate to the food pantry again in the coming months.

## Let's Jam!

On Tuesday, February 7<sup>th</sup>, Center Operations Coordinator Veneta Wadlow spoke to a group of students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, SIUE, to discuss family engagement. She explained how RHSFS approaches it through a concept known as PFCE (parent, family and community engagement).

Following the 30-minute zoom presentation, the students were tasked with closely examining our website, [www.riverbendfamilies.org](http://www.riverbendfamilies.org) to find words that were associated with engagement. Below is their jam board, using words and phrases they were able to find!





## Penny Rush 2023

Our annual Penny Rush campaign is over, and we've surpassed last year's totals!

The fundraiser ran from February 6 – March 10<sup>th</sup>. All of our six Head Start sites, plus Central Office participated. This year's goal as set by National Head Start is two dollars per child. So, with 759 children enrolled, the goal for RHSFS was to raise \$1,518 total this year.

- The National Head Start Association, NHSA, is the only national organization advocating solely for Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families.
- Dollar Per Child is the only source of support for NHSA's national advocacy efforts.

Even though it was called it a "penny rush" we collected currency of all kinds! Those hard-earned pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and dollars will be turned over to the nonprofit IHSA (Illinois Head Start Association). According to their website, IHSA is a non-partisan association serving as the voice of Illinois' Head Start/Early Head Start programs, staff and parents.

The grand total raised was **\$1,122.39!** Even though this fell short of our goal, we raised a lot more than last year. In 2022, we raised \$756.16. We'll use \$75 of this to create a basket to take to the IHSA conference in East Peoria at the end of March. This should raise even more money for Dollar Per Child. The basket will contain \$25 worth of Illinois Lottery scratch off tickets, plus \$50 in cash. In total, RHSFS will turn over **\$1,047.39** to IHSA.







**Christy Meredith**  
**Teacher Assistant**



***"We Do Ourselves the Most Good  
Doing Something For Others."***

***-Horace Mann***



Christy Meredith is a 20+ year employee of Riverbend Head Start and Family Services who currently works at Granite City South. She began as a Head Start parent and has dedicated many years to the Head Start mission. She joined the agency on May 6, 2002.

Christy previously served as the Food Handler at GC South. She was responsible for serving food to children in the classrooms, families at parent meetings, and families at Learn and Plays. Christy purchased food and tracked supplies to ensure every child and family had a healthy meal. She attended parent meetings and helped with family contact follow-up. She has filled in at the front desk and monitored bus returns.

In addition, Kristy developed a library system for children and families to check out books. She also implemented a reading program where children would read books each month and in turn, receive a certificate of achievement. The students would also have the opportunity to pick out a book to take home and keep. Kristy has also been a part of the site team and subbed in the classroom as a teacher assistant on numerous occasions. She has participated in recruitment events and supported staff by attending home visits.

"The best part of my job – then and now – is seeing the progress the children and families have made while they're with us and after they complete our program," said Meredith. "I am privileged to see our families in the community where we both live."

More recently, Kristy was observed supporting a hungry homeless family by taking their order and preparing them a meal while ensuring their integrity. After a very successful career as a Food Handler, Christy recently decided to pursue her Early Childhood Education Degree. Christy has been promoted to teacher assistant and is beginning her new career in the classroom.

Congratulations to you Christy, for going above and beyond at RHSFS!







Lisa McKee at Granite City North shared this amazing photo that she captured during the week of February 13<sup>th</sup>. She calls it a "Pot of Gold at the end of the Rainbow."



*"Beauty is all around us and within us. If we open our eyes and our hearts to see it and feel it, we do not have to search. Beauty will find us."*

*-Angela Gwinner*



All of the colorful beauty of spring has sprung at the RHSFS Granite City North location. It features a bright, beautiful mural in the main hallway. The mural is the work of artist Rebecca Luna.

Luna's twin boys are enrolled in our Early Head Start Program at GC North. She works as an independent painter/artist. Luna first sketched out the mural, which depicts Head Start students and their parents picking from an apple tree. Those apples contain the words which embody our mission. Characteristics including trust, inspiration, respect, and collaboration can be seen on the apples.

The mural now takes up the previously empty wall space between the Health Advocate office and the front office area. Everyone at GC North agrees the new mural has really helped to brighten up the hallway!

A Note to our Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

We hope you've enjoyed our first newsletter of 2023! We greatly appreciate your support and input throughout the years and hope it will continue.

Because of rising costs in printing and postage, we've decided to deliver our newsletters to you via email. We believe this decision is the fiscally responsible thing to do given our current economic climate.

If you would like to opt in to receiving future issues, please send us your email address. We will not share your email with any 3<sup>rd</sup> party companies.

The newsletter will also have a home on our website: [www.riverbendfamilies.org](http://www.riverbendfamilies.org)

To opt in to receiving our newsletter via email, please drop a quick note to our editor and Public Relations Director, Melanie Steen. Her email address is: [msteen@riverbendfamilies.org](mailto:msteen@riverbendfamilies.org)

Thanks again for being a supporter of the Head Start mission, and we'll see you online!



KEEP  
CALM  
WE ARE  
GOING  
DIGITAL



Proud member of

United Way  
of Greater St. Louis



Teach...  
Strengthen...  
Enhance...

