



# FRIENDS TALK

NEWS FROM MERCER STREET FRIENDS

Fall 2024

## MESSAGE FROM CEO BERNIE FLYNN

**The summer flew by for Mercer Street Friends staff, students, and clients! Filled with events, robust programs, and a major facility move to better serve our community, this was once again a summer to remember!**

We ushered in the summer months with our annual Leadership Awards Celebration, held at our new food bank (more about that soon!) on June 10, 2024. It was an extraordinary honor to recognize New Jersey Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, a champion for food insecurity in the State and nationally. It was an incredible moment for Mercer Street Friends and all in attendance when Feeding America CEO Claire Babineaux-Fontenot offered inspirational words about the power of community in fighting food insecurity and introduced Speaker Coughlin to accept the 2024 Humanitarian Leadership Award. Read on for more about the event, including how our new warehouse will help us better serve the needs of our community.



Students from our Community Schools and Preschool enjoyed their summers as well, as they “bridged” the break between school years with academic lessons, field trips, and plenty of opportunities to explore activities they are passionate about.

While our students flourished, families in our programs also benefited from the services we provide to the Trenton and Mercer County community. I’m especially proud to share the story of LaBella Barnes, a local woman who overcame tremendous adversity to succeed in higher education. After working with our team to earn her high school diploma, LaBella graduates from Thomas Edison State University this fall with her associate degree, while simultaneously continuing her studies for a bachelor’s degree at Rutgers University – congratulations, LaBella! You are an inspiration.

Our attention to the needs of our neighbors is the key to the fulfillment of Mercer Street Friends’ mission. New initiatives are underway to support our work focused on food, family, and education. Our Board of Trustees continues to expand as we welcome members who will help guide Mercer Street Friends into the future. And the dedication of our staff is unwavering. This edition of Friends Talk highlights the work of Mercer Street Friends, made possible by the support of our friends and neighbors. Thank you for your commitment to nourishing minds and bodies, empowering families and communities.

With gratitude,

*Bernie Flynn*

Bernie Flynn

# A New Chapter in a **LARGER SPACE**

In response to the growing need of our neighbors and partners throughout Mercer County, Mercer Street Friends Food Bank has a new address! Located at 3 Graphics Drive in Ewing, the warehouse provides 42,000 square feet of space to better store and distribute food to our 100+ pantry partners.

The move-in process has been overseen by our COO and Food Bank Director, James “Butter” Allen, who identified this opportunity through his friendships at TCNJ (read the full article below). We couldn’t be more excited about the new chapter for Mercer Street Friends Food Bank! Moving to this new space was no small task but as we settle in, we couldn’t be more excited for what’s ahead as we expand our food focused programs to better serve our community. Stay tuned for more information about the food bank!

Read more about the unique story that led to our acquisition of the new warehouse:



*“This move has fostered growth and development in the warehouse management staff. They’re being driven to make big decisions and being asked to do things they’ve never done before. I tell them constantly, failure is not an option.”*

– James “Butter” Allen,  
Chief Operating Officer / Food Bank Director





# Honoring a Champion in the Fight Against FOOD INSECURITY

Over 300 guests joined us on June 10, 2024 for our Fourth Annual Leadership Awards Celebration, as we honored **New Jersey Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin** with the 2024 Humanitarian Award. Special guest **Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, CEO of Feeding America**, presented Speaker Coughlin with the Award.



The event also offered guests a first glimpse at our new food bank warehouse, which was incredibly transformed by our warehouse team into an elegant dining space. Thank you to our event sponsors and all supporters who made this event possible.

See highlights of the event  
(or watch the entire Awards  
Ceremony again!) here:



Throughout his tenure in state leadership, Speaker Coughlin has been dedicated to eradicating food insecurity. He has helped to raise the monthly minimum SNAP benefit from \$50 to \$95, expand free school lunch opportunities for children, increase aid to food banks by 800%, and create New Jersey's Office of Food Security Advocate, the first in the nation. With the support of other community leaders and organizations, Coughlin has stated he hopes to eliminate hunger in New Jersey by 2030.

*"I was thrilled to be part of an inspiring evening that brought together so many champions of the community, who are working to end hunger in our New Jersey neighborhoods. Community involvement is the backbone of any successful initiative, and I am encouraged by the tireless work of Mercer Street Friends and its network."*

- New Jersey Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin



# FUN IN THE SUN

## for Community School Students

Summer Bridge 2024, an extension of Mercer Street Friends' Community Schools initiative within the Trenton School District, offered 200 elementary and middle school students a vibrant and engaging summer!

This program "bridges" the gap between the end of the school year and the start of the next one with grade-specific lessons in math, reading, and SEL (social emotional learning) to keep our students' minds sharp. Students also explore individual interests with a variety of afternoon enrichment activities and class trips – read on for highlights from our best summer ever!



**At Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School**, students loved reading the coming-of-age classic "Holes" by Louis Sachar, and constructing cardboard structures that must be wind-resistant. Enrichment programs included drumming, leadership, comic books, arts/sports, gardening, and video production, and students visited BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Robbinsville and the Statue of Liberty.



**B.C. Gregory Elementary School** students advanced their reading and math skills with the help of interventionists, and took trips to the Trenton Thunder, Shady Brook Farm, and Rockville Climbing Center.



**Luis Muñoz-Rivera Elementary School** students explored their communities and celebrated diversity. In between personalized math and reading lessons, students enjoyed SEL lessons from Kidsbridge and rehearsed their cumulative dramatic performance.

*"Thank you to the sponsors and donors who made it possible for 200+ students to enroll and learn in three fully equipped and fully staffed summer programs."*

– Bernadette Trapp, Director of Community Schools



# SUPPORTING MERCER COUNTY Families

We know strong families make strong communities – so we proudly provide services to support the physical, financial, social/emotional, and developmental needs of local families. Education is at the heart of Mercer Street Friends' work, and our adult education is a critical component of our Family Services program, offering individuals seeking to complete their high school education an opportunity to do so.

## From Adult Education to Associate Degree

For LaBella Barnes, earning her degree is a family affair. On her mind are both family members who have passed away, and those whose young lives have just begun.

"My nephew Michael and I promised each other we'd get our high school diplomas," the Ewing resident says. Together, they took advantage of Mercer Street Friends' adult basic education tutoring and services. When Michael sadly died in 2019, LaBella knew she had to keep going and earn her diploma to honor his memory.

"The Mercer Street Friends team is amazing," she says. "Michelle and Mr. Richard were so helpful. They helped get me to the point where I could earn my high school diploma and think about next steps."

At 49, LaBella earned her high school diploma – and family members, including her son Antwone, pushed her to keep going. But in 2022, tragedy struck again – Antwone passed away, and LaBella knew she had to follow the advice he had always given her. In September of that year, she enrolled at Thomas Edison State University (TESU).

"Antwone was always so proud when I was pursuing my education," she says. "And he was a great father – now that I'm helping to take care of his three daughters, I want to show them that their grandmother can go to college and get a degree."

This fall, LaBella graduates from TESU with an associate degree, and she just began her first semester with Rutgers University, where she will pursue her bachelor's degree in biology.

LaBella is a prime example of the difference Mercer Street Friends Adult Education can make, and we couldn't be prouder of how far she has come. Congratulations on your success LaBella!



# BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION IN EDUCATION

Mercer Street Friends offers high-quality, no-cost preschool services for children ages 3-5, helping them adjust to an educational setting and prepare for a successful transition to kindergarten. Our certified teachers and teacher assistants use the Creative Curriculum to build essential academic skills while helping students grow socially and emotionally, too!

This summer our preschoolers enjoyed a six-week camp that helped advance their writing and literacy levels. Campers practiced writing their names and learned in small groups. Combined with summer activities like water play and dance, the camp served as the perfect transition between school years, said Preschool Director Lisa Banks.

This fall, enrollment at the Preschool remains at 100%, with 90 children ready to learn. Meanwhile, 53 children just transitioned out of the Preschool program – they are academically and socially ready to take on kindergarten!

*"We provide a loving, caring, safe environment for all children who enter our doors. We teach them, prepare them socially and emotionally, and make sure they have well-balanced meals – all of this allows our students to be themselves as they have fun while learning."*

– Lisa Banks, Director of The Center for Early Childhood Education

# THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS:

## Bank of America Intern Spends the Summer with Mercer Street Friends

This year, we had the privilege of hosting a summer intern: Sheguyma Bazile, a Bank of America Student Leader, was immersed in all aspects of our operations, from grassroots fundraising to high-level meetings and organizational activities. The Trenton High School senior met with our directors and spent time in our facilities, helping teachers in our schools, learning from our parenting and adult education providers, and even attending a Board of Trustees meeting and Greater Trenton event with Bernie Flynn.

Sheguyma said she was impressed by how integral volunteers were to Mercer Street Friends, and detailed the insights she learned about food insecurity right in her community. "One key lesson from my internship is that while individual passion can spark change locally, lasting, widespread improvement requires a collective effort," she wrote.

Sheguyma gave us a valuable experience as well! We benefitted from her perspective and insights into the community, and her ideas about how we could better serve its members. We see a bright future for Sheguyma and her fellow Student Leaders.



*"Being a student leader has been an eye-opening experience... The most impactful part [of my internship] was connecting with individuals who offered invaluable advice that continues to guide my efforts to make a positive difference."*

– Sheguyma Bazile,  
Bank of America  
Student Leader

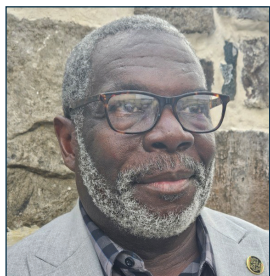


# WELCOME NEW MEMBERS to our Board of Trustees

Mercer Street Friends is pleased to announce four new additions to our Board of Trustees:



**Aubrey Haines, CEO, Princeton Property Group**, has over 30 years experience in the Princeton market and has been responsible for negotiating over \$2.5 billion in leasing and sales transactions. His extensive experience includes acquiring and marketing office and industrial space, directing land development, consulting, and investment property sales and purchases. Aubrey has served community organizations in several leadership positions, including President of the Princeton Corridor Rotary Club and Chairman of the Board of the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce. He is currently a Vice-Chair of the Urban Development Mixed-Use (Red) Council at Urban Land Institute.



**Rupert A. Hall Jr. is the Founder and CEO of Hope For The City.** Previously he served as Pastor of Turning Point United Methodist Church. A true servant leader, Rupert also currently serves as President of the Board of Trustees of Kingsbury Towers, an affordable and moderate-income housing development in the City of Trenton, and on the Boards of Mercer Alliance to End Homelessness, Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (T.A.S.K.), The Makers Place, the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, the Caucus of the Black Methodists for Church Renewal and the Commission on Archives and History. A graduate of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and the Rutgers University School of Law, Rupert has studied at the New Brunswick Theological, Wesley Theological, and the Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminaries.



**Lisa Parry, VP and Owner, Parry Insurance**, is a fifth-generation property casualty agent servicing and selling personal and commercial lines. A dedicated advocate of the Quaker faith and supporter of her community, Lisa currently serves as Treasurer of Bucks Quarterly Meeting and on committees for Buckingham Friends School and George School, and has previously served as Director of Pennsbury Manor. She has been a frequent speaker on automation issues that impact insurance agents, speaking at conferences and engagements around the country.



**Yvette Randolph is a Project Specialist at Bristol Myers Squibb**, with 22 years in the Research and Development Veterinary Sciences department helping manage day-to-day operations. Yvette is the co-founder and supervisor of the Mother Estelle Clark Food Pantry and co-founder of The Sky Is the Limit Ministries, where she serves as grant writer and project manager. Additionally, Yvette serves as a Trustee of the Bible Way Cathedral of Deliverance Church.

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# We are dedicated to **nourishing** minds and bodies and **empowering** families and communities.

Mercer Street Friends provides comprehensive programs to address poverty and the physical and emotional trauma it creates for children, families, and the community. Our work is focused on three critical areas: **food, families, and education.**

There are many ways to support our mission. Your involvement at any level makes an impact.

**DONATE ONLINE** Donating online has never been easier. Be it a one-time gift or recurring, simply scan the QR code or visit [mercerstreetfriends.org](http://mercerstreetfriends.org).



**MAIL A CHECK** Feel free to send a check made payable to Mercer Street Friends using the enclosed envelope.



**GIFT MATCHING** Designate Mercer Street Friends as the recipient of funds in your employer's gift matching program.



**PLANNED GIVING** There are many ways to leave a personal legacy to Mercer Street Friends. As a member of our Legacy Society, "Stewards of the Mission," your gift will have a lasting impact on the Greater Trenton community. Please speak with your financial or legal advisor to learn about ways to include Mercer Street Friends in your estate plans.



**VOLUNTEER** Time is one of the greatest gifts you can give to Mercer Street Friends. To inquire about volunteer opportunities, please contact Sherries Anderson at [sanderson@mercerstreetfriends.org](mailto:sanderson@mercerstreetfriends.org).



**STOCKS AND SECURITIES** By making this type of gift, you can avoid paying capital gains tax that would otherwise be due if you sold the assets. To make a gift of stock and appreciated securities, please contact Nancy Jankowski at [njankowski@mercerstreetfriends.org](mailto:njankowski@mercerstreetfriends.org).