

Riverbend Friends



GOOD NEWS FOR SUPPORTERS OF RIVERBEND HEAD START & FAMILY SERVICES

Q2 2023 | NEWSLETTER



Greetings,

As we reach the deep days of summer we see things “heating up” outside. At Riverbend Head Start, the same can be seen inside. Though it feels like summer has just begun, we are on the cusp of seeing our education and support staff return to the centers and processes for enrollment scale up to full speed. We are always eager this time of year to engage our families, enroll children, and transition previous students onto Kindergarten.

Over the past couple of months, we have worked hard to get the word out for future children and families to access our services, connect with our community at local events for outreach, engage mission moments like International Mud Day and the recruitment of staff to fill vacancies. We have successfully completed two monitoring events from our funding sources and look forward to a couple more in the year to come.

As we are blessed with a supportive community and mission-minded staff. Our agency continues to stand out locally, statewide, regionally and nationally for outstanding outcomes in child development metrics, health, dental and nutritional outcomes and optimal utilization of grant funds though enrollment capacity. We thank our staff, volunteers and community friends for contributing to a culture of continuous improvement and high-quality services for our families.

While transitioning to a new school year, the primary challenge we have to overcome is full staffing. We continue to seek education, social services and transportation staff. If you are interested in employment or know someone who is, you can help by checking our website and First Student’s website for employment openings. Perhaps our mission may meet your personal passion, or that of a friend.

Job opportunities for Riverbend Head Start are posted on our website at www.riverbendfamilies.org/employment/. Opportunities to drive a bus or be a bus monitor for our agency may be found by visiting First Student’s website at <https://workatfirst.com/our-opportunities/>.

Be well and stay safe!

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

Gene Howell/President & CEO



Bright Futures Start at RHSFS: Meet Wes!

It's a brand new, exciting chapter for a former Early Head Start student at Granite City South. And it's because of the love of Teacher Assistant **Emalee Shubert** and her partner Jesse. It all began in early 2022, with a phone call to provide childcare for a 1-year-old named Wes. Initially, the couple was only supposed to care for the toddler for the weekend.

"We were nervous because we never had a little one in our care, especially not for several days," says Shubert. "But we said yes. I picked him up from daycare that Friday and instantly loved him."

On that first weekend, the couple (along with their 8-year-old foster son) took Wes to the aquarium.

"After his weekend stay we learned that he wasn't going to be adopted by his placement, so we asked if we could spend more time with him," according to Shubert. "He settled right in with our family and moved in on April 29, 2022. He was officially adopted on June 7, 2023."

Wes had previously been in two foster homes prior to joining Shubert and her family. Those families kept in contact and were able to provide baby photos of Wes to his forever family. Initially, Emalee and Jesse were also planning on becoming foster parents and weren't expecting to adopt.

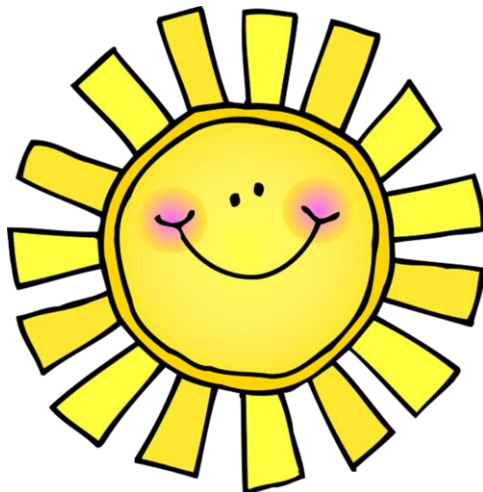
"The purpose of fostering is to support the family until reunification," says Shubert. "Wes didn't have that option, so we knew when we met him if he joined our family it was going to be forever."

Wes is looking forward to starting Head Start in August 2023. His Mom says Wes already loves seeing the school buses!

"He has absolutely loved Early Head Start," says Shubert. "He would wait at the door for Ms. Hannah to come when I say it's almost time for a visit. When we were on our way to learn and plays, he would watch for her. I know once he starts school and sees how much fun it is he will make new friends, learn so much, and love it."

Prior to adopting Wes, Emalee and Jesse had never parented a child this young before so she admits they were a bit nervous.

"Head Start has had such a positive impact on our family," says Shubert. "Having a Family Advocate to help us come up with games to play, recipes to make with him, and monitor his development helped us parent more confidently. Wes was also on several long waitlists for dental care due to a shortage of providers who accept his insurance, but Head Start gave us a voucher so he could be seen quickly. We are so grateful to have had this support when we needed it."



Bright Futures Start at RHSFS: Meet Wes!



RHSFS is Awarded a \$100,000 Grant to Purchase a New Passenger Bus with Integrated Wheelchair Seat

In July 2023, Riverbend Head Start & Family Services was awarded \$100K in grant funding in order to buy a new wheelchair accessible school bus for our Head Start and Early Start students. The money was provided through ACT – the **Agency for Community Transit**, which has locations in Granite City and Pontoon Beach, IL.

The funding was awarded through the ACT’s Community Action Grants Program. Its purpose is to provide multi-modal transportation services to the people, organizations, and communities of Madison County to enhance mobility for the elderly and disabled, improve ADA accessibility, and promote alternative transportation modes to improve the quality of life for Madison County residents. ACT’s Community Action Grant intends to provide technical and financial assistance and assist in securing funds for impactful transportation related projects.

“We are so excited to have the opportunity to partner with the ACT Community Action Grants program to elevate equity in access to Head Start’s preschool services,” said Riverbend Head Start & Family Services President & CEO, **Gene Howell**. “This will ensure that every child has access to high quality programming.”

Our plan is to purchase a new, 16-passenger, wheelchair accessible school bus from Southern Bus & Mobility. The estimated delivery for the 2024 school bus is expected in the summer of 2024. As of the date of the grant application, there were no 2023 models available.

Those families in Madison County with a child ages birth through five can qualify for the Head Start and Early Head Start program(s) if they are living at 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, have a child with a disability or are involved with the Department of Children and Family Services. We also enroll pregnant moms into our Early Head Start program.

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services is working to help children and families throughout Madison County through our many programs. Our students who rely upon a wheelchair will be able to be transported safely to/from school. Children can also be transported to other appointments including dental, eye exams, pediatrician visits, or to other appointments as needed. We anticipate having a new wheelchair accessible school bus will positively impact the families that we serve.





Illinois Head Start Association

Awards presentation

Congratulations to three of our own, who were recognized this Spring by the IHSA – Illinois Head Start Association.

Julie Haberer was named **IHSA Teacher of the Year**. The Teacher of the Year award recognizes and celebrates a unique individual who promotes and/or surpasses the Head Start and Early Head Start Program Performance Standards. The award further recognizes the impactful contributions on the services provided to children and families.

Lawanna Chatman received the **IHSA Support Staff of the Year award**. The Support Staff of the Year award recognizes and celebrates the important contributions of staff who work in the areas of administration, management, family services, facilities, food service, transportation, health, disabilities and social services. This award ultimately recognizes the positive impact on the services recipients provide to children and families. Chatman is retiring from the agency in mid-August following 20 years of dedicated service.

Candice Thrasher was named the **IHSA Parent of the Year**. This award celebrates our most important partner, parents. It pays honor to a Head Start/Early Head Start parent who has demonstrated exceptional leadership skills, exemplifies as a role model for their child and to other parents, and has made efforts to make a positive difference in the community.

The annual IHSA luncheon was held in East Peoria, IL. Congratulations once again to this year's honorees: **Julie Haberer, Lawanna Chatman and Candice Thrasher!**



From left to right: Julie Haberer, Lawanna Chatman and Candice Thrasher

Story Smart is Helping to Tell our Story

On Tuesday, April 4th we welcomed the local video production company, Story Smart, LLC to Central office and Essic Robinson. The agency contracted the company to produce six videos which were featured online and on our social media channels.

Ron Watermon is the founder & CEO of the video production company. Prior to launching Story Smart, the Emmy nominated writer spent 18 seasons leading the Communications Department for the St. Louis Cardinals. While there, he pioneered various innovative fan engagement and creative digital storytelling initiatives that helped contribute to Forbes ranking the Cardinals 3rd amongst 30 MLB teams in terms of social reach.

Julie Tristan is an Emmy award winning journalist. Currently, she can be heard weekday mornings on *The Wake Up with Bret & Julie in the Morning* on KYKY 98.1 FM (Y98). She's also a former host at KSDK-TV. The multimedia journalist conducted all of the staff interviews at Central Office. She also gathered video while engaging with our staff and students on the playground and in the classroom at Essic Robinson.

Our President & CEO **Gene Howell**, Center Operations Coordinator **Veneta Wadlow**, and Staffing & Training Specialist **Precious Frazier** took part in the on-camera interviews. The videos were released via social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn) between May and July. To view/share them, please visit the following links on our Vimeo page:

An Introduction: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821336256>

Our Mission: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821344312>

Program Eligibility: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821346452>

Recruitment & DEI: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821347322>

Head Start Works: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821338241>

Your Donation: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/821341833>



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Give STL Day Raises More Than \$3.8 Million for MO/IL-based Nonprofits

Between May 10-11, Give STL Day raised approximately \$3,836,532 million dollars for nonprofit organizations in Missouri and Illinois. Approximately 26,222 individual donations were made to 1,053 organizations. This included Riverbend Head Start & Family Services. We'd like to say thank you to those donors who took the time to remember our Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families.

Mark & Liz Reinders	\$1,050
Anonymous	\$52.50
Kegan Hollerbach	\$28.00

This year marked the 10th year for the annual Give STL Day campaign. The effort is a part of the St. Louis Community Foundation's initiative to expand charitable giving in our community and to strengthen the local nonprofit sector. The St. Louis Community Foundation inspires purposeful philanthropy that connects community and donors to build and preserve a more equitable and vibrant region, now and forever.

Since its inception in 2014, the event has raised more than \$30 million for local nonprofits. To learn more, please visit their website at www.givestlday.org.





We often use the phrase *Head Start Works* to show others that a small investment in the lives of young children and families will not only save dollars in the short term, but it can reap rewards for generations to come. As a longtime Riverbend mission partner, **Veneta Wadlow** is the personification of how and why *Head Start Works*.

Attending Head Start in its very first years back in the 1960s, Veneta has progressed to become a leader within our program. She's also a leader on the Illinois Head Start Association Board of Directors (IHSA), and a leader on the Head Start Association's Region 5 Board of Directors. Veneta has served the mission for nearly 30 years. She's taken on roles including: site supervisor and lead case manager (similar to today's lead family advocate). And now in a Coordinator role, Veneta is described as a master recruiter and a fierce advocate!

Using every opportunity to advocate for the preservation of our comprehensive model, Veneta is living proof that a small investment early on – can yield dividends in the future. We are thankful to Veneta for her decades of dedicated service. We certainly hope she isn't anywhere close to being done just yet!



Cultural Festival at Granite City North

Last month, the staff and students at Granite City North proudly took part in a Cultural Festival. The idea was launched in 2022 during Hispanic Month by our bilingual Family Advocate, Idalia McNulty. This year, the goal was to expand upon the idea and become more organized and inclusive of all the cultures of the parents, children and employees at GCN.

With that in mind, each classroom chose to represent a particular country or region. This included China, Italy, Puerto Rico, and Africa.

“This year I helped organize Latin cultures during our festival,” said Family Advocate Idalia McNulty. “Everyone who had clothes from their respective country was asked to wear it.”

The photos on this page show some of the beautifully embroidered and colorful attire worn by students.

“We held a fashion show with the children, with couples, and those employees who dressed up for the occasion,” said McNulty. “We also had dancing from Mexico by our students, Renee did stepping and I did Hawaiian.”

Some of the participants were given an impromptu dance lesson. Those who took part in this year’s festival say it was a really fun event. We applaud our employees at Granite City North for creating an event that celebrates the beauty of the cultures represented by our students, parents, and staff.



When I see you through my eyes,
I think that we are different.



When I see you through my heart,
I know we are the same.

~Doe Zantamata

Sweet Music to our Ears

When she's not busy troubleshooting computer issues at RHSFS, IT Specialist Karla Hurley has a passion for music and feels right at home when she's got a musical instrument in her hand.

Hurley took piano lessons as a kid and would go on to play trumpet, which she continued all the way through high school. By her early 20's she would teach herself how to play guitar. Then later, she would teach herself how to play drums. Eventually she would form a band, the Hurricanes. The group is now on hiatus, but she doesn't rule out getting the band back together.

Bringing her love of music to Head Start happened purely by accident. A few years ago, Hurley took part in a Leadership Academy at work. At the end of the session, participants created a skit. During the skit, she played guitar and made up a song. As it turns out, the Collinsville center supervisor at the time was also in the Leadership Academy. The light bulb went off, and Hurley was asked to come and play music for the kids at the center.

"I didn't want to just play for them, I wanted to give the kids the opportunity to play music themselves," said Hurley. "I showed up with instruments that I own, and gave each child the chance to play."

During her first classroom jam session, Hurley brought a keyboard, snare drum, bongos, shakers, guitar, microphone and an amplifier. She admits that she and the kids had an absolute blast!

"Once word got out that I did this, other centers asked as well," says Hurley. "I've done this with Essic, Bethalto, Edwardsville, and Collinsville. We even purchased a keyboard for me to do this, which is definitely the kid's favorite."

She loves seeing how excited the kids are when they get the chance to play. During these classroom jam sessions, Hurley and the students pretend to play a song as a group. The anticipation builds once the countdown starts.

"It's complete mayhem, but it makes them happy," says Hurley. "My favorite part is when I see them get in the zone of creativity. It's a look they get, like they are tapped into a deeper layer of the mind. I don't know how else to explain it. Not all of them get there, but they all have a blast!"

In her own time, she seems fearless when it comes to picking up a musical instrument and playing, or teaching herself how to play one.

"I'm not a great player. For me, the draw is about exploring music in the moment with a group," said Hurley. "It's like we are all painting a picture together at the same time. What I do with the kids is similar, I just give them the instrument and the space to explore."

Most recently, Hurley admits that her current musical instrument of choice is the keyboard.

Sweet Music to our Ears (cont.)



Karla's jam session at Edwardsville





Crystal Jennings has been an employee of RHSFS since 2010.



Crystal Jennings Community Service Coordinator – Central Office

Crystal Jennings first joined the agency in January 2010 as a Case Manager. By 2014, she was promoted to Lead Case Manager (now called Lead Family Advocate) at Granite City North. She held that position for about nine years.

“I have loved frontline work—interacting with families, doing applications, recruiting, seeing the kids in the classroom,” says Jennings. “Besides my coworkers, I miss greeting the kids as they come and go from school each day and seeing them in the classroom.”

Jennings is now works as a Community Service Coordinator, a role that she was promoted to in March 2023. Some of her duties include covering Social Services, Parent Involvement/Engagement, ERSEA, and working to collaborate with local organizations in Madison County.

Jennings exemplifies someone who has gone above and beyond in her role at the agency. Years ago, while working as a Case Manager, she had a Spanish speaking family on her caseload. While she only had a couple of years of Spanish under her belt (8th grade and freshman year) she admits she had forgotten most of what she learned, but knew that she had to quickly get back up to speed.

“I learned a lot on the home visits through the parent/child interactions,” says Jennings. “From there, we were able to gain more Spanish speaking families and it kept growing. I am not fluent by any means, but I learned enough to get points across and to get the basic idea of what parents needed.”

Jennings has been on the advisory board with Madison County Community Development (MCCD) for the Community Services Block Grant for several years now. She is a representative of the client sector, proudly representing RHSFS.



"The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members... a heart of grace and a soul generated by love."

-Coretta Scott King



Drivers Needed for our Most Precious Cargo

As you saw earlier in our newsletter, the new school year is nearly upon us, and Riverbend Head Start & Family Services (RHSFS) is hoping to remind potential candidates that we're looking for bus drivers and monitors.

Becoming a bus driver is ideal for retirees or someone who's semi-retired. The starting pay for a school bus driver is \$17/hour. The starting pay for a bus monitor is \$13.50/hour with no experience. Experienced bus drivers will receive a \$2,000 sign on bonus, or a \$1,000 bonus with no experience. The first half is paid after 30 days licensed, the rest is paid after driving for six months.

RHSFS currently owns and maintains 21 buses and related equipment. First Student is in charge of hiring bus drivers to service all six of our Head Start locations.

There's currently a nationwide bus driver shortage. According to a 2022 survey from HopSkipDrive, the bus driver shortage has risen by 10% over the previous year. More than two-thirds of survey respondents said they see a direct link between driver staffing challenges and chronic absenteeism in students.

Feel free to share this information with those in your network. If they're interested in becoming a school bus driver, they should visit First Student online at www.workatfirst.com to apply for an open position.



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RHSFS Welcomes a New Member to its Board of Directors

The Board of Directors at Riverbend Head Start & Family Services (RHSFS) is pleased to welcome **Brett Briggs** to the agency.

Briggs has worked in banking for the past 19 years, spending the past 15 years with PNC Bank. He currently leads a team that stretches across Central/Southwest Illinois and into St. Louis. His team works specifically with small-to-medium sized companies (for profit and nonprofit), helping those organizations navigate through the financial and operational management of their businesses.

“We are very excited to welcome the expertise and experience of Brett Briggs to our governing body,” said President/CEO Gene Howell. “We’re looking forward to his contributions in the success of our mission.”

Briggs was appointed to the Board during a special meeting that was held on Thursday, May 11, 2023. Outgoing board member, Kristin Tanzyus, has decided not renew her seat. She was appointed in 2011, and previously served as Board Chairwoman.

Briggs earned his B.S. in Business Administration/Marketing from SIUE in 2004. He earned his MBA in 2021 from the University of Illinois. Prior to becoming a board member at RHSFS, Briggs was a board member with the SIUE Alumni Association and Edwardsville Neighbors in Need.

He and his wife have lived in Edwardsville since 2016. The couple has two sons which keep them very busy in their spare time.



*New RHSFS Board Member Brett Briggs
Briggs is a V.P. with PNC Bank in Collinsville, IL*

Edwardsville Team gets Hands-On with Mother Nature

Earlier this summer, the Edwardsville center teaching team took part in the Rooted in Play: The Power of Place conference at SIU Carbondale. The team included: **Kelley DeConcini, Connie Harris, Tia Ferrari and Kelsey Messick.**

The group spent three days at the Touch of Nature Outdoor Education Center, which is located in the Shawnee National Forest in Southern Illinois. The objective of the conference was for educators to experience play-based education in a nature inspired environment. Throughout their sessions, they learned the importance and benefit(s) of place-based and nature-based learning environments. Each session provided them with hands on experiences in nature and how to transform their playground into a nature-based outdoor classroom.

In addition to all of the great content, there was an opportunity for participants to win a \$6,000 competitive award to support place-based classrooms. In order to be considered, each person completed an application process that included an essay on how they would use the \$6,000 for their outdoor classroom, if awarded.

Kelsey Messick was chosen to receive one of the \$6,000 awards, based on her submission. Together as a team, the Edwardsville group was able to adjust their initial plan – based on what they learned throughout the conference sessions. Messick is invited to attend next year’s conference to present her team’s implementation of the place-based outdoor classroom, by using the grant they were awarded.

Members of the team say they have come up with many new ideas, based on their training sessions. They’re extremely excited to get started on the transformation of their outdoor classroom when they return to the classroom this month.





Sharon Wallace & Debbie White

Meet two of our stellar employees who are working hard behind the scenes to keep us up and running. **Sharon Wallace** is the Lead Data Systems Associate and **Debbie White** is a Data Systems Associate. You can find both of them on the 4th floor of Central Office.

Sharon joined RHSFS as a temporary employee in June 2006, and became a regular employee in February 2007. Debbie joined the agency in September 2020.

Sharon and Debbie are known as the “Data Team” as they work closely to make sure all of the necessary tasks get done quickly and accurately.

“Sharon and Debbie are both extremely detail-oriented and truly care about the program data,” according to IS Director Connie Paruch. “They don’t just copy what’s on paper, they actually analyze it and follow up as necessary. Both are charitable, reliable, approachable, intelligent, caring and dedicated to the mission of Head Start.”

Jokingly referred to as the *Department of Knowledge* by staff, Sharon and Debbie are always willing to help out their colleagues. Their “can do” attitude and the ability to put their colleagues at ease is why they’re making a difference at RHSFS. Plus, their supervisor says that they have an accuracy rate that averages more than 99.6 percent!

“We’re fortunate to have Sharon and Debbie on the team,” says Paruch. “They are dedicated professionals who go above and beyond to ensure the success of the program. I am grateful for their hard work and dedication.”

A Note from the Editor



Dear Riverbend Friends and Supporters,

I hope you've enjoyed our second quarter newsletter! We greatly appreciate your support and input throughout the years and hope it will continue.

For those individual donors and corporate sponsors who attended our first in person fundraiser (post-pandemic) on August 1st, we thank you. It was a fantastic way to celebrate the summer, catch up with old friends, or make new ones. But most of all, it was a way to say Thank You for your ongoing support of Riverbend Head Start and its mission.

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

If you were unable to attend our fundraiser but would still like to arrange a donation, feel free to reach out to me directly at: msteen@riverbendfamilies.org.

Thanks again for being a supporter of the Head Start mission, and showing your support!

Melanie Steen
Public Relations & Fund Development Director

Thank you, donors

You make an impact



Approximately 30 corporate sponsors donated to this year's fundraiser, including Argosy Casino in Alton. This special check presentation took place at the casino on Friday, August 4, 2023.

Riverbend Head Start & Family Services

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