

## WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL – YEAR TWO



**O**ur second year integrating the community school model at Rivera Community Middle School will primarily focus on parent/caregiver engagement. This year, we are incorporating services offered through Mercer Street Friends' Adult and Parenting Division and establishing new partnerships with community agencies to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, financial literacy, parent to parent support groups, technology education for seniors, intergenerational activities and more.

The outreach and activities will enhance services and programs begun last year including mobile vision exams and dental cleanings, free tax preparation, computer giveaways, weekend food bags for children facing food hardships at home (Send Hunger Packing), as well as free produce for students, parents/caregivers and community neighbors.

Rivera Community Middle School will continue supporting students with mental/behavioral health needs with individual counseling services and expanding after-school activities. All partners have embraced the incorporation of academic goals with programmatic goals. As we target more family and community-focused activities, our hope is to build a safe haven for students, families and the community.

There will be bi-monthly family gathering sessions where parents/caregivers and children are encouraged

to spend time and eat dinner together while focusing on relevant topics.

### YEAR ONE RECAP

During 2015-16 school year, the first year implementing the community school model, the focus was on student engagement. In the spring, we implemented "Check and Connect", a mentoring and case management program to reduce student absenteeism, truancy, suspension and expulsion. Seventeen 7th grade students were identified as high priority to participate in the program. By the end of June, only two months into the intervention, 40 percent of the group showed improvement in attendance. One youth had no absences since participating.

We are working with teachers, staff, and members of the child study team to address mental health issues. Four MSF mental health counselors are now on-site, and they have engaged fully with the students through contacts not only in their offices, but in the hallways, classrooms, and even at lunchtime in the cafeteria to provide a range of therapeutic services dealing with social, emotional, and intellectual issues. These efforts are paying off in the reduction in school suspensions, classroom disruptions and behavioral outbursts.

We brought in the Trenton Children's Chorus to form a school choir and teamed up with the Boys and Girls Club to expand the after school program from 16 to 67 students. Also, the school is now open on weekends for activities. ■

**A** community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its aims are to transform the school into a hub of services and programs for the students, families and community.

Its integrated focus on academics, services, supports and opportunities leads to improved student learning, stronger families and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings and weekends.

Luis Muñoz Rivera Community Middle School is the first "community school" in Mercer County and Trenton is only the third school district in New Jersey to adopt such a model. ■

Dear Friends,

Education is a major factor in helping a family or individual move from poverty to self-sufficiency. As an organization we must address the issue of education and particularly the low academic achievement levels of too many of Trenton's children in poverty, if we are to be successful *"Bridging Opportunity Gaps... Helping Families and Communities Make the Journey out of Poverty"*.

I find it an interesting fact that studies indicate that teachers have approximately a 20% impact upon students' academic achievement and test scores. On the other hand, more than 60% of test scores and academic achievement correlates to out-of-school factors. Knowing this we cannot solve the problem of educational inequity while we ignore the inequitable and inadequate resources available to low-income children in their homes and communities, as well as their schools.

Let's look at some of these out-of-school factors and how they impact academic success.

**Violence** – As many as one-third of children living in our country's violent urban neighborhoods have PTSD, according to recent research and the country's top child trauma experts – nearly twice the rate reported for troops returning from war zones in Iraq. "PTSD can look a lot like attention-deficit disorder, with the lack of concentration, poor grades and inability to sit still... it almost guarantees that these students – often African American or Latino and low-income – won't do as well on standardized tests as their wealthier, whiter and safer peers." (*San Francisco Chronicle 2007*).

Patrick Sharkey found in his research that if a murder occurred in a child's neighborhood, the child's test scores fell by an average of half a standard deviation.

**Early Vocabulary** – The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University states that: "Early experiences and the environments in which children develop in their earliest years can have lasting impact on later success in school and life. Barriers to children's educational achievement start early, and continue to grow without intervention. Differences in the size of children's vocabulary first appear at 18 months of age, based on whether they were born into a family with high education and income or low education and income. By age three, children with college-educated parents or primary caregivers had vocabularies two to three times larger than those whose parents had not completed high school. By the time these children reach school, they are already behind their peers unless they are engaged in a language-rich environment early in life."

**Food insecurity** hits children hard, especially infants, who may be developmentally delayed as a result of malnutrition.

**Stress** from a variety of sources – parental unemployment, depression, inadequate housing, neighborhood violence, can rise to toxic levels that adversely affect children. Researchers have found that this sort of stress can even have a negative effect on brain development.

As you read this newsletter, you can get a sense of how our work via the community school initiative, preschool, parenting programs and the Food Bank addresses the many factors which impact upon a child's academic success and thus his/her ability to move out of poverty as an adult.



Armstead G. Johnson

## NEW MSF BOARD CHAIR

**M**ercer Street Friends has selected

**Dr. Joe Hulihan** as its new Board chair. Dr. Hulihan joined the MSF Board of Trustees in 2011 and served on the Board's Finance and Development Committees.



Dr. Hulihan is a Principal at Paradigm Consulting, LLC, providing consulting services for development of therapeutics in neurology and psychiatry. Prior to that, he worked at Johnson & Johnson in neuroscience drug development for over 15 years.

Besides working in pharmaceutical development, his interests include health policy and urban health.

*"Mercer Street Friends addresses issues of employment, hunger and education – for both children and adults. All of these bear not only on poverty, but on a person's health as well. As a physician interested in the physical and mental health of urban communities, as well as issues of opportunity and social justice, I am passionate about the work that MSF does and the way it changes lives of people in Trenton and Mercer County,"* comments, Dr. Hulihan.

In addition to his board membership and commitment to Mercer Street Friends, Dr. Hulihan is also active in other community organizations including membership on the board of Pennswood Village and on the steering committee of the Trenton/Princeton chapter of the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow.

Joe and his wife, Sharon, live in Newtown, Pennsylvania with their three daughters, and all are members of Newtown Meeting. He is an avid photographer and attempts to play the drums in his spare time. ■



# FAMILY OUTREACH WORKERS VITAL MEMBERS OF THE PRESCHOOL TEAM

Each morning as families arrive with their children at Mercer Street Friends Preschool, **Family Outreach Workers** Jennifer Sandoz and Sharon Dismukes greet them at the door with a smile and “good morning.” The two women are a critical resource for the families at Mercer Street Friends Preschool, providing information and assistance to parents and caregivers who may struggle with problems that can range from a shortage of food in the home to an undiagnosed learning barrier or a lack of stable housing.



Jennifer Sandoz



Sharon Dismukes

Miss Jennifer and Miss Sharon, as they are known to both students and parents, are required to meet with each of the families under their care three times per year, and at least one of those visits must be in the student’s home. These visits give them an opportunity to get to know the families and learn about any issues that the parents might need assistance in managing.

Our family outreach workers do not simply see their role as a “three times a year” check-in. As parents and children enter the school each day, Miss Jennifer and Miss Sharon take note of small signs that the family might be struggling with a problem. They try to engage with parents every day as they arrive, and stop them to chat after their child has been dropped off if they sense that something might be troubling the parent.

“A lot of parents just don’t like to ask for help. But sometimes, when you ask the right way or at the right time, they will let you know,” says Sharon Dismukes. If a child is absent for a couple of days, the family support worker will call the home to check on the family. If there is no answer, she may visit the home just to make sure that everything is okay.

“I’ve gone to a student’s house before and found out that the reason the child missed school for three days was because the family had run out of food,” says Jennifer Sandoz. “I just

turned around and came back to the preschool, loaded up a box with all the food I could find here, and took it back to the family. The mom was so grateful and the child was back at school the next day.” ■

## HAPPENINGS AT THE PARENT-CHILD CENTER WEST

It is Friday morning at the Mercer Street Friends Parent Child Center West and much chatter can be heard from the meeting room where women, with their babies in tow, have gathered for the weekly session of **Motherhood and More**. The workshops are aimed at mothers who may be at risk of or are experiencing Postpartum Depression (PPD); to help them understand the cause and symptoms of PPD, know that many women experience the so-called “baby blues” and provide them with tools to deal with PPD and other issues related to motherhood.

Other topics discussed at the sessions include nutrition for mother and baby; how to handle the Period of PURPLE Crying (an acronym for the time between two weeks of age to 3-4 months when babies can cry a lot, seemingly uncontrollably and resistant to soothing); breastfeeding; SIDS/Safe Sleep; smoking cessation; family planning; stress management, and sexually transmitted diseases.

Between 50 to 60 moms come to the program during the course of a year. They are welcome to come for as many sessions as they want or need.

Participants learn about the program through outreach, word of mouth, and health clinic referrals.

*“I didn’t experience PPD with my first child. However I have been struggling with postpartum depression since my most recent baby was born. I didn’t know where to go or how to find other moms who have experienced this. In my culture, depression is not something that exists. I was told to “get over it”. Since I have been attending the Motherhood and More group, I have learned so much about PPD and my symptoms. I really like that I have a place to go that I can talk and they understand what I am going through. I meet other moms that are going through the same thing. It has been a relief to find such a supportive group to attend.” – a Group Attendee*



Motherhood and More is one of the many center based activities that take place at our Hermitage Avenue site where we help mothers to learn how to create a less-stressful, loving, nurturing, healthy and safe home environment for themselves and their child. ■



# Thank You to our Taste-Full Evening Sponsors, Food Providers, Entertainers and Guests for making the evening a great success!

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## RECENT GRANTS AND AWARDS

- Ameriprise Financial – *Hunger Prevention*
- Bloomberg Philanthropies – *Hunger Prevention*
- Church & Dwight Employee Giving Funds – *Hunger Prevention*
- Goldie B. Rojer Hunger Relief Fund at the Jewish Community Foundation of Greater Mercer Prevention Fund – *Hunger Prevention*
- Janssen Pharmaceuticals – *Hunger Prevention*
- Karma Foundation – *Hunger Prevention*
- Nordson Corporation Foundation – *Adult Education*
- TJX Foundation – *Hunger Prevention*

## KYLE WILLIAMS APPOINTED FOOD BANK DIRECTOR

Mercer Street Friends is pleased to announce the appointment of Kyle Williams as the new Food Bank Director. Kyle is no stranger to the organization and anyone spending time at the Food Bank will recognize his smiling face and gracious manner.

Kyle has an educational and professional background in health services management and technology.



Kyle started his relationship with MSF four years ago as a volunteer, organizing and overseeing the distribution of fresh produce and other food donations. His skills and engaging personality made him the perfect person to fill a grant-funded position that arose in October 2013 as our Healthcare Navigator. In this role, Kyle spread the word, provided information about the Affordable Health Care Act and facilitated enrollment in health plans for over 500 people. When the grant ended, Kyle signed on as our AmeriCorps member and assisted with SNAP outreach, food distribution and our child hunger programs. Upon the conclusion of the term of service last November, Kyle permanently joined the staff in progressively responsible positions until his appointment as Food Bank Director July 1.

*“It is extremely gratifying to serve community members in need in a very tangible way and it is exciting to become director of the Food Bank at a time when it is more important than ever to be flexible and respond nimbly to our community partners’ needs,”* Kyle notes.

*“Kyle brings a keen understanding of the Food Bank’s role in the community and what is needed to broaden its reach and impact. He is the right person to build on established relationships and forge new ones that will bring additional resources to the hunger relief charities we serve,”* says MSF Executive Director Armstead Johnson. ■



Thanksgiving Morning  
Thursday, November 24  
5k Run/1 Mile Fun Run  
Mercer County Park, NJ

**Benefits Mercer Street Friends Food Bank and other hunger relief charities.**

The 5K race kicks off at 8:30 a.m. from the West Picnic area. The walk/fun run will start immediately after the 5K run has started. The whole event is over by 10:00 a.m. at the latest. Put on your sneakers and join the MSF Team! For more information, go to: [www.mercercountyturkeytrot.com](http://www.mercercountyturkeytrot.com) or [mercerturkeytrot@gmail.com](mailto:mercerturkeytrot@gmail.com) or [www.facebook.com/MercerCountyTurkeyTrot](http://www.facebook.com/MercerCountyTurkeyTrot). ■

## MSF FOOD BANK VOLUNTEER COUNTS

Mid-June 2016 through October 2016

Visits by Volunteers..... **496**

Number of Hours..... **1,277**

*Thank you to the following groups for helping in the warehouse during this period.*

- Agape Revival Christian Church Youth Group
- Berkshire Hathaway Home Services Fox & Roach
- Bloomberg
- Bristol-Myers Squibb
- Cadwalader Asbury United Methodist Church
- CBIZ KA Consulting
- Covance
- Credit Suisse
- Dawn of Hope Church
- ETS
- HMS Host
- Investors Bank
- Janssen Pharmaceuticals – Interns
- Lend Lease
- Marriott
- Morgan Stanley
- NJ Manufacturers – Interns
- Notre Dame High School
- Novo Nordisk
- Philadelphia Insurance
- Princeton University – Community Action
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation – Interns
- Salesforce
- TCNJ – Alpha Phi Omega
- TCNJ Bonner Center
- TCNJ Bonner Center – Health and Environment Team
- Team Griffiths/Alpha Kappa Alpha

*If you would like to volunteer, please call the Food Bank at 609-406-0503.*



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## DON'T FORGET TO CHECK-OUT HUNGER®

It is that time of year to Check-Out Hunger® – the annual supermarket based campaign to raise funds for New Jersey’s food banks.

Check-Out Hunger® runs every year from October through the end of January at varying times at the participating stores over the course of the campaign. Shoppers can donate whenever they see the Check-Out Hunger® displays.

100% of donations made in Mercer County come to the Mercer Street Friends Food Bank. Participating stores in our service area are: Marrazzo’s, McCaffrey’s, Pennington Quality Market, QuickChek, Risoldi’s, ShopRite, Wawa and Wegmans.

Shoppers wishing to make a donation simply tear off the donation slip located near the register, hand the slip to the cashier where it is scanned like any other purchase. The donation is simply added to the grocery bill and appears on the receipt. It is as easy as buying a loaf of bread.

Donations made at stores outside our service area are directed to another member of the NJ Federation of Food Banks: Community FoodBank of New Jersey, FoodBank of Monmouth & Ocean Counties, NORWESCAP Food Bank and/or Food Bank of South Jersey. ■



## FriendsTalk

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A PUBLICATION OF MERCER STREET FRIENDS

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