



Rivendell READER

W I N T E R 2 0 2 2 / 2 0 2 3 • V O L . 2 6



Dear Friends of Rivendell,

I hope the gatherings with friends and family that mark the end of one year and the beginning of another were inspiring for you especially now that in-person celebrating, when planned with care, is once again often possible. Here at Rivendell, we're moved to celebrate the resilience of our community in the face of considerable challenges over the last several years. We understand more deeply now the significance of the small moments of joy that signal connection and deserve our attention every day, all year long.

Not surprisingly, families and staff from across Rivendell's programs always stay deeply connected, sharing and celebrating what we learn from one another year after year. Through the best practices that underscore our commitment to Rivendell's mission, we resolve again to promote excellent early childhood education for all children in a wide variety of inclusive programs.

Underlying all we do is the belief that learning to get along with a wide range of people and accepting and respecting their differences has lasting benefits for everyone. Elsa Butler, a current parent, calls the impact we have on one another the **Rivendell Effect** and I know you will be touched by her story about Stevie, Izzy and their joyful friendship in this issue of the Reader.

Whether you've been touched by the thoughtful expertise of our Evaluation Team, the individualized learning support developed by our Special Education Itinerant Teachers, the joyful classroom communities fostered by our Preschool Teaching Staff, the relationship building foundation of the CORE Program, the environmentally conscious Growing Connections Program or the steady, underlying organization of our Administrators, you, too,

continued on page 12



The CORE Program at Rivendell School

ROSALIE WOODSIDE

CORE Program Coordinator

I have been privileged to write an article for the Rivendell Reader since the newsletter was first issued in 1996. For the last fifteen years, I have been sharing the work of Rivendell's CORE Program with you. CORE is an education and social thinking model that helps young children who are on the Autistic Spectrum develop the readiness skills they need to learn with others. 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. At CORE we help our students form positive understanding of teachers and their roles, widening their perspectives to differentiate roles beyond that of their earliest influences, their parents. Making sense of the dynamic preschool classroom is a challenge for CORE students. They may see what teachers and other children are doing and can make use of classroom materials, but they struggle to understand the ongoing relationships that are a part of school life. The careful building of the teacher/child relationship teaches CORE children the meaning behind the skills they acquire and the generalized understanding they need to apply the skills they've learned in a variety of settings. When experiences are meaningful and shared, social understanding takes place.

A relationship is defined as the way in which two or more objects or people are connected and behave toward each other. CORE is the product of its founding principles and the teachers and therapists who weave those principles into their practice. Recently, I have started to think about what impact the relationship that CORE children, parents and practitioners have had on me. One of the characteristics of children with ASD is the challenges they face in

understanding other minds and putting experiences into any context other than their own. Our job is to become attuned to their thinking. When we are successful, it is because they have taught us how they think. We try to share in each CORE child's interests and perspectives and help them to process and organize their experience through our joint attention. We help them to understand what and how they are thinking so that they can understand the thinking of others. The relationship that is formed through knowledge of each other leads to intentions that are complementary to each other. In this way, we can be each other's guides to shared social thinking.

CORE parents, as their children's most important relationships, are key to our efforts. They help us to clarify and broaden the perspectives of our students and they can change our thinking when we build a bridge to shared meaning through our partnerships. Without them the power of our work weakens. With them, our ability to support central coherence in their children's thinking becomes stronger.

The CORE team's ability to share and reflect on other's thoughts and perspectives is critical to forming and maintaining relationships with their students, their parents and each other. We learn from each other's beliefs, intentions, emotions, and imaginations. Our relationships with each other forge our understanding and strengthen our belief in the work we do.

The impact that my relationships with people on the Autistic Spectrum, their teachers, therapists, and their parents have changed me profoundly. They have enhanced my understanding of the human mind and spirit in countless ways and taught me so much about the value of shared perspective.

Why Rivendell?

ELISA LUNDY

Assistant Director, Rivendell School

When my colleagues at a school I worked in formerly began to talk about founding Rivendell, I was all in. I knew who I would be working with and had the greatest respect for each of them. I was proven right when we started to talk about what Rivendell would be. From that day to this, the vision we had then has held constant.

Inclusion has remained the mission. Children have always come first. Innovation and research and forward-thinking have been hallmarks of our work together. Fairness in employment practice has not wavered. Collaboration among staff members and within teams has been fostered.

I am not the only one who has stayed at Rivendell or has joined the team because of our on-going commitment. The commitment of our staff members to the welfare of children and to this agency is unparalleled in my experience. I receive requests for Rivendell special education itinerant teachers from parents and schools because our SEIT's reputation for professionalism and dedication to the work is respected. Parents and schools request and wait for Rivendell evaluations. Our evaluators are curious and conscientious and interested in really getting to know the children they are evaluating so that strengths and learning challenges can be addressed. Our hard-working administrative staff organize the documentation collected so thoroughly by providers with careful attention to stringent city and state requirements for the use of public funds. Our Board makes decisions that support the mission and Rivendell's future.

Insufficient public funding for the special education programs Rivendell provides to support early childhood inclusion puts limitations on the extent to which salaries and benefits can reward commitment to best practice. Our ongoing advocacy for reimbursement rates that reflect the true cost of our special education services and your contributions to the Annual Appeal are commitments we can count on, too. The day to day rewards for me and our staff members come from dedication to Rivendell's inclusive mission and our collaborative efforts on behalf of the children and families with whom we work.

And me? I have never not been stimulated at Rivendell. I have always been challenged and my mind engaged. Our commitment to shared thinking has resulted in wonderful advances in the way we perceive the work of inclusive early childhood education. Rivendell is what it is because of the people who gravitate to Rivendell. Each one brings special contributions and pooling them together in professional practice changes us all. Wherever we are, in the classroom, in the office, in the evaluation room, sharing information with parents, we are Rivendell - our collective wisdom goes with us and is shared.

I am so grateful to be a part of Rivendell and consider it such a privilege to work among you.





Professional Development at Rivendell

EILEEN BLAU, TIFFANY GONSALVES, CAROL KOLINS AND
THERESA SALVANTI

Rivendell SEIT Staff Development Committee

Continuing education is part of our contract with the New York State Special Education Department, but even if it was not required, we have a staff of special education and classroom teachers with inquiring minds who love to learn about new ideas. Over the years, we have had formal presentations as well as regular staff meetings to learn more and deepen our practice. Teachers often share about conferences they have attended, classes they have taken and books they have read. Last year, we began weekly “chats” so teachers could share information and ask questions of one another. The idea for a Staff Development Committee was born during a weekly chat.

After a lengthy discussion about the purpose of the Staff Development Committee we got on board and decided to develop a survey to determine what SEITs wanted out of the time they invest in attending staff meetings. The survey sought topics of interest and necessity as well as preferences for remote and in-person meeting options and meeting frequency. The survey results informed the forthcoming SEIT staff meeting and professional development agenda for the year. The less formal (and optional) chat session group was reformatted to once a month. Required staff meetings are also once a month and include the professional development topics of special interest to our group. The staff meeting also includes a 15 minute “social” time prior to the beginning of the meeting for folks to say hello.

The Staff Development Committee had an opportunity to review the survey and to determine the schedule of topics for the year ahead. The topics so far have included collaboration with teachers, paperwork challenges, and communication disorders. Committee members talked about how the SEITs can be more involved in staff meetings. It was suggested that each staff meeting end with a preview of the next one to raise interest, encourage attendance and plan for collaboration within meetings.

The first meeting was dedicated to the paperwork required to document our work with children who have mandated SEIT services. Cindy Asher, our special education administrator, attended the meeting and walked us through each required form, answered many questions and heard our request for a cover sheet, which was recently made available. A Rivendell Preschool Teacher graciously attended our second staff meeting and shared about her experience working with SEITs and how she is eager to learn more from the SEITs in her classroom. Within these meetings the SEITs collaborated on their own teaching and communication strategies, shared tips and personal experiences at schools outside of Rivendell Preschool. We look forward to the “materials” meeting when SEITs will discuss creating and individualizing materials for their students. Many enjoy making materials and the questions they ask themselves about what children need will be shared: “Why is this material necessary?”, “What goal does this material

support?”, “What is already in the classroom that can be used?”.

One of the main reasons we initiated the Staff Development Committee was to attempt to engage more SEITs at the meetings and dig into what would be most interesting and useful to the majority of SEITs. It is a work in progress, and we are figuring it out as we go along. We recognize the expertise and skills among us, and we want to find ways to highlight each person’s abilities, knowledge and creativity. We all benefit when we hear from many different voices.

Growing Connections Dispatch

BRIGITTE YOHE

Growing Connections Teacher

A lot happens in the garden at Rivendell Preschool in the fall: the classroom jack-o'-lanterns and ornamental gourds make their way to the garden after Halloween, producing beautiful sights as their dedicated planter suddenly turns into a pumpkin patch. There, the children watch them shrink, get "mushy" and "yucky," and slowly make their way back into the earth. They learn a big word called "decomposition."

Fall is also a time when we venture outside of school. During our popular annual leaf walk, classrooms get to walk in small groups to the Gil Hodges community garden on Carroll Street. There, the children collect leaves, put them in baskets, and bring them back to our leaf compost tumbler in our garden. Everyone loves to spin the tumbler, and not only during Growing Connections!

It is also time for lots of cleaning up. The children use child-sized rakes to rake up the dead leaves that have fallen from the Boston ivy and the grape vines that trail through our garden. They pull out the tomato, pepper, kale, and basil plants that have provided us snacks for many weeks but have now turned brown.

While the children busily tend to the garden, they observe, experience, and ask questions. They witness firsthand that the life cycle of many plants end once it gets cooler out. Plants die down and give up their turn to make space for new ones to grow. They also turn into healthy compost that can be used for our spring planting. Decomposition is a natural recycling process, an early lesson in sustainability.

During the cold winter months, the cozy and heated greenhouse allows us to continue to have Growing Connections. We explore soil in depth and ask more questions: What happens to an apple core when we put it in a container of soil? How about a plastic spoon? We experiment to find out. These inquiry-based lessons allow us to discuss how that knowledge affects keeping our earth clean.

At the same time, the leaves in the compost tumbler keep quietly turning into nutritious soil until spring. There will be many pots to fill and lots of seeds to plant! The new life cycles will begin!





The Rivendell Effect

ELSA BUTLER

Rivendell Parent

When our daughter, Cleo, told us her teachers were rubbing her back at nap time to help her rest, we knew for certain that Rivendell was pretty great. This was only one of many ways she was being nurtured lovingly at school. We'd been happy to discover Rivendell because we believed deeply in the benefits of the inclusion model, and we quickly learned how the ethos of care, thoughtfulness and responsiveness applies every moment of every day with every single child.

Our youngest, Stevie, is now in her third year at Rivendell. When we first sent her to Classroom 1 in Fall 2020, it was an occasion accompanied by many emotions. Thanks to Katy's and Shelly's extraordinary work, and that of all the teachers and staff, new protocols helped mitigate the risks of COVID and made in-person school possible. To be able to deliver Stevie every day into their capable hands was a relief for us and a joy for her. Finally, after months of seclusion with her family, here were new friends! And a place full of interesting works just right for her!

Through the work of the SEITs and her Classroom 4 teachers, Stevie has come to understand a diversity of abilities and personalities among her friends. She's learned to read the needs and interests of those who are non-verbal, noticing and responding to the dynamics of different social situations. She's discovered how to connect to a wide range of kids, from friends who use devices to communicate, to students who want to run and play tag, to friends who create elaborate pretend-play games.

What has made Stevie's time at Rivendell singularly memorable is her friendship with Izzy, who has multiple disabilities and developmental delays and is mostly non-verbal. When Stevie and Izzy are together, they have their own easy way of relating and communicating, and they create games that delight them both. Izzy has taught Stevie life lessons that nobody else in the world would be able to do - how to look through someone else's window, how to think outside the box when coming up with ways to connect with fellow human beings, how to care for someone, how helping someone creates a sense of purpose.

Izzy is like a beacon to Stevie. In the classroom, she finds books that Izzy might like and "reads" them to her. She's cheering Izzy on as she becomes a stronger walker. Last year, to protect Izzy if she lost her balance, Stevie would pile blankets around her to create a soft spot to sit. A game called "Cover Izzy" was born in which all the blankets and silks were laid over her lap and shoulders, inspiring the most adorable grins and giggles. "Izzy" was the third word Stevie learned to write, and the sheer volume of notes and drawings addressed to Izzy tells us how often Stevie thinks about her when they're apart. Both girls' growth is deeply enriched by their relationship.

At pick-up recently, Stevie was resisting putting on her coat. Izzy, in her wheelchair, stretched out her hand and Stevie instantly moved in close to gently stroke her palm. "Izzy likes this," Stevie said, "it makes her feel calm." Izzy's presence calmed Stevie, too. It was a moment of magic that



reminded me how lucky we are to be part of a school community where a connection like theirs is nourished with plenty of sunlight and water.

Now our older daughter is 10 and she has a grounded sense of herself that we know is a result of her early childhood education. I suspect every child who emerges from the school possesses qualities of kindness, grace and a secure sense of self. This is the “Rivendell Effect,” and it is mighty.

Community Coming Together

BRIAN DEPASQUALE

Rivendell School Advisory Board

As I looked past smiling faces new and familiar, onto the buildings of Gowanus reflecting the day’s last rays, a sense of happiness overcame me that I hadn’t felt in years. I was standing on Rivendell’s rooftop, an incredibly joyful space that had become just a memory. Standing atop a children’s climbing block, an object I’ve come to know well from Covid-era photo sharing, Katy Hill welcomed parents to Rivendell’s open house, our first in-person gathering in over two years. A tremendous applause followed, and, in that moment, everyone remembered, or first came to know what Rivendell School is all about: creating community.

Last year was incredibly successful and rewarding – both for fundraising and community-building – and this year is building right on top of it. Our start-of-the-year open house was well-attended and jubilant, with parents socializing and learning about ways to get involved with the school. Our annual cheese tasting fundraiser, which supports our SEIT program, followed with an in-person and virtual gathering. Parents mingled while sampling delicious cheeses donated by Rivendell board member Mandy Wynn and shared impassioned personal stories of how the SEIT program changed their lives. The fundraiser was an incredible success, with over \$20,000 collected to support the SEIT program. Our community also came together to lend support at a moment of great need and tragedy. The school was heartbroken for Classroom One teacher Tashua Vassell, who tragically and unexpectedly lost her partner and father of her children, Gladstone Haynes, during an accident while vacationing. A PTA initiated GoFundMe page garnered over \$23,000 in contributions to support Tashua and her family in her time of unimaginable loss.

The PTA and Fundraising Committee, composed of dedicated parent volunteers, continued to develop new, exciting, and safe community-building and fundraising events where parents can socialize and support Rivendell’s important mission of providing amazing early-childhood education focused on community and inclusion. Looking forward, many are excited for the possibility of having our end-of-year fundraising gala in-person. A cherished event, the gala provides key funds for the school’s scholarship program, critical for ensuring socioeconomic inclusion at Rivendell. Lastly, fundraising is vital for supporting innovative Rivendell programs, like Growing Connections, and for development of our physical space, such as our beloved rooftop, so that year after year, families can experience joy as Katy Hill shouts Rivendell’s praises from atop a climbing block.







RIVENDELL PRESENTS

June 2022

The CORE Program at Rivendell School
Downtown Little School

August 2022

Optimizing the Committee on Preschool Education
(CPSE) Process
Brooklyn Sandbox Early Learning Center

October 2022

Optimizing the Committee on Preschool Education
(CPSE) Process: Tools to Use and Strategies to Try to
Help Children
Red Hook Playgroup



Rivendell School

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*Thank you for your generous in-kind
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Dear Friends of Rivendell

Continued from page 1

have experienced the **Rivendell Effect**.

Our steadfast commitment to Rivendell's mission is always accompanied by the reality of funding gaps for our special education services and our Scholarship Fund goals. **Your contribution to Rivendell's Annual Appeal at any time during the year will honor our work and support our efforts in the months ahead.** Let me know if you want to know more about the power of the Rivendell Effect and why you should support our inclusive efforts!

Very best wishes,

Katy Hill

Katy Hill

katy.hill@rivendellnyc.org



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Get up-to-date information, see the school calendar, or contact us any time at
www.rivendellnyc.org

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