

Fall/
Winter
2021



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center

SFCC Star

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Fall/Winter 2021: Volume 14

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



2021: Going the Distance for Kids & Families

by Mara Dučkens, Executive Director



***Laughter. Play. Self-discovery.
Continuous growth.***

This is the important work of childhood, and it is what we specialize in at St. Francis Children's Center. Through experiential, hands-on learning opportunities, children in our programs are becoming curious and courageous explorers of the world around them. Within the pages of this newsletter, you will find a small sampling of the incredible success stories that occur at SFCC every day.

This past year, our dedicated team of educators, service coordinators and program managers were able to positively impact the lives of over **850 children** in our four programs: Early Childhood Education, Birth to Three, Children's Long Term Support and our Family Activity Center. In each program area, our team members partnered with each child, teenager and young adult in our care to eliminate their barriers to success, celebrate every milestone reached and develop individualized plans for their continuous development. This is why we have been at the forefront of special education for over five decades.

Even in the midst of a global pandemic, our team members have been meeting kids where

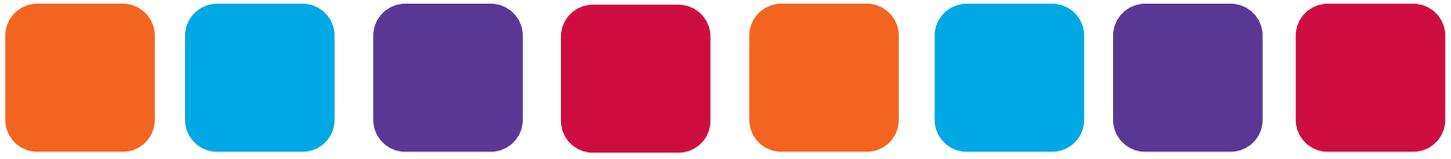
they need us most. SFCC staff members are working in our classrooms and in homes throughout Milwaukee County; they are connecting with families over Zoom and email; they are facilitating playgroups in local parks and leading support groups online. We are continuously adapting to ensure that we live our core philosophy: *All Children Can Learn if We Can Learn How to Teach Them.*

As 2021 comes to a close, please consider a year-end gift to help our high-quality, high-impact programs at SFCC (*see page 8*). With your generosity, our programs can continue to provide stable support for children during an unstable time.

In appreciation,

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FAC: No Tricks at the FAC's Trunk-or-TREAT!

Thank you to everyone who participated in our Family Activity Center's (FAC) first-ever Trunk-or-Treat on Saturday, October 23, from 9am to Noon in SFCC's parking lot!

What is a Trunk-or-Treat? Cherie Purdy, FAC Coordinator, organized this fun event that included trick or treating at eight cars decorated for Halloween. Besides candy, participants collected allergy-friendly treats and joined in on an interactive scavenger hunt and other activities located between the cars.



The goal of the event was to provide a safe, sensory-friendly and fun opportunity for families of kids with special needs. Parents and caregivers selected a time slot, so they could stop by and enjoy the trunk-or-treat while avoiding big crowds. "We wanted to encourage our families to take their time, without having to feel overwhelmed by a large amount of people," Cherie explained. "Often children with special needs can get anxious or need encouragement and this provided a safe space for families."

The FAC would also like to give a special thank you to our volunteers from Marquette University, Kiwanis Club of North Shore Milwaukee and the North Shore Library. We hope to be able to bring this fun event back next year!





ECE: Meet Melissa, our new ECE Director!



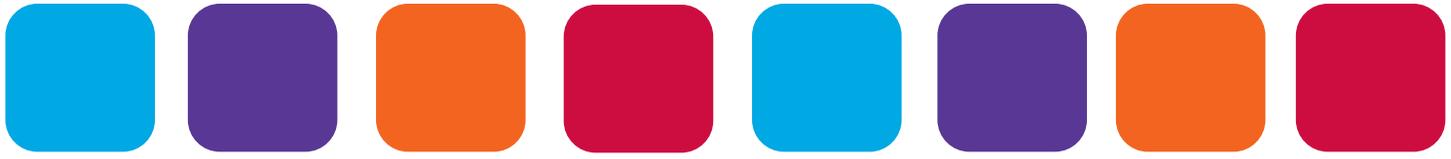
We are thrilled to introduce our new Early Childhood Education Director, Melissa Kowall! Melissa joined SFCC in November and comes to us with over 20 years of experience in education. Melissa found her love for early

childhood education after working in her university's child center, where she realized how important early education is for the development of young children.

Melissa is also a mother to a child who has been a part of the Milwaukee County Birth to 3 program. She shares a personal understanding of the effect that meaningful community resources have on children and their families.

As she steps into her new role, Melissa is excited to continue to support our teachers by giving them the resources and tools they need to build an even stronger community. When you see Melissa, please join us in welcoming her to our SFCC family!





Bella's Story: Building Her Confidence



"The program [B-3] really treats you like family. You feel like a part of something. It was a special experience." - Tere

explained Bella's mom, Tere.

As Bella continued to grow, her mom could not help but notice differences in Bella's activity levels compared to those of her younger sibling. "Bella and her brother are very close in age and while he was beginning to stand and walk, Bella wasn't doing any of that," Tere recalled. At age 14 months, Bella's pediatrician referred the family to the **Milwaukee County Birth to 3 Program (B-3)**, and the family was assigned to receive services from St. Francis Children's Center.

Due to the pandemic, Bella's B-3 team and her family all met in a virtual setting. "Bella would

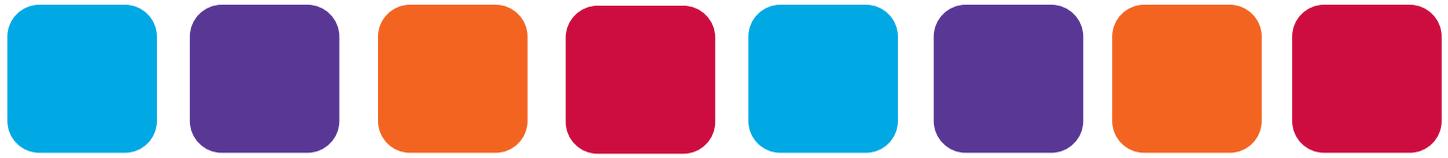
At 6 months old, Bella was reaching milestones as expected for her age, except for crawling. Her parents also noticed that their baby girl had a unique way of sitting. "It's hard to describe how exactly Bella sat,

but there was something different about it which raised concerns,"

sometimes try to pull up to a standing position but wouldn't take any steps, and she would prefer to not stretch out her legs," remembered Michelle, Ascension Physical Therapist. The team demonstrated ways for the family to work with Bella. This included gently pushing down on her feet to help stretch her legs. "I have learned so much from our virtual sessions," said Tere. "It has been a lot of work, but every day I've learned something new." After just four months working with her B-3 team, Bella began to use the furniture to support herself as she moved around. Her family was excited to see Bella become interested in joining her siblings who were walking around her.

Her B-3 team encouraged the family to make Bella's therapy feel like a game—instead of work—to engage, motivate and give her confidence to move forward. "One of our goals was to get Bella to start shifting her weight from one foot to the other, starting with the smallest movements," Michelle explained. With the help of her team, Bella began to lift one foot off the floor without falling. After just 5 months in the B-3 program, Bella took her first steps. "When I first saw her stand without falling, it was such a relief!" Tere said. "Her first steps felt like such a huge accomplishment."

Today, Bella is not only taking steps, but she is walking and is trying to chase her siblings! This happy two-year-old will be graduating from SFCC's B-3 program this winter, and she is ready! Bella is climbing furniture and has started an Early Head Start program close to her home where she loves music and art class. "I will miss all of Bella's team," said Tere. "It's not just about the child. It's a family service."



Nathan's Story: Designing His Future

For as long she could remember, Jen wanted to be a mom. "I've always known that family is who loves you, and I wanted to adopt," she explained.

Finally, in 2005, she brought 14-month-old Nathan home from Russia. While Jen was excited to start bonding with her new baby, she knew immediately that something was wrong. Soon after, Nathan was diagnosed with a vision impairment. After noting that Nathan also displayed signs of developmental delays and sensory issues, his doctors recommended that he start receiving therapy and other services from the Milwaukee County Birth to 3 program to help shape his development.

After turning three, Nathan transitioned out of Birth to Three and was accepted into **Milwaukee County's Children's Long-Term Support (CLTS) Waiver Program at St. Francis Children's Center**. Shortly afterwards, Nathan was diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) and Autism. The Cleveland Clinic defines RAD as a condition where "an infant or young child does not form a secure, healthy bond with his or her primary caretakers."

In addition to his mother, Nathan had difficulty connecting with other kids at school and staff from SFCC who were assigned to help the family get the resources they needed. "I just remember



"They [CLTS team] were always thinking of the next steps and reminding me that we want to continue to grow Nathan." - Jennifer

the first day I met Nathan, he wouldn't say hello to me. But slowly he began conversations, asking questions and speaking up," recalled Amanda, Nathan's CLTS Service Coordinator.

After encouragement from Kristin, his previous CLTS Service Coordinator, Nathan started participating in workshops at Islands of Brilliance, a nonprofit organization that offers learning experiences rooted in an art, design and STEAM-based curriculum for kids and young adults diagnosed with Autism. This is where

Nathan discovered his love for computer programming and coding. "Kristin was pivotal in making that connection for us," Jen said. "It became a catalyst of growth for him."

Today, Nathan is a busy 17 year old who designs video games, has a job, earned his black belt in Tae Kwon Do and even went to prom! His CLTS team continues to work with Nathan to improve his social behavior and coping skills along with helping to prepare him to attend Milwaukee Area Technical College next fall. "We have been very lucky to have the [CLTS] coordinators we've had," said Jennifer. "They have been instrumental in thinking outside the box and working with him to reach his goals."

Want to learn more about Nathan? Watch his video on our website at sfckids.org!

Awards Banquet Raises Over \$121,000

We would like to thank everyone who joined us or contributed to our 2021 Leading Lights Awards Banquet on Tuesday, October 26, 2021, at The Pfister Hotel! With your help, the annual event raised over \$121,000 to support the quality education and therapy services that we provide to children, teenagers and young adults with special needs in our community each year.

We began the evening with a pre-recorded video of some of our Early Childhood Education students singing their rendition of "If You're Happy and You Know It." After dinner, we honored these exceptional community leaders:



Dr. John R. Raymond, Sr.

Dr. John R. Raymond, Sr.
Medical College of Wisconsin
HUMANITARIAN AWARD

Steve & Melanie Booth
Baird
CHILDREN'S SERVICE AWARD

Melissa Allen
Maures Development Group
COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

A big thank you to all of our sponsors, but especially to this year's Platinum sponsors: *Baird, Maggie and Dr. John Raymond on behalf of the Medical College of Wisconsin and Northwestern Mutual.* We would also like to acknowledge Jennifer Schmitt and her family for sharing their amazing story with us. You can watch the video "Nathan's Story" about their journey on our website at sfckkids.org.



Steve and Melanie Booth







6700 N. Port Washington Road
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414-351-0450

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Support SFCC Programs and Families!

At SFCC, we know that every child is unique in their own special way. That's why we strive to uncover the individualized needs of every child we serve... so we can locate the programs, services and resources to support that child. The goal is for ALL kids to reach their greatest potential.



families, and we fully expect to be here for 53 more.

Here are the ways you can make your tax-deductible donation:

✓ By **credit card** using the QR code below or on our website at **sfcckids.org**. Simply click on the Donate button at the top of any page.

✓ **Mail a check** to us in

the donation envelope inside this newsletter.

Please consider supporting SFCC's programs and services for children with special needs in our community by making a year-end contribution. Every dollar you donate *will* make a difference. For the past 52 years, SFCC has been there for over **34,000** children and their

**As always, thank you
for your support!**

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!!!

