



Rivendell READER

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Dear Friends,

Founded 28 years ago by Rosalie Woodside, Rivendell School and its inclusive mission offers a striking contrast to scenes from our unsettled world. Committed to promoting excellent early childhood education through a range of programs, our investment in the Rivendell mission remains as strong today as it was years ago when Rosalie dreamed of creating a sanctuary of sorts for young children, their parents and their teachers. The idea was to make space for a wide variety of diverse learners and ensure that the resources needed to support successful inclusive efforts were in place.

Many years later, Rivendell resources including evaluation, special education itinerant teaching, our Pre-school, CORE, Growing Connections and Consultation and Training programs continue to influence inclusive efforts in the early childhood community and earn high marks from families and colleagues. To put it simply, we and they firmly believe that educating diverse learners together fosters the discovery of the differences that make us unique, special and worthy of appreciation and respect. This perspective has life-long benefits for our young students as well as those of us who nurture and teach them at home and at school.

The benefits to the world are notable, too. Awareness and appreciation of themselves and others, gratitude for the care and love they receive, the unique differences reflected in relationships formed, the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully and honorably, and the commitment to care for our environment are the characteristics of the stewards of the world that we nurture and invest in now. This is Rivendell's foundation, and it gives us hope.

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It Takes a Village

HEATHER BROOKSHIRE

Rivendell Preschool Teacher

A little over four years ago I started at Rivendell School as a classroom teacher. Around three years ago I became a foster parent and have cared for five different children ages 1 to 5. Foster care is no easy task, and I cannot imagine doing it without the Rivendell community by my side. They always say it takes a village and I feel so incredibly thankful that my village is full of amazing early childhood educators. I always have coworkers to go to when I need help with anything from potty training to supporting children with special needs to navigating tricky conversations. Rivendell families have showed up with extra clothes, shoes, books, and toys that the children needed. When I was having trouble finding related services providers for children who came to live with me in the middle of the school year, Rivendell-based providers found ways to fit them in even if it meant coming to my house on the weekends.

At Rivendell, I've always been able to take time off when I needed to welcome a new placement or stay home with a child who was sick. Through advice from Katy and Elisa I've been able to advocate successfully to make sure the children in my care get the special education services and support at school that they need. Coworkers have helped in all kinds of ways from helping us get home when we were having a tough day, showering my kiddos with gifts, and coming along with us for support on big outings like the zoo.

I have learned so much as a teacher and a parent over these past few years and find my work as a foster parent so closely aligns with the work we do at Rivendell. At staff meetings we often brainstorm ways to talk to children

about all different kinds of topics such as gender, racism, violent acts in the news, hospitalizations, and even death. We talk about how to approach tricky subjects in developmentally appropriate ways, answer children's questions and remind them about all of the people who can help. These conversations have given me the confidence and the tools to have tricky conversations with children in the classroom and the children in my care at home. I use the same tools we use at school to answer questions about where mom and dad are, moving homes, and big goodbyes. Difficult topics come up for all children and I always know if I don't have the answer to something I can bring it back to my Rivendell colleagues for advice.

As a foster parent, I am often thinking about attachment and building connections with the children in my home that I have not known since birth and sometimes have a difficult time trusting me. I work a lot on felt safety, helping children feel and know they are safe, by trying to create a home environment that is calm, predictable, and warm. I remind the children in my care at home over and over that I am there to help. At Rivendell, we realize how important felt safety and strong relationships are for all children. Children need to feel safe at school. We create predictable, consistent classroom routines so that children know what to expect and can feel settled and confident in the classroom.

We work hard to connect with students and build strong relationships so that children feel safe, confident, and ready to learn. We are constantly reminding children through our words and actions that teachers help.

A big part of foster care and our work at Rivendell is partnering with families. I've learned that all families need encouragement, support, and reassurance that they are doing the right thing. All families need a village. One of the children in my care had a Rivendell SEIT and as a single parent knowing that I had a partner who could help to brainstorm strategies to handle challenging behaviors, to help me advocate for services, and who also believed in the child and saw their potential, was the best feeling in the world. I strive to have that kind of partnership with the biological families of children in my care.

At Rivendell we all work to have that strong partnership with the families of children in our classrooms. We want to help families understand that we are truly in it with them and want the best for their children and that we can work together to strategize around tricky behaviors and anything else that may come up. Because foster care or not, we all need a village. I feel so lucky to have the Rivendell community as part of mine.

Lasting Ties

ELISA LUNDY

Assistant Director, Rivendell School

This past year, our staff has been coping with the illness and eventual death of one of our beloved special education itinerant teachers. Our colleague Nicky Di Pietro (1974-2023) came to Rivendell School as a SEIT in September 2000. She brought a keen sense of curiosity, intelligence, and a fierce desire to learn with her. In the years that we were lucky enough to have Nicky as part of the Rivendell Community, her commitment to the children and families that she served was unwavering and her work was outstanding. We feel tremendous gratitude for the years we were able to spend together and a great loss at her passing. Every effort was made to contact the families of Nicky's former students because we knew that she was someone important in their lives.

SEITs are a part of a child's life for such a short time – a year or two usually. The child often will not even remember them. But SEITs understand the impact these first relationships with teachers can have on the lives of children and families and that each family has on the lives of SEITs as well.

Back in the spring, I carefully read parents' thoughtful assessments of the SEIT services their children received during the year. They talked about the progress their children had made but also the support they themselves had gotten from their SEITs. One parent described it as "having someone in it with them." At the beginning of this new school year, I am watching as SEITs meet their new students and families and begin to develop relationships and set up best ways to communicate and work together. I think about what this relationship will mean by the end of the year and what SEITs, children and parents will learn from each other.





Weaving Narratives

ROSALIE WOODSIDE

CORE Program Coordinator

Rivendell School's CORE program is an education and social thinking model that helps young children on the Autistic Spectrum develop the readiness skills they need to learn with others. Our program, 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 a 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 environment here at Rivendell is a challenge for CORE students. They may see what teachers and peers are doing and make use of classroom materials, but they struggle to understand the ongoing relationships that are a critical 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 those skills in a variety of settings. When experiences are meaningful and shared, social understanding takes place. This principle holds true for the teacher/child relationship as well as the collaboration between the CORE team of teachers and therapists to accomplish their goals.

For over twenty years CORE's unique and highly regarded program of direct service to young children with ASD and training initiatives for families and professionals have relied on three psychosocial constructs to organize our work. We call these the Fundamental Competencies of social relationships. They are the development of a sense of self, the understanding of the roles of self vs others, and the ability to follow a teacher's directive. CORE is the product of these founding principles and the teachers and therapists who weave those principles into their practice to create coherent narratives with our students. But what of our own narratives? How does our experience with each child strengthen or alter us? Relationships, reciprocal in nature, influence the ability to share our collective experiences. Reflective supervision and collaboration with our colleagues draw heavily on the understanding of our own fundamental competencies in our efforts to understand other minds. One of the characteristics of children on the Autistic Spectrum is the challenge they face when they try to think socially and frame experiences into any context but their own. Our job at CORE is to become attuned to their thinking. When we are successful, it is because they have thought us how they think. We try to share in each CORE child's interests and perspectives to help them 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 complement each other. In this way, we learn to be each other's guides to shared social thinking.

In the past year, our work at CORE has focused on what it means to "look", "listen", "touch" and "move". These words are so basic to everyday experience that it is easy to assume that children understand them at a very early age. Our CORE students are teaching us to question that assumption and to explore, together, what to look at, how to listen and touch and what it means to move with purpose. Finding meaning and purpose in what we teach gives our work relevance and organizes our experience as well as the child's.

The CORE team's ability to share and reflect on each other's thoughts and perspectives is crucial to efforts to form and maintain relationships with our students, their parents and each other. When we learn from each other's beliefs, intentions, and expectations, we learn to think socially. Our relationships with each other forge our understanding and strengthen our commitment to the work we do and to our Rivendell community

Lessons From the Growing Connections Garden

BRIGITTE YOHE

Growing Connections Teacher

Reflecting on our Growing Connections this past school year, I want to share what is behind "gardening" here at Rivendell. First, our school community is lucky to have a garden and a greenhouse in our urban setting. It is a place full of wonderment that sparks questions, surprises, and appreciation for beauty in our environment.

It is a place of growing together. As our children go through physical and emotional changes during their school years, we can relate many of their feelings to lessons in the garden. Children need new clothes as they might get too tight as they grow. When plants grow, they need to get transplanted into bigger pots, as the roots need more space. When children move on to a bigger school, we connect that with our butterflies. We release them in the garden when it is time for them to move on.

Our garden is also a place of inclusion. Everyone can come to the greenhouse when they are ready. Transitions can be tricky for some children; the trip there may be overwhelming. I work closely with classroom teachers and SEITs so every child can be successful in Growing Connections. Groups are small, and there are few distractions in the greenhouse. It is also wheelchair accessible.

Voices from Our Classrooms

RIVENDELL PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

Rivendell Preschool Teachers introduce their parent- teacher conference notes with an overview of their class curriculum. Their voices bring curriculum to life and demonstrate what a meaningful life at school looks like for them and their young students. Read on for a glimpse into the very beginning of the school year.

'In the fall, our curriculum centered around friends separating from their grown-ups and learning the concepts of 'go away' and 'come back.' The children learned about themselves and others through discussions at snack time with pictures from home days, during work time as they adjust to being at school with other children and by reading books about various groups and characters. We have the opportunity to integrate home languages into the





feeling at home within our special class community. We've also been learning how to take care of ourselves by washing hands, coughing or sneezing into our sleeves and trying the potty. Our students have observed the changes that happen in the natural environment right outside our classroom window, which teachers connect to our special curriculum topics for the season, such as trees, apples, and pumpkins and seasonal colors of green, yellow, red, brown and orange.'



'We started off the year by talking with the children about their families. They all had a chance to share their family photos and to talk about family characteristics and the similarities and differences between and among family members. We observed the change of seasons from summer to fall together, watching leaves and the weather and took the opportunity to explore the concepts of real and pretend through conversations about the different Halloween costumes children wore for trick or treating. The Color Monster book helped introduce an ongoing discussion about feelings and we have been associating feelings with colors just like in the book. We check in with our feelings every morning and are starting to notice that feelings can change during the course of the day.'



'Our class is a mix of returning and new students and it's been nice to see the groups mesh together as children reconnect with old friends and make new ones. Over the past few months, we've been learning about each other and our families. We've made two class books, one about ourselves and one about our families. Each child contributed a page to the books, sharing their likes and dislikes as well as familial activities. A common thread in our conversations and books is that we all have things in common and things that are different. We're learning about how these differences are great things and make us unique.'



'Over the course of the first half of the school year, friends have been learning about life at school and daily classroom routines like hanging up coats and backpacks upon arrival, taking picture cards and water bottles into the classroom and putting them in their designated spots, washing hands and choosing a work. During morning meeting times, we sing our Hello song to give a friendly greeting to one another and discuss who is at school and who is not. We also go over our daily schedule and the works we have in the classroom ranging from early literacy, math, practical life, social studies and art. Every week we introduce our Sign of the Week, such as same, different, thank you, you're welcome, help, more and together, so friends can learn about communicating in different ways like through American Sign Language.'

MILESTONES

Manny Ferran retired this year from his position on Rivendell's Maintenance Team. Manny was always dedicated to the work of keeping our beautiful building spotlessly clean, in good order and ready for children and staff to work and play. Thank you, Manny, and best wishes for your retirement.



Nurture and Nature

AKEMI MARTIN

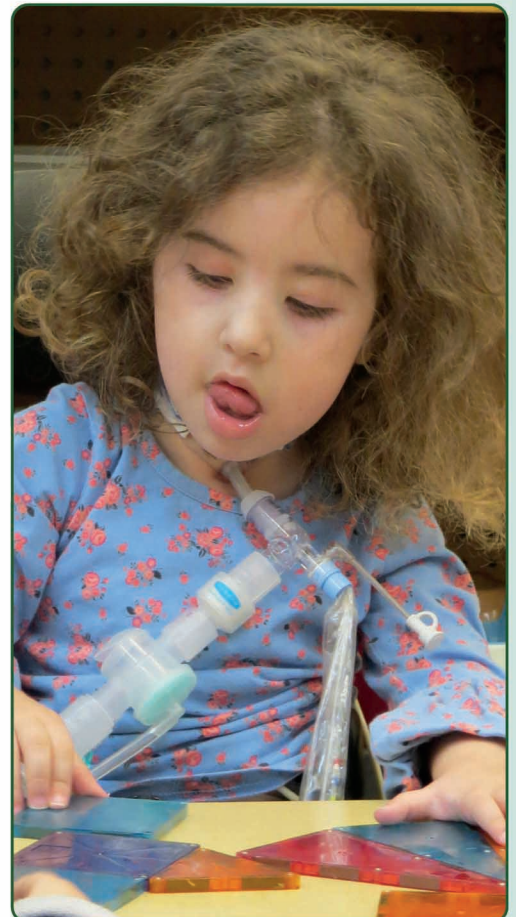
Rivendell Parent

Born in Brooklyn in the early days of the pandemic, our younger daughter was not exposed to many things. Play dates, library visits and meeting grandparents topped the list of experiences for which she would have to wait. So when Rowan joined Rivendell two years later in Classroom 1, we all rejoiced in the “catch-up experiences” she had each day.

One story stands out for me. On Brigitte’s first Growing Connections visit, she brought the infamous pet slug. Before Rowan’s birth we babysat many a snail when our older daughter Reiko attended Rivendell. Rowan, however, was terrified and ran to the opposite side of the room! It turns out our Brooklyn stoop had never yielded slugs.

Fast forward to the end of that rich inaugural preschool year, where we found ourselves on a trip to the mountains of North Carolina. Rowan and I spotted a slug in the grass, and before I could find a leaf to scoop it up, Rowan had the slimy creature in her hands! Reiko wanted a turn holding it but Rowan would not share. Protests, cajoling and tears followed. We desperately searched for a second slug for big sister while little sister cradled her slimy friend, but to no avail. I never imagined my children fighting over a slug.

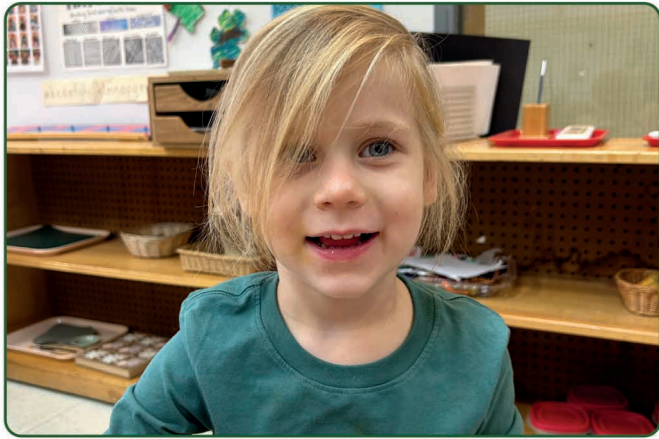
Our family made the tough decision to leave Brooklyn and relocate to the woods of Massachusetts where frogs sing us to sleep and snakes find their way into our car! Rivendell gave our children many invaluable gifts: social, academic and inclusive knowledge to name a few. But I was surprised by how thoroughly this small preschool in the midst of Brooklyn was able to impart such a foundational appreciation for the natural world.



Franny Gold 2012-2023

HONORING FRANNY, HER FAMILY AND HER TEAM

Franny Gold, her sister and her parents were trailblazers at Rivendell School where she was a student during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years. Her very presence at school made Rivendell’s mission of inclusion so obviously beneficial and ripe with challenging opportunities to stretch our commitment to that mission. Franny, her family, teachers, classmates, nurses and related service providers became a powerfully inclusive team. We learned so much from her and them. We honor Franny every day by welcoming all kinds of learners, acknowledging parents as essential team members, flexibly expanding our knowledge base, and sharing the joy of learning together.



RIVENDELL PRESENTS

July

World Association of Infant Mental Health

*“A Dynamic Exploration of Intersubjectivity’s Impact
On Our Professional Relationships With Young
Children With Autism”*

Rosalie Woodside and Denise Taddonio

Rivendell School CORE Program

August

Brooklyn Sandbox

“Optimizing the CPSE Process Part 2”

Elisa Lundy



Rivendell School

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Thank you for your generous in-kind contributions to Rivendell School.



Dear Friends

Continued from page 1

You can help Rivendell meet the costs of providing these inspiring programs and services! A contribution to the Annual Appeal will support evaluation and special education programs that are not fully funded, renew our Scholarship Fund so more children can benefit from a Rivendell Preschool education and maintain and enhance all of our programs and services for years to come.

With best wishes to all,

Katy

Katy Hill

katy.hill@rivendellnyc.org

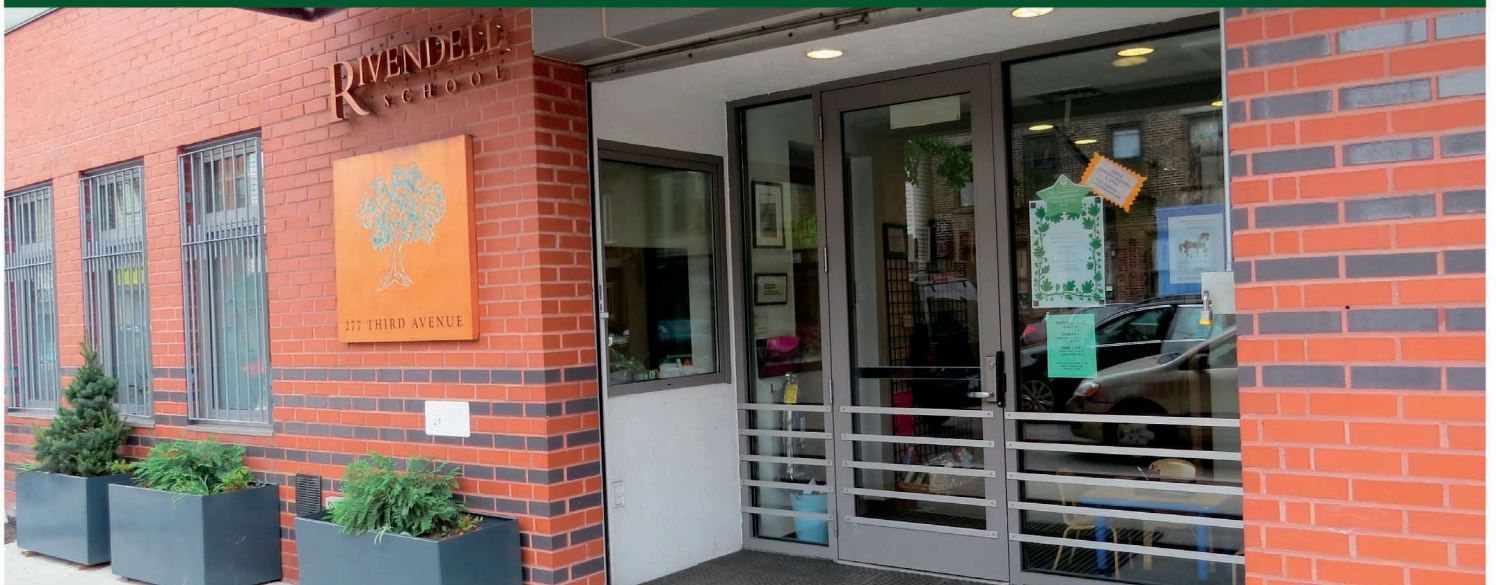


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www.rivendellnyc.org

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