

Fall/
Winter
2020



st. francis
children's
center

SFCC Star

The bi-annual newsletter published by St. Francis Children's Center
Fall/Winter 2020: Volume 12

*Our mission is to serve and educate children with special needs in
inclusive environments enabling them to reach their greatest potential.*



Overcoming Obstacles

by Mara Dučkens, Executive Director



When schools and businesses closed in March to help flatten the curve of covid-19, parents of children with special needs were left asking, "What will happen to our kids?" These families know that in order to meet developmental goals, children

with disabilities and delays benefit from high-quality early intervention and ongoing support including special education and therapies. Lapses in services can set back children's progress and increase caregiver stress.

Although St. Francis Children's Center was in uncharted territory, our team acted quickly:

❁ Our home visiting programs, Birth to Three and Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS), provided in partnership with Milwaukee County, never closed during the pandemic. Social workers and therapists quickly moved from providing home-based services to leading telehealth sessions by video, telephone and email. (See article on page 2)

❁ Our Family Activity Center (FAC), open to all families of kids with special needs, closed in-person programming to protect the health of participants. The FAC's purpose is to help the caregivers of children with special needs reduce isolation, build networks of support and offer free and low-cost programs and events. Our FAC Coordinator continues to find creative ways to ensure that this important work continues. (See update on page 2)

❁ Our Early Education Center, serving kids with special needs in inclusive classrooms, closed during the Safer at Home Order from March through May. During that time, our educators explored virtual learning options and provided lesson plans, videos and remote check-ins to help parents with at-home learning. On May 27, we opened our doors again to continue offering the high-impact special education, socialization and play-based learning that SFCC is known for. (See story on pages 6-7)

While this has been the most difficult year our organization has ever faced, our mission-focused staff are problem solving and shifting as needed. During these challenging economic times, we hope that you will consider a gift to SFCC, so children with special needs can continue to have access to our high-quality, life-enhancing programs and services that will help them thrive.

We're wishing for brighter days ahead and hope that you have peace and health this holiday season.



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FAC: Providing Thanksgiving Crafts To-Go!

While the doors to our Family Activity Center (FAC) have remained closed since March due to the pandemic, our FAC Coordinator, Cherie, has kept the community connected through virtual workshops and via our FAC Facebook group. In a typical year, the FAC would have a full schedule of in-person activities for the kids during the holiday season. However, in 2020, Cherie decided instead to take the FAC to our families by creating and mailing *Thanksgiving Craft Kits* to them. These kits were filled with small projects that included turkey hats, magnets and other fun activities that families could do together to celebrate the holiday.

To stay connected and for information on other events in our FAC, please visit sfckids.org!



B-3: A Team Effort to Help Families in Need

While Covid-19 has impacted all of our programs, many of the families in Milwaukee County's Birth to Three program (B-3) at SFCC



have really been hit hard. Parents and caregivers with few resources have struggled with virtual therapy, since they don't have access to the toys and other materials needed to

help them demonstrate therapeutic techniques to their children in their homes.

Seeing the issues our B-3 families were going through, our B-3 Program Manager, Stephanie, asked SFCC staff to look for new or gently-used toys that could be passed on to our B-3 families. After hearing this request, our FAC Coordinator, Cherie, worked with Kids Impact Community (KIC), another nonprofit organization, to organize a toy drive. Our HR Director, Kristin, also pitched in and donated puzzles and toys. Collectively, enough toys and educational items were donated to help our B-3 families in need.

"They needed a few basic items to explore and feed their cognition, language, motor skills, and social-emotional development," explained Stephanie. "They [Cherie and KIC] really ran with this in the most amazing way!"



Annual Awards Event Honors our Unsung Heroes



Since it was such an unseasonably warm November afternoon, guests could choose to remain in their cars or sit outside in their lawn chairs separated from other families. Attendees received goodie bags filled with hand sanitizers and other treats and were able to enjoy beverages and popcorn from the Sprecher Fire Truck and nachos from the FiveStar Nachos food truck.

Thanks to the support of our sponsors, community partners, donors and guests, this event raised over \$51,000 for our programs and services for kids with special

needs. While we appreciate all of our sponsors, SFCC would like to give a special thank you to this year's Platinum sponsors: **Northwestern Mutual** and **Sprecher Brewing Company**. We would also like to thank our award recipients who opened their hearts to us and shared how they have navigated through this difficult year.

When the global pandemic began, parents and caregivers of kids with special needs turned into full-time educators and therapists overnight. For this reason, SFCC felt compelled to do something different for our Annual Leading Lights Awards event this year. We decided to honor four of our SFCC families as our *Unsung Heroes* on Sunday, November 8, in the Sprecher Brewing Company parking lot. The event featured a socially distanced, outdoor drive-in movie, Disney's *Moana*, and the premiere of our pre-recorded Awards video where we presented awards to these families:

- ▶ **Cody Zwicke** and his family received an award on behalf of our Family Activity Center.
- ▶ **Hazel Marshall** and her family accepted an award for our Early Childhood Education Program.
- ▶ **Marquise Butler** and his family were the recipients of an award on behalf of our Birth to Three/Early Intervention Program.
- ▶ **Trevell Carter** and his family were selected to receive an award for our Children's Long Term Support Program.



Missed the event? Turn the page for stories about each of our honorees and their families and watch our video on the *Leading Lights Awards and Movie* page on our website at sfckids.org.



Cody Zwicke
FAMILY ACTIVITY CENTER
AWARDS RECIPIENT

Shortly after his birth, Cody was diagnosed with Down syndrome. While initially being shocked and nervous, his parents, Tami and Nick, set out to get their son the resources he needed. After

receiving services from Milwaukee County’s Birth to Three Program at St. Francis Children’s Center, Cody joined our inclusive Early Childhood Education program. Today, Cody and his family continue to participate in events and activities in our Family Activity Center (FAC).

The FAC has been like a second home to Cody and his family. This program gave them the

opportunity to meet other families who had children with special needs. In the FAC, Cody learned how to ride a bike, which was a huge accomplishment for him. “One day, we were here for Chatter and Scatter, and all the other kids were riding tricycles around...Suddenly, I looked up, and there was a little boy pedaling past me. It was Cody! It almost made me cry,” remembers Tami. “He wanted to keep up and play with the other kids!”

Tami and Nick not only advocate for Cody but they also work to bring awareness about Down syndrome to others. And while our FAC Coordinator, Cherie, was on maternity leave, Tami filled in to keep the program going in her absence.

At six-years-old, Cody is breaking down barriers by being the first student with Down syndrome at his school, where he is making new friends and is on the same path academically as other kids his age. His family is receiving this award because as Cherie said, “The things they do to make sure Cody has the best life possible blow me away!”



When Marquise was a baby, someone noticed at a family outing that he wasn’t responding to his name. The concerned family member asked Marquise’s mom, Nicole, if he had autism. Shortly afterwards, his pediatrician confirmed that Marquise had autism.

After receiving the news, the whole family gathered to get Marquise the help he needed. They asked questions and advocated for things they could use to help him succeed. He was evaluated by Milwaukee County’s Department of Health and Human Services and started receiving services from Milwaukee County’s Birth to Three (B-3) Program at St. Francis Children’s Center.

Through the B-3 Program, his family learned how to understand Marquise’s body language and possible triggers for him. Nicole explained that although the program is meant to help Marquise, the whole family learned new ways to help him achieve his goals. Marquise’s siblings took a big

role with his therapies and special education and are very protective of their little brother. His older siblings go above and beyond in caring for him.



Marquise Butler
BIRTH TO THREE
AWARDS RECIPIENT

Today, Marquise is a bright three-year-old who enjoys books, balls and bubbles. While some days are easier than others, his family does whatever is needed to help Marquise. They are receiving this award because of their commitment to Marquise and to each other. His family proves that a child with special needs can make great progress with the support of a loving family.

To the surprise of his parents, Trevell was diagnosed with autism when he was almost two years old. However, Tanisha and John took the news in stride as they quickly began searching for the resources they needed to help their child. They viewed his diagnosis as yet another way they could grow as a family, despite the challenges ahead of them. “Of course, we were sad [about the diagnosis], but we didn’t see it as a time for sadness,” explained Tanisha. “We just knew we had to get to work and help in whatever way we could.”

Trevell started receiving therapy and other services through Milwaukee County’s Birth to Three program. After aging out of the program, Trevell was placed in Milwaukee County’s Children’s Long-Term Support (CLTS) Waiver Program at St. Francis Children’s Center. Through CLTS, Trevell and his family received the resources they needed to help him reach his goals.

Today, the ten-year-old attends a Montessori-based school where he benefits from a hands-on learning approach. Like many others, Trevell’s

school transitioned to an online format this fall. Although this created some challenges for Trevell, his parents were determined not to allow this to deter his progress.

Tanisha and John jumped into action and purchased books and materials to help him continue his learning at home.

Tanisha and John have made it very clear that their goal is—and will always be—to keep their son’s mind sharp, even through difficult times. This is just one reason why Trevell’s family has been selected to receive this award on behalf of our CLTS program.



Trevell Carter
CHILDREN’S LONG-TERM
SUPPORT AWARDS RECIPIENT



Hazel Marshall
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AWARDS RECIPIENT

Although her parents were told that she may not

be able to learn certain skills, Hazel, now a happy and affectionate four-year-old, is walking, identifying colors and learning more every day. The Safer-At-Home order this spring was particularly difficult for Hazel as she loves to be around other people. Trying to do speech, occupational and physical therapy virtually was also a challenge, but the Marshall family used it as an opportunity to get creative. They made obstacle courses and had Hazel walk on uneven ground for her therapy at home.

Then, at six months, Hazel’s parents became even more concerned when she wasn’t hitting milestones for infants her age. Eventually, at her two-year check-up, Hazel was diagnosed with Angelman syndrome, a genetic disorder.

Hazel’s mother, Jennifer, suspected something was different about her second child shortly after birth.

Then, at

Hazel’s family received this award on behalf of our Early Childhood Education program because they have gone above and beyond to ensure that she has the resources she needs, even if that means creating those resources themselves. Not only do her parents continually work with SFCC staff to maximize learning for Hazel, but they also never fail to ask the important questions in order to help Hazel’s development and growth.



A Behind-the-Scenes Look into our ECE Program

For those of you who are not aware, our Early Childhood Education program reopened on May 27, 2020, after being closed for over two months during the Safer at Home Order. While the walls of our building are once again covered in colorful drawings and paintings created by our kids, a lot of other things have changed. For example, one of our new procedures is that parents and guardians are not allowed in our building during child care hours. Instead, children have their temperatures checked outdoors, and a member of our staff walks them back to their classrooms. At the end of the day, our staff escorts each child outside to be reunited with his/her family. So, since you cannot see what's going on inside SFCC, we thought we'd give you all a special "backstage pass" into some of our classrooms:

If you were to walk into our Toddler and First Friends classrooms the week before



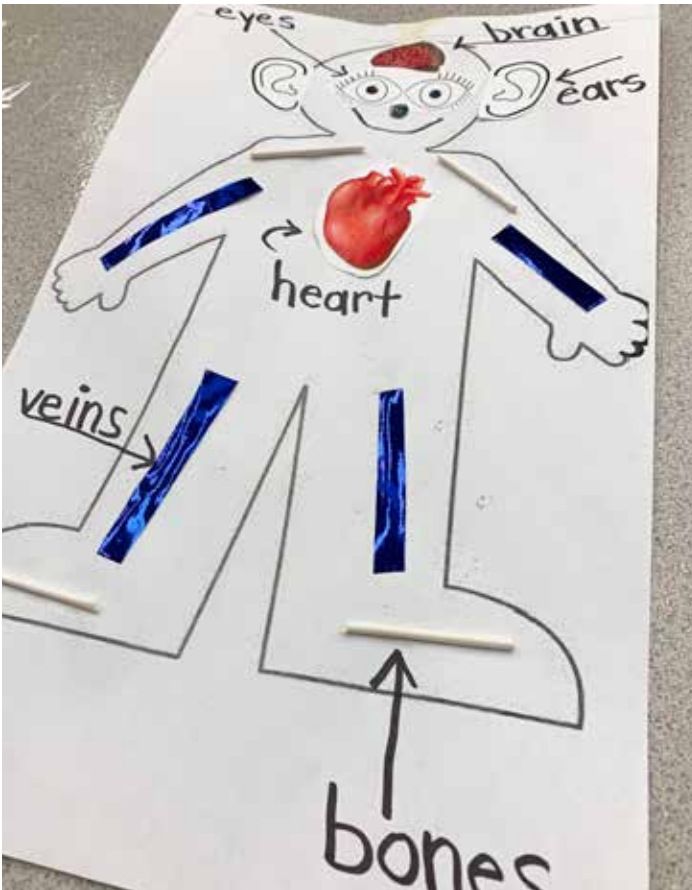
Thanksgiving, you would find yourself surrounded by the giggles and enthusiasm of our kids as they excitedly put together paper turkeys. Gluing the colorful feathers on the bodies of their turkeys not only helps them learn their colors, but the activity also helps them improve their fine motor skills.

Across the hall in our Young Toddlers Classroom, you can hear the chorus of "Old McDonald Had a Farm" as Ms. Tina, our Classroom Assistant, sits with the little ones in a circle. The kids all have pictures of animals, which they cheerfully wave in the air as they sing and babble along.



Right next door in the Infants Classroom, you can also find our Classroom Assistant, Madame, singing to the babies. Music is known to improve and help children of all ages with their communication skills...even our tiniest students!

Across the hall in our Pre-K/K classroom (pre-kindergarten and kindergarten), the room is filled with different pictures of healthy food along with not-so-healthy food groups. In one corner, there's even a skeleton labeled with



she encourages each child to take turns speaking and answering her questions. Their friends in our PreSchool North Classroom can also be found listening intently as one of our staff reads them a book. Reading to them at this age is so important as it encourages the improvement of their comprehension and language skills.

As our students learn and practice their skills, our teachers and staff continue to ensure that our students keep their routines and schedules, just like they did in our classrooms before the pandemic. While life outside of St. Francis Children's Center might be wildly different than it was a year ago, inside the walls of our center, our staff strives to maintain a sense of normalcy. "Once our students step foot into SFCC, their routine picks up where they left off back in March", explained Kim Evans, our Director of Early Childhood Education. "While we have had to make changes to the program in order to ensure the health and safety of our families and staff, what has remained the same at St. Francis is the high quality of care and education that our staff provides for each family that we serve."

the names of the different bones in the human body. Ms. Molly, our Pre-K/K teacher, explains that her classroom is currently learning all about why our bodies are so important. Students are labeling parts of the body as they discover that we are all made of bones, blood, muscles and cells. This particular morning, as Ms. Molly teaches her class about the different body parts, a kindergartner points to her nose and exclaims, "This is my nose, and I like it because I can smell with it!" A few others then jump in, proving that they too are experts in understanding what their bodies can do.

You can almost hear a pin drop in our PreSchool South classroom as all the children are huddled around Ms. Jane, our PSS teacher, for their afternoon reading. "Yes, Graham, that's right!" she exclaims as





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How does our
garden grow?

WITH YOUR HELP!

For every \$50 in contributions that St. Francis Children's Center receives between now and the end of December, we will plant a colorful daisy spinner in our front lawn! For example:

- \$50** = 1 Daisy Spinner
- \$100** = 2 Daisy Spinners
- \$250** = 5 Daisy Spinners

Our goal is to fill the entire green space inside our circle drive with 844 spinners...one for each child with special needs that SFCC served in 2019. All funds raised will help sustain the special education, therapy and support services that SFCC provides for children with special needs and their families in our community.

DONATE NOW by

returning the envelope inside this newsletter or visit our Garden of Daisies Fundraising page at **sfckids.org** for a list of donors, to see our progress and to donate online!

Visit **sfckids.org** to donate or view our progress!