



# Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Joseph County Wins 2023 Leighton Award for Nonprofit Excellence

Studebaker National Museum, Potawatomi Zoo Receive Special Recognition



Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Joseph County's CEO, Jacqueline Kronk, addresses a group of students.

The Community Foundation of St. Joseph County has named **Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Joseph County** winner of its 2023 Leighton Award for Nonprofit Excellence. The award recognizes BGCSJC for its unwavering commitment to the academic success and emotional well-being of our community's children.

During the past three years alone, through the COVID-19 pandemic, BGCSJC has grown from five to 29 sites, developing effective programs to improve the academic success and emotional well-being of the children and teens it serves. Today, the club serves more than 3,000 young people with plans to grow this number to over 5,000.

"Coming out of Covid, we learned 90% of our kids were below academic proficiency," says **Jacqueline Kronk**, CEO of BGCSJC. "We realized we had work to do."

BGCSJC's STRIVE program focuses on academic enrichment to help combat the learning loss caused by the pandemic. Early results are impressive: 65% of participating students advanced one or more grade levels in literacy and 69% advanced one or more grade levels in math. Over 20% of students advanced two or more grade levels in both areas.

As the 2023 Leighton Award winner, Boys & Girls Clubs of St. Joseph County receives a \$150,000 endowment challenge grant and a \$25,000 cash award. This means all gifts to the Boys & Girls Club Fund at the Community Foundation will be matched dollar for dollar, up to \$150,000.

In addition to this prize, two outstanding nonprofits also received \$10,000 Special Recognition awards.

Studebaker National Museum, under the leadership of Executive Director **Patrick Slebonick**, was recognized for its innovative storytelling and programming.

Potawatomi Zoo, under the leadership of Executive Director **Joshua Sisk**, was recognized for its rapid modernization and animal conservation efforts. In 2022, a record-breaking 316,000 people visited the zoo.

Your gift to the endowed Boys & Girls Clubs Fund will be matched dollar for dollar, increasing the annual support it receives from now on.



# 21st Century Fellows Begin New School Year

## Foundation Welcomes Roberto Leal; Program Officer, Student Success

A new school year brings new challenges, new opportunities, and a new cohort of students into the Community Foundation's 21st Century Fellowship program.

This fall, the Fellowship welcomed nine new scholars: **Alondra Cora, Aurora Nuñez, Aya Saleh, Caribia Coleman, Jennifer Leon, Kimberly Ruiz, Leia McCann, Lynda White, and Salomon Vasquez.**

These students are graduates of four local high schools and represent four different colleges and universities. Currently, 23 students are part of the program.

The Fellowship also welcomed a new staff member. **Roberto Leal**, Program Officer, Student Success began on September 11. A former teacher and 21st Century Scholars recruiter in the South Bend schools, Leal is himself a beneficiary of the 21st Century Scholars program. In a lot of ways, stepping into this role brings his career full circle.

"A few of the students I taught are in the Fellowship now," he says. "And so I can continue to help them on their journey."

Leal (*right*) recalls that he only enrolled in the 21st Century Program in middle school because it came with a king-sized candy bar. But it's a program that opened doors for him, doors he is thrilled to hold open for the next generation.

"I struggled a lot through high school. I graduated with a two-something GPA," he says. "I should have been a nobody."

But thanks to the 21st Century Scholars program, hard work, and people to push and encourage him, Leal would earn himself a Teacher of the Year nomination while at Washington High School.

"I'm just sharing my story and helping other people the way other people helped me," says Leal.



Already this school year, Fellows have volunteered at Cultivate Culinary, met for a credit workshop with First Source Bank, and participated in a Study Habit Seminar at Holy Cross. They've helped to enroll further generations of 21st Century Scholars at high schools throughout St. Joseph County.

"It truly takes a village," says Leal. "It's an honor to be a part of it."



21st Century Fellows volunteering at Cultivate Culinary; August 2023.

# Robinson Center Helps Keep Seniors Young

## Lu Ella Webster Speaks About the Impact of \$40,000 Senior Living Initiative Grant

Like it did many places, the Covid-19 pandemic affected and halted the day-to-day operations at the Robinson Community Learning Center. But especially for the Center's senior adult audiences, the effects of the shutdown were felt more deeply.

Seniors reported feeling loneliness, anxiety, and depression due to the prolonged isolation. **Lu Ella Webster**, Adult Programs Coordinator, knew that the 95 adults who participated in her programs were in need of human connection.

"I called each one of them every week," she says. "Asked them how they were doing. Just gave them a chance to talk to someone."

As Covid restrictions eased in the later part of 2021, the Robinson Center recognized a growing need to serve that population. They applied for, and received, a \$40,000 Senior Living Initiative grant, payable over two years, beginning in spring 2022.

Research has shown over and over again the myriad health risks of senior isolation. That's why Webster and **Susan Devetski**, Director of the Robinson Center, are willing to try just about anything to make sure that seniors have social outlets.

The Robinson Center has provided lunch-and-learn opportunities where participants learn about everything from taxes to funeral arrangements to gardening to diabetes. Their quilting class was taught by a volunteer just down the street from the Center. Their bus tours of Notre Dame and South Bend are always filled to capacity.

The Robinson Center also offers computer literacy courses for seniors. The course is taught by Notre Dame undergraduates in the computer sciences program, and offers lessons on internet safety, trip planning, and even using money management apps like ApplePay, Venmo, and Zelle.



As for Webster (*above*), her passion for the senior adults in her programs is unwavering, and she shows no sign of slowing down. The winner of the 2023 Rosa Parks Award continues to explore new ways to bring more people into her orbit, including planning a widow's group and partnering with St. Mary's College for auditory testing during an upcoming lunch-and-learn.

"Sometimes I forget I'm a senior myself," Webster laughs.

If you spent a few minutes with her, you'd probably forget it too.

# Mitigating Youth Violence Exhibit at SBMA

## Arts Everywhere Grant Pays Dividends at the Juvenile Justice Center

A new exhibit at the South Bend Museum of Art may seem to come from an unexpected place, but for **Neeta Verma**, Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame, it's not so surprising after all.

Thanks partly to a \$20,000 Arts Everywhere grant, Verma developed and implemented a curriculum at the Juvenile Justice Center's DePaul Academy to help the young men express themselves and tell their stories.

"They've experienced a loss of voice when there is trauma," says Verma. "This is a way we can help them reconnect with their voices and passions."

As part of their time with Verma, students at DePaul Academy created a set of masks that are on display now at the SBMA.

"At first I didn't want to do it," says **J'Shon McIntosh**. "I'm not good at art."

Verma continued to encourage him, and the people who've seen McIntosh's completed mask (*right*) are inclined to disagree with his initial assessment. It's a striking work, full of depth and meaning.

"Miss Neeta gave me the confidence to keep going," he says. "I learned I can make something creative."



"My mask represents my culture," he wrote. "I used dreads to describe the African experience. The dreads define us, but also label us in ways that are unfair, biased, and discriminatory."



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Not all of the students were hesitant about the project. **Shawndale Tate** was one of the students excited for his mask (*pictured below*) from the start.

"I was excited because every project Miss Neeta brought was fun and exciting," says Tate. "It's a coping skill that helps take your mind off of stuff."

Besides creating the masks, students also participated in creating posters of their heroes, reflected on their own pasts, and researched their family histories.

"They were diligent. It was beautiful to watch," says Verma from inside the JJC. "When I come in here, it feels like coming home."

**The Mitigating Youth Violence Exhibit is on display at the South Bend Museum of art right now.**



**Aaron Helman**  
Director of Communications



**Sharan Palmer**  
Accounting Associate



**Roberto Leal**  
Program Officer, Student Success

## Foundation Welcomes New Staff

The Community Foundation is excited to welcome three new staff members:

**Sharan Palmer** started August 28 as the Foundation's Accounting Associate. She has more than 20 years of experience working for nonprofit organizations in the South Bend area. Sharan has an AS degree in Accounting at Oakland Community College in Auburn Hills, MI.

**Aaron Helman** began September 5 as the new Director of Communications. He has worked in nonprofit marketing one way or another in South Bend for the past 15 years. He is responsible for internal and external communications, marketing, and public relations. Aaron has a BA in Economics from Indiana University (IUPUI), and is the author of two local history books.

**Roberto Leal** began September 11 in the newly created position of Program Officer, Student Success. As a graduate of Washington High School and a beneficiary of the 21st Century Scholars Program, Roberto has incredible passion for helping students in St. Joseph County to realize their potential. Roberto is a former Teacher of the Year nominee in the South Bend Community School Corporation and has a degree in Secondary Education with a concentration in English / Language Arts from IUSB.

Our dedicated professional staff has more than 150 years of combined experience with the Community Foundation. We're committed to St. Joseph County, and we're here to help you achieve your philanthropic goals. Get in touch with us or learn more about our team at [cfsjc.org/staff](https://www.cfsjc.org/staff).