



# Rivendell READER

W I N T E R 2 0 2 1 / 2 0 2 2 • V O L . 2 5



## Dear Friends of Rivendell,

**T**he stories in this issue of the Reader are particularly poignant for me this year because they highlight the bonds we forge with one another through Rivendell School that influence us in the moment as well as over time. Our mission of inclusion, at its foundations a belief that typically developing children and those with special needs can and should learn together, touches us and influences our ability and motivation to embrace diversity in all its forms. When we teach and invite children to find joy in diversity, we find that joy, too. And we carry that awareness with us wherever we go and however far in miles or years we are away from Rivendell.

Our overarching goals for children are articulated with great depth and clarity in *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, Second Edition*, a book by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards with Catherine M. Goins (2020, National Association for the Education of Young Children.) The authors' focus on **identity, diversity, justice and activism** is directly connected to Rivendell's belief that learning to get along with a wide range of people and accepting and respecting their differences has lasting benefits for everyone.

It's the evidence that this is true that pushes us forward through challenges like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and lack of investment of public funds in agencies such as ours. Amid these challenges are the links to Rivendell that remind us to take heart and persevere. And the connections are as diverse as our student population!

This year we've heard from more than the usual number of alum families about the impact Rivendell has had on their children, even years later. We trust, too, that our



## Home

### THE CORE PROGRAM TEAM

September 18, 2006 marked a milestone for Rivendell as we moved into our new building at 277 Third Avenue and unpacked the commitment to early childhood inclusion that defines us as a community. We transplanted our Montessori roots into this new educational environment where children belonged, were cared for, and learned to care for each other. Every square foot of space, both indoor and out, reflects our mission of inclusion and, fifteen years later, continues to do so. The breadth of our experience allows us to approach each Rivendell student holistically, integrating academic learning with the development of positive social relationships and a genuine sense of belonging.

In 2008, in what is now our school library, Classroom 5 was designed to house Rivendell School's new CORE program. CORE is an educational and social thinking model that helps young children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder to develop the readiness skills they need to learn with others. All CORE children experience significant challenges to forming relationships. Our educational model, based on the belief that relationships are at the core of learning, places the teacher/child relationship as the primary focus that guides direct teaching experience. SEITs, classroom teachers and related service providers work to help CORE children to adapt to new experiences, changes in routine and exposure to information presented in new or even slightly different ways.

At CORE we help our students, each enrolled in one of Rivendell's Preschool classrooms, to form a positive understanding of teachers and their roles, widening their perspectives to differentiate roles beyond those of their earliest and most important influences, their parents. We are committed to the evidence-based belief that it

is both possible and necessary for our students to form a positive understanding of teachers and their roles. That understanding gains the child access to classroom learning experiences and is critical to the development of cognitive flexibility. As the mother of CORE's first student put it "the key to the CORE program is to build a child's readiness skills through micro-steps and through incremental exposure to a mainstream school environment with the help of individualized, therapeutic team teaching." The CORE curriculum guides children with ASD to form and generalize the KEY CONCEPTS that are necessary for social thinking. We teach self-awareness and knowledge of others through meaningful experiences across contexts. Each KEY CONCEPT is a personalized narrative that the child, CORE practitioners and parents make together to form the steppingstones of social learning. Our curriculum is based on three FUNDAMENTAL COMPETENCIES:

- **To understand the differences between self and other.** To learn in a classroom, a child needs to learn that she/he is an individual, and that there are other individuals who are separate from them. The understanding of self arises from experiences shared with others
- **To understand the roles of teacher, child, self.** Children become aware of the world, primarily due to the relationships they form with others. In the classroom "others" are individuals with functional similarities and differences.
- **To follow a teacher's directive.** Learning to develop a meaningful relationship with teachers is key to the formation of cognitive flexibility. How a child follows a teacher's directive is an indication of the quality of that relationship.

In 2012, thanks to the generous contribution from the Morris and Alma Schapiro Fund, Rivendell signed a ten-year lease and moved to CORE's newly created program and training space at 272 Third Avenue, diagonally across the street from the main campus. In the following decade, through therapeutic teaching methods, clinical services, and intensive team member collaboration, we strengthened our work in helping CORE children understand what it means to be at school. Using newly acquired technology, we were able to use videos as a natural means of assessment, treatment, and collaboration. These became increasingly important in our work with parents as a natural relationship-building exchange while sharing perspective of how their children make meaning of the world around them. We developed video training materials which we presented locally and internationally, always mindful of Rivendell's mission of promoting authentic inclusion.

Last year the lease at 272 was set to run out, the building was sold, and we were faced with the challenge of finding space at 277, which was at full occupancy. Thanks to Katy's creative and seemingly inexhaustible energy, financial support from a Rivendell parent, the outstanding flexibility of CORE practitioners and Rivendell administrators, CORE moved into two newly created spaces on the third floor. We came back to the place where authentic inclusion is our shared vision and the right of every child. As another CORE parent wrote "Rivendell was founded with a core mission of kindness and compassion—for everyone. This basic principle isn't just part of the fabric of the place, it's the main thread. So, while there are many lessons learned there—everything from washing hands to ABC's—the most important lesson is that we are all different. We are all unique. We each have our own challenges, as well as our own gifts. And we all—every one of us—have something special to share."

It's good to be home.

## On Belonging

ELISA LUNDY

Assistant Director, Rivendell School

**S**ince Rivendell's founding in 1995, our investment in the concept of belonging has been in the forefront of our discussions about how to best fulfill Rivendell's mission of inclusion. That investment remains strong, along with our awareness that we continue to learn more each year about the collaborative strategies and perspectives that make inclusive opportunities meaningful.

Last year, the need to teach remotely challenged us to think about inclusion, collaboration and relationship in a whole new way. At our year end retreat in June we shared feedback from parents who felt a deeper collaboration with us during remote learning and felt more included in their child's education. We compared notes about the need to collaborate with our students in different ways to meet the unique learning needs presented by remote instruction and the need to foster belonging in a situation ripe with potential for isolation. We also experienced what it was like to be a classroom teacher again as we responded to the need to create curriculum that would work remotely to hold a child's attention and encourage their participation. Our commitment to use what we learned from our





remote days remains strong. This fall we concentrated on developing relationships with parents with a renewed appreciation for their role on the team. We've reflected on how to collaborate and communicate, about how much to say and when, about what is relevant and meaningful to us AND to parents and how to be more open about what we each need to meet the educational needs of the child.

We are thinking together about belonging and what it takes to be truly included, what interferes with inclusion and how we partner with children to foster their sense of belonging in their classrooms. Moving forward, we'll consider how a sense of belonging is necessary for other team members, such as related service providers. How might we exchange skills rather than simply share information with those who work differently and in other than classroom environments? The world has become quite divisive, with people increasingly in separate camps of opinion. Here at Rivendell School, we'll continue our efforts to break down barriers and understand each other more fully in the belief that the outcome will be better for everyone.

## Twenty-Five Years at Rivendell

KATIE BROWNING

Associate Director, The Early Childhood Center at Congregation Beth Elohim

**I**n December of 1995 Rivendell had its first SEIT case, and I was Rivendell's first SEIT. SEIT as a special education service was new in those days, and I didn't know what to expect, but I dressed up and took the R train to a small nursery school in Bay Ridge to work with a little boy there. I had previously been a classroom teacher in a special education classroom and being a SEIT was a very different experience (we used to joke about the "itinerant" part of the phrase, imagining ourselves roaming the city and spreading the "good news" of inclusion to schools.)

In reality, becoming an effective SEIT involved a certain amount of knowledge I already had a vast skill set I had yet to learn. What I did learn over the years was how to collaborate with classroom teachers from a wide variety of early childhood settings, from small daycare centers in East Flatbush to very progressive preschools in Manhattan. I learned that children can flourish in many kinds of educational situations, as long as their teachers cared about them and they had the appropriate kind of support. I learned how to listen more carefully to parents and classroom teachers, and how to adapt my teaching to the philosophy of the school while at the same time continuing to advocate strongly for the child I was working with. All these things I learned on the job, and with the continual support of Rivendell.

Through our staff meetings and retreats we pondered the ideas of collaboration, belonging, and personal and professional growth. This exploration and support nurtured me and eventually led me to where I am now, which is as the associate director of a large preschool in Brooklyn. Because of what I learned at Rivendell, I have been able to bring to my new position my knowledge of effective inclusion, and a strong desire to always work as collaboratively as possible. I already miss Rivendell, but am so grateful for all I learned there.



## Our Beautiful Journey at Rivendell School

THE DWARIKA FAMILY

**O**ur daughter Ariana attended Rivendell for three years. Our memories there are unforgettable. We cannot stress enough how knowledgeable, loving, kind and thoughtful everyone was.

As new parents, we were a bit intimidated about so many things, BUT Rivendell did an outstanding job welcoming us as a family and quickly made us feel at home. Today, we're still grateful to be a part of such an amazing community. The relationship we share is a remarkable one we hold close to our heart.

At the end of our journey, Rivendell was instrumental in recommending schools that were outstanding for our daughter. Ariana is now a fourth grader at Berkeley Carroll School, doing well and for that we're forever grateful to all her teachers at Rivendell. We have no doubt that Rivendell has helped to shape our daughter to become the smart, beautiful and kind person she is today. We know Ariana has benefited from the guidance she received at Rivendell. She's always getting compliments from her teachers for things that reflect her early learning.

Ariana has many fond memories of her own and enjoys telling stories about her experience at Rivendell and how much she adores her beloved preschool. She hopes to write about all of it one day.

### MILESTONES

*We thank these recently retired Rivendell colleagues for their many years of service and commitment to our mission of inclusion:*

*Judy Herskowitz, Tina Mochon, Shelly Wolf Scott and Denise Taddonio.*

*We also thank Rivendell Board of Trustees past president Sallie Stutz for her many years of service.*



## More Than A Preschool

ALISA LAMONT  
Rivendell Alum Parent

**W**hen my son, Mac, joined Rivendell’s Twos program nearly 20 years ago, I did not foresee how meaningful the school would become to our family. Back then, Rivendell was located in a brownstone on a tree-lined street in Park Slope. After a very gentle transition to the classroom, Mac made his first friends, established new routines, and developed trusting relationships with his first teachers outside our home: Katy Hill and Nora Carrillo.

Our family grew to include Malinee, Siri and Charlie. I deeply appreciated how teachers embodied Rivendell’s mission of recognizing similarities and respecting differences within each child. In the classroom and on the rooftop playground, my children had natural opportunities to befriend others who learned and communicated differently. I believe this set the tone for the kind, accepting young adults they are becoming.

More than a preschool, Rivendell became our community. As a new parent, I met people with similar values and developed cherished friendships that have endured well beyond our time at Rivendell. Like its symbol, the tree, Rivendell provided roots that helped our family grow in a positive, purposeful way. We enjoy returning to visit Rivendell, and we remain grateful for its lasting impact on us.



## Intangibles

JULIE KIM  
Rivendell Parent

**W**ords I thought I’d never write: We moved across the country. For my disabled daughter to attend a school we only visited on Zoom. During a global pandemic. Yet, all these words are true. AND they don’t even begin to describe Izzy’s transformation since starting at Rivendell this past fall. Izzy now walks the halls. Opens doors. Holds a cup on her own. Protests when she’s sick of a song, or when I furnish the wrong white cheese. Loves the sound of crunching leaves. Lights up when we mention Vivian, Owen, Alanna, and friends. Kicks her legs with excitement in her stroller



as we make the final turn off of Carroll onto Third Avenue and Katy greets us with smiling eyes, a big high-five, and the thermometer.

To *Siri With Love*, a memoir by Judith Newman, led me to a special education advocate who understands that finding the right school for your child is not only about checking off boxes. It's about the intangibles, the advocate said—the right balance of nurture and rigor, the community you're joining and above all, it's about trust. The ability to sleep at night. The advocate led me to Rivendell, and now that we're here and benefitting from all this magical place has to offer, I can be more specific: Here, Izzy is known, expected of a lot, and thriving. She learns every day from her team of nine—or is it ten?—dedicated teachers and therapists. As do I. She learns from friends. And we all learn from Izzy.

## Ambitious Goals

BRIAN DEPASQUALE

Rivendell School Advisory Board

**L**ike all aspects of 2020, fundraising in support of Rivendell during COVID was an intense mixture of highs and lows. It was heartbreaking to witness institutions we partnered with in the past shuttered and demoralizing to not be able to organize our annual fundraising and community-building gala. However, these limitations created exciting new fundraising opportunities that allowed us to meet our enthusiastic fundraising goals and foster a sense of community while remaining inclusive to all and vigilant towards COVID. And the excitement of these events was matched only by the enthusiasm of Rivendell families and friends, who rose to meet and exceed the fundraising challenges we faced. This experience laid bare the truth: gala or no gala, the Rivendell community and its spirit is indestructible.

Although it can often feel like COVID has always been with us, I remember the emergence of COVID in early 2020 and how impossible the realities of its impact seemed. Many institutions were not financially prepared to weather a storm of this magnitude, and thankfully, Rivendell was not one of those places. Although COVID brought along intense financial strain, through years of careful saving, Rivendell was able to nimbly navigate through 2020, freeing it to remain focused on the health and education of its students.

Fundraising remains critical for achieving Rivendell's ambitious goal of providing unparalleled early-childhood education focused on inclusion and community. The entire Rivendell community, especially its many dedicated parent volunteers, hope to build on our success last year, by developing exciting, new ways to raise funds and strengthen our community while remaining vigilant and cautious about COVID safety and remaining inclusive in an unevenly reopening world.

As always, key targets for fundraising are to support innovative programming, such as our Growing Connections program, maintenance and development of our physical space, such as our beautiful and well-used rooftop, and our scholarship fund, a critical mechanism of inclusion that ensures that Rivendell's resources can be made available to families regardless of their individual finances. Lastly, as we emerge from COVID, fundraising will be critical for ensuring that we can replenish and build on our savings, so that Rivendell will flourish and thrive for years to come, no matter what the next storm brings.









## RIVENDELL PRESENTS

Rosalie Woodside and Denise Taddonio had the honor of representing Rivendell’s CORE Program again at the World Association of Infant Mental Health in June, 2021. The conference, which was held virtually this year, included their presentations:

“Strengthening the Fractured Narratives of Preschool Children with ASD by Bringing Attachment Theory Into the Classroom, Where it Belongs”

“Reconstructing and Reframing the Attachment Narrative with Parents When COVID Closes the Classroom”



## Rivendell School

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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARC GOLDBERG, JESSICA TAYLOR AND ANNE HERVÉ

## Friends of Rivendell School July 2020 -June 2021

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The Morris and Alma Schapiro Fund

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BlackRock, Inc. matching for  
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Thomas Diakomichalis

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## Friends of Rivendell School July 2020 - June 2021

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Shelley Braff  
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Alexis & Grant Mainland  
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### ***With Thanks***

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## Dear Friends of Rivendell

Continued from page 1

relationships with colleagues recently retired from Rivendell will remain strong and that teachers and families who have moved on to other schools will carry forth a deep commitment to others.

Bookending the goodbyes are hellos as we welcome new families, staff and Board members into our community. We remember that new spirit energizes our efforts. We are a diverse, hardworking and joyful group, bolstered by the proof that we make a difference together. You are part of that group and we count on **your** generous spirit and support to keep Rivendell's connections strong into the new year and beyond.

Best wishes,

*Katy Hill*

Katy Hill



### VISIT OUR WEB SITE

Get up-to-date information, see the school calendar, or contact us any time at  
[www.rivendellnyc.org](http://www.rivendellnyc.org)

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