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## Closing the Book on 2020

By Diane Nelson, Executive Director

Our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary year has come to an end, and we have closed the book on 2020. We know it has been a challenging year for everyone, but as we look back on this unique time, we are extremely proud of the work that VIPS has continued despite all the barriers. Here are a few special highlights:

- We finished our fiscal year serving 752 children and families.
- We have not missed a single day of providing services throughout this entire pandemic.
- Through the generosity of donors, grantors, foundations and COVID relief support, we have kept our entire team available every day for the children and families we serve.
- We have made sure our families had the resources in their homes to continue learning in a different way—from materials and supplies to computers and brailers. We have even helped with basic needs (i.e., food & clothing) when we were made aware of other challenges.
- We have provided flexible visit times as parents work virtually.
- We have held our family events and retreat in a different way this year, so that all families had the ability to participate.
- We have prioritized the health and well-being of our VIPS team, so that their needs were met, in order to best meet the needs of the families they served. Each week, "Diane's Friday Message" is sent out to keep communications open and team members updated across all our offices in Kentucky and Indiana.
- We have looked to the future, as well, when we began construction of our new home in Indianapolis – the VIPS Family Resource Center. We have also completed the parking expansion at Kosair Charities Kids Town Preschool in Louisville.

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## Celebrating VIPS Children!

*Editor's Note: Each year, we publish parents' stories about their VIPS children that they have shared for Blindness and Visual Impairment Awareness Month during October. They are filled with love, pain, determination, joy and inspiration.*

### Callaway

As a parent, we prepare for the day our children are born. We make the lists, pack the bags and are ready for just about anything. There is so much excitement and we hope they are healthy and thriving! However, the joy we experienced to bring our sweet Callaway into the world, quickly changed to fear. Moments after he was born my husband said, "I can't see his eyes. Is he ok?" The doctors quickly calmed us and said "Oh, he just got here! Give him a little bit to adjust." We knew straightaway that

[Continued on page 2](#)



### Mission Statement

VIPS empowers families by providing educational excellence to young children with visual impairments in order to build a strong foundation for reaching their highest potential.

### ***Closing the Book on 2020, cont'd. from front page***

As you can see, we have and will continue to walk alongside our VIPS families on their journeys from diagnosis of blindness and vision loss to their child's highest potential. We remain hopeful and optimistic that at the other side of this challenge, VIPS will be even better because of our experience.

I want to leave you with this thought for the year ahead of us. *In 1606, Shakespeare's theatre was forced to close because of the plague. So, in the diversion from his normal way of working, he wrote King Lear, Macbeth and Antony & Cleopatra.*

I can't wait to see what we all accomplish in 2021!

### ***Callaway, cont'd. from front page***

something was wrong, and that fear was quickly confirmed the following morning.

The pediatrician entered our room and confidently stated, "I believe your son has Congenital Glaucoma. I have an ophthalmologist coming in to confirm." Then she walked out. We looked at each other, completely in shock. We couldn't process the words being spoken. Congenital Glaucoma? What is that? We immediately googled the term and started our research. We had no idea what just hit us! We had this sweet baby in our arms that needed us, yet we had no idea what to do for him! The ophthalmologist never came.

This was how our journey began. Those first few months we were just as much in the dark as he was. The grief of losing what we thought was "supposed to be" and "what was" can't fully be put into words. Countless trips to Riley Children's Hospital and 3 surgeries later, we fell upon VIPS – and our lives were changed. VIPS has impacted our family immensely. It was the beginning of our acceptance and healing. We knew nothing of how to help our son in his world until they started to show us the way. As the only agency in Indiana that provides this method of intervention during the toddler years, VIPS has shown us how to teach Callaway to safely navigate his environment and learn to compensate for his disability. Additionally, the home visits have augmented his confidence in processing new challenges and opportunities, and have strengthened his resiliency.

Finally, VIPS has been an advocate together with us for Callaway. His life is forever changed by their help. We now have a community around us. This is the foundation in which we build his future. No longer are we alone. Our family has someone to turn to and teach us how to help our sweet boy. Callaway has a team surrounding him now – one that is always encouraging and cheering him on. He is thriving because of it!

**Claire, Callaway's mom, Ft. Wayne, IN**

### ***Gavin***



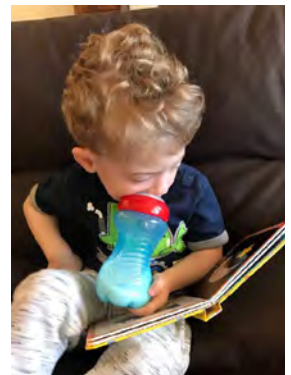
Hi, my name is Leesha and I am a mom to a little three-year-old boy named Gavin. When he was 6 months old we found out that he has coloboma (a hole or gap) of the iris and optic nerve. He has a larger coloboma on his left eye that affects the front of his eye and on his optic nerve in the back. His right eye coloboma only affects the front of his eye and is quite a bit smaller.

Since he has been six months old all the way up to 3 years, we have taken him to see Dr. Bradley at UK in Lexington every 6 months to see if there have been any changes in his vision. And as of right now there haven't been. Next year we will find out what his visual acuity is, meaning how bad it is. But since finding out, little Gavin has not let his vision stop him. He keeps pushing and growing and learning every day. Also since learning that he has a vision problem, we have become part of VIPS and they have been so wonderful and helpful and given us a community that we feel we can fit into and find others we can relate to. Mrs. Katie, Gavin's teacher, has been the best when it comes to helping us with Gavin's vision and understanding it to the best that we can.

**Leesha, Gavin's mom, Georgetown, KY**

### ***Hunter***

Hunter is 29 months old and has received services through VIPS since he was 6 months old. He has progressed so much since beginning services. He is walking now and enjoying the outdoors. He also enjoys looking at books and anything with Mickey Mouse. VIPS has been a wonderful program and helped meet our needs in so many ways!



**Brenna, Hunter's mom, Wallingford, KY**

### ***Josephine***

Josephine is a graduate of VIPS Central KY. She participated in Ohio's Braille Challenge this year for the first time ever. This event was amazing and well organized and as her mother and educator, to be afforded the opportunity to attend with her was enlightening. I was able to see Josie dance, braille, sing, see others use their canes, see others read braille and be surrounded with young people just like herself. This was rewarding for Josie and also helped push her to want to learn more braille and get better at it.

We are very excited about attending Ohio or Kentucky's Braille Challenge in 2021. Until then, Josie continues to work on her braille skills, her dancing moves, of course, and her cane skills.

It's so awesome when children with visual impairments can come together and just be kids, celebrating their talents and accomplishments!



**Karin, Josephine's mom and a TVI, Villa Hills, KY**

## Nadine and Vivian



*Editor's Note: Brooklyn tells a beautiful story about her family's journey with her two precious daughters, both of whom have been diagnosed with Leber's Congenital Amaurosis. You can read the excerpt below, and click the link for the full story and the wonderful pictures.*

I remember thinking, "How do I tell everyone who loves them this?" "How do I break the news that Nadine and Vivian have never seen detail and never will?" "How do I tell them they will continue to lose all of their vision?" I was terrified. I immediately began thinking of all of the things they will never see. They will never see their own children. They won't know what they look like on their wedding days. They won't know what their husband looks like. They won't ever see a star. They won't ever know what their mommy or their daddy looks like. They won't know what they look like. This list goes on and on and on.

Continue the journey at: <https://www.lovewhatmatters.com/her-eyes-were-going-back-and-forth-horizontally-uncontrollably-how-do-i-tell-everyone-who-loves-them-this-blind-visually-impaired-special-needs-mom/>

**Brooklyn, Nadine's & Vivian's mom, Elkhart, IN**

## Owen

Owen is 3 years old and has albinism, a condition that affects the level of pigment in the eyes, hair, and skin. Owen has been a VIPS kid since he was a baby and he's a graduate of the Central Kentucky Office's Little Learners Program.

In March of this year life turned upside down for a lot of people; for Owen, it was the start of the longest, best weekend ever. He

was home with Mommy and Daddy and enjoying an enormous amount of focused parental attention. He missed seeing extended family and missed going to Little Learners in person, but under Healthy at Home, Owen blossomed. He learned new skills, outgrew his shoes, and has gone from a toddler to a little boy during this time. As his parent, I did my best to reframe the time at home and the changes as an opportunity to be a full time parent and keeping Owen busy has kept his parents busy as well. Even as the world outside has been full of uncertainty I will look back on these months and remember all the time I got to spend watching Owen grow and learn.

During "coronatypes" we stayed connected with Little Learners using Zoom and I think those sessions prepared us for the experience of starting our first year of preschool with remote learning. Unlike staying at home, remote learning has been harder for Owen and it's something we are still navigating how to give him the skills he needs to develop in a format he understands and can use. As Owen's parent, I think the guidance we got from VIPS' teachers has helped us to advocate for Owen, and I am very grateful for the model of parent coaching through Early Intervention, because it meant I have the skills to follow the instructions from Owen's new teaching team. These times have been a learning experience for us all. I look forward to the days when we can reconnect with VIPS in person, but throughout this time we have been supported and encouraged by VIPS.

**Tiffany, Owen's mom, Lexington, KY**

## Wells

My husband Ryan and I are parents to two small children, Warren (age 4) and Wells (age 2). Our journey with VIPS started in January 2018. At that time, Wells was 6 months old, and in daycare. They did a standard "Ages & Stages" assessment on



Wells, looking for development milestones. They gave me the results, reporting concerns with his vision – his eye tracking specifically, as well as his hearing. I spoke with the pediatrician about it, and she referred us to First Steps.

After lots of Doctor appointments, and waiting, and more assessments, and waiting, we learned a few



months later that Wells has some serious medical issues related to his hearing, his vision, and physical delays.

Wells has always been a very content child, he never really fussed. As a baby, he was a great sleeper, and he only cried when he really needed something. As parents, we thought to ourselves, WOW, this is wonderful, a baby that's a great sleeper, which was a welcome balance to Wells' loud older brother, who was a toddler at the time and competing for attention. I think the most painful moment for me in this journey was the realization – when Wells was 8 months old- everything I thought I knew about my son was wrong - this sweet, easy-going child had perhaps never seen me, his mother, or never heard my voice. That he was alone, silent and in darkness, not knowing if it was day or night. I channeled this worry and grief into action to help Wells. The doctors told us that a medical procedure or medication would not be effective to help him. Wells began physical therapy, speech and hearing therapy, and visual therapy to help address his condition.

The staff at VIPS is amazing. I am incredibly thankful to our DI, Tracy, who has been instrumental to Wells' development. We see Tracy for therapy with Wells a few times a month, but it is incumbent on us, as the family and caregivers, to use and apply the therapy that we learn from Tracy every day! When Tracy began working with Wells, he did not have a formal diagnosis of his visual impairment, yet her therapeutic approach began with introducing the strategies to address early stage CVI. Tracy also connected us with a leading CVI doctor in Cincinnati, who definitively concluded that Wells had CVI. Unfortunately, there is no magic cure for CVI, the only way to help is to work with him every day, and hopefully his vision would improve. This is where VIPS is so important for Wells!

It started small, while Wells didn't track much with his eyes, he did seem to be intrigued by shiny mylars (like a cheerleading pom pom) and flash lights. Tracy noticed him focusing on these objects, and we slowly began to introduce ordinary objects alongside the mylars and, after consistent presentation, Wells could see the new object on its own! She was helping developing those visual pathways in the brain!

She also noticed that his preferred color was red, so we started to use a red spoon with feeding so he could see it. Then we noticed that he responded well to cause and effect toys. As his hearing developed, the combination of sound, light, and color became an important part of his therapy. We noticed that Wells preferred to touch soft or textured objects, so we took soft scrunchies hair ties and sewed jingle bells on them so that they also made a sound when he touched them. Tying together all these sensory elements has been so important for Wells' visual development, and is all a result of VIPS collaborative intervention.

We've seen a lot of amazing experts regarding Wells, but none of them have a definitive answer to explain his condition. Wells is 2 years old today, and he still has challenges with feeding, communication, and mobility...all which Tracy has to factor into her therapy session with Wells. It's completely tailored to his individual needs. We see him improve every day!

**Taylor, Wells' mom, Louisville, KY**

**Willow**

Willow is almost 3! She has received services with VIPS from an early age. Willow was diagnosed with ocular albinism and nystagmus shortly after birth and was referred to VIPS. She has progressed so much since beginning services. She is very independent and loves to play outside. She enjoys dancing, music, and anything Trolls! Willow loves her big sisters and learns so much from them. We are so proud of her!



**Toni, Willow's mom, Ahsland, KY**

# What's In a Name?

*By Kathy Mullen, VIPS Director of Education*

At VIPS, all team members are guided by the same mission: Visually Impaired Preschool Services (VIPS) empowers families by providing educational excellence to young children with visual impairments in order to build a strong foundation for reaching their highest potential.

It doesn't matter if you work on the administrative side of Team VIPS or the education side. Without each other, our mission could not be accomplished. It doesn't matter if you live south of the Ohio River or north. Without all hands on deck, our mission could not be accomplished. It doesn't matter if we call you a classroom assistant or an instructional assistant, a developmental interventionist or developmental therapist, a teacher of students who are blind or visually impaired (TSBVI) or a teacher of the visually impaired (TVI). We are all working with this one mission in mind.

So why do we have so many different titles? How do these titles differ? How are they similar? Are people just trying to confuse us? It may seem so, but there really is an explanation for the madness. I'll try to explain:

The title of Classroom Assistant vs. Instructional Assistant really is just a matter of choice. Both titles require the same amount of hours of annual training. At VIPS, the assistants working in Kids Town Preschool do so much more than assist with the instruction of our students. They are entrusted with many more responsibilities related to the physical care and teaching of life skills. The title of Instructional Assistant seems limiting, so we choose to use Classroom Assistant.

In Kentucky, First Steps providers of early intervention within the scope of education are called Developmental Interventionists (DI). To be a DI, one must complete their certification as an Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Educator. Only a person with this form of teaching certification can be a DI. In Indiana, the term used in First Steps is Developmental Therapist (DT). While the role of the Developmental Therapist is to provide education for the child enrolled in First Steps and their family, the service can be provided by individuals with a variety of degrees, including a variety of levels of education. The DTs working for VIPS all have their teaching certificates or another advanced degree. Those who are not certified in the field of vision participate in a specialized and intense training program, VIISA (Visual Impairment InService of America), before they are hired to work with our VIPS children. Given the additional training, Indiana First Steps honors VIPS providers with the title Blind and Low Vision Specialists.

There are universities across America where teachers can receive their certification to teach students who are blind or visually impaired. The requirements of these programs are similar in content, but differ as do all programs due to the professionals who lead the programs. In Indiana, those who graduate with this certification are called Teachers of Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired (TBSVI); in Kentucky they are called Teachers of the Visually Impaired (TVI). Once again, it doesn't matter the name, the education and responsibilities are the same.

For some reason, the official name of Orientation and Mobility instructors remains the same no matter where you live or work. Officially, these individuals are known as Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists (COMS). It would be nice if each of our disciplines practiced the same continuity.

I can put this into easier terms. My grandchildren call me "Mimi" and my husband "Pop." I have friends who are called "Gigi" and "Papa" and others who are called "Grandma" and "Grandpa." We all went through the same steps to earn these titles, raising our own children. Likewise, we all share the same mission: to spoil our grandchildren.

It doesn't matter the name. The real test is the commitment. At VIPS, we meet the challenge!

# What's Been Going On Around VIPS

## ***Eye Opening Symposium***

The Blind Services Coalition of Kentucky (BSCK) hosted the Eye Opening Symposium on October 29, 2020. BSCK is comprised of representatives from agencies that provide services and supports to individuals of all ages who are blind and visually impaired across the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Many member agencies also provide support to caregivers and families of individuals who are blind.

The Symposium is presented annually to raise awareness about blindness/visual impairments and to highlight available resources.

Speakers presented and answered questions virtually throughout the day. The speakers included:

- Ramiro Maldonado, MD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Kentucky, who discussed genetic diagnoses and therapy;
- Justin Kaiser, Ph.D., Clinical Assistant Professor of the Vision Impairment Program at the University of Kentucky, who presented an overview of orientation and mobility instruction and techniques;
- Jennifer Roark, Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialist, and Kenny Williams, Community Volunteer, demonstrated proper guide techniques;
- Kristen Piery, O.D. Director of Optometry at the University of Kentucky, provided updates and benefits of assistive technology and
- Jeffrey Jackson, Psy.D., Licensed Psychologist at the Lexington VA Medical Center, shared his own journey of vision loss and life transformation through the stages of grief.

VIPS and the BSCK would like to thank VANDA, UnitedHealth Care, and KAER for their sponsorship of this event. The symposium was recorded and may be viewed by going to the Fayette County Extension Horticulture's YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxyY-xtw-U>.

## ***Family Retreat- Virtually Special***

One of our favorite events of the year is our VIPS Family Retreat and Parent Conference. We LOVE welcoming families from across Indiana and Kentucky to Louisville to receive the gift of a night or two in a hotel and a day of self-care, good food and programming about parenting a young child who is blind or visually impaired. We LOVE welcoming our VIPS kids to the



Louisville campus to Camp VIPS in our Kids Town Preschool. But, as most things in the year of 2020, our retreat this year looked quite different!

The annual VIPS Family Retreat took place remotely (via Zoom) on Saturday November 7, in the comfort of our VIPS families' homes. We opened the day with a presentation on self-care with Dr. Joe Bargione, providing us with strategies to appropriately care for ourselves and solid reasons why self-care is so important.

After a short break, VIPS team members, Kathy Mullen and Meredith Howell, presented on transitioning from VIPS to public or private preschool or kindergarten.

Families who registered ahead of time also received a retreat kit including supplies for a family project. The kit also contained resources and a few surprises. Both

of the informational sessions were recorded so all VIPS families can access them. If you are interested in doing so, please contact the VIPS Family Service Coordinator, Jenny Castenir at [jcastenir@vips.org](mailto:jcastenir@vips.org).



One family's Retreat project.

Please mark your calendars for the 2021 VIPS Family Retreat and Parent Conference, which will be scheduled for a Friday and Saturday in November, 2021.

## Drive-Thru Santa Experience

VIPS Indiana held a Drive-Thru Santa Experience on Saturday, December 12 in Roanoke, Indiana for our VIPS families! We couldn't let COVID ruin all of our holiday fun so our team got creative this year to provide an enjoyable event that made sure everyone was kept safe! Parents drove through an open barn thanks to our friends at *The Plant Center* and that's where the fun began! Parents



opened trunks where we placed gifts generously donated by the *Mad Ants* and the *Plainfield Police Department* in the trunk. The next stop was Santa's mailbox where kiddos dropped off their letters to Santa and the best part is that he actually wrote back with a certificate for being on the Nice List! Next up was the cookie stop where delicious cookies were graciously gifted to families from one of our favorite bakeries, *BB Sweets to Eat*. Finally, the kids were able to wave to Santa as he joyfully belted out Ho Ho Hos from his sleigh! It was a wonderful morning and we are thankful our families were able to enjoy the event thanks to our amazing community partners!



## Santa and Mrs. Claus Visited Little Learners

Ho Ho Ho! Guess who came to visit our Little Learners a couple of weeks before Christmas? Santa, of course! He read the famous "Twas the Night Before Christmas" poem to our attentive students and then after, he talked with each child about what he or she wanted for Christmas. We are so glad Santa came by to spread some holiday cheer and chat with our Little Learners!



To watch the fun, go to:

<https://www.facebook.com/VisuallyImpairedPreschoolServices/posts/10157712835960965>.

Not to be outdone, Mrs. Claus also visited Little Learners for a cookie baking lesson. We cut down the whole Zoom call into a few minutes long clip to share the ADORABLENESS of these

kiddos baking with their families and Mrs. Claus! We are so grateful for the technology that allows us to continue hands-on, holiday activities with our students from the safety of their homes.

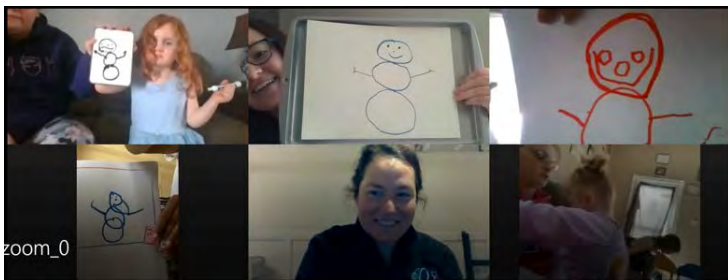


Check out the video at: <https://www.facebook.com/VisuallyImpairedPreschoolServices/posts/10157689011020965>.

## Making the Most of the First Snow!

As we continue virtual school, our highly creative VIPS teachers are becoming even more creative. Ms. Christina, VIPS Kids Town Teacher, has been doing letters of the week, colors of the week, and recently shapes of the week in her online classes. One week recently, the shape of the week was circle. Students were encouraged to identify circular and round items around their homes.

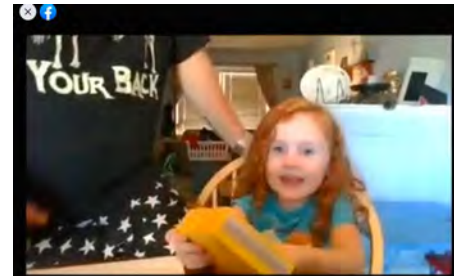
Ms. Christina then led her students in a directed drawing activity. She began to model and verbally instruct students to draw three circles, one at a time. Students quickly began to identify that the shapes together made a snowman. Then they added a nose, a mouth, eyes and arms to their snowmen. Ms. Christina was joined by Occupational Therapist, Sarah Conway, who assisted in providing verbal instruction for the children. For those not ready for drawing, Ms. Sarah and Ms. Christina provided verbal instruction and alternative activities for making a circle shape. These involved the parent using hand over hand strategies to move the child's hand in the circle motion over textured materials or flat surfaces.



## Those Marvelous Milestones

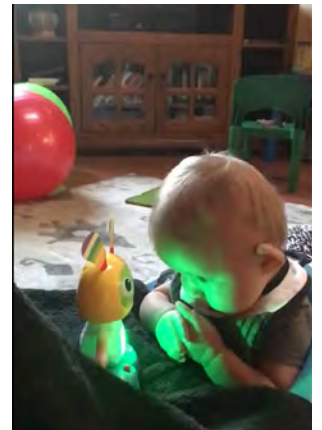
VIPS children work very hard to accomplish the goals we set for them. For a VIPS child, achieving a typical milestone may take a bit longer and a bit more work. Sometimes a lot more! In this issue, we are celebrating several children for their developmental achievements!

**Sophia** is a four-year-old child who attends VIPS Kidstown Preschool in Louisville. Due to COVID-19, she has been attending virtually. Sophia has a visual diagnosis of Bilateral Retinoblastoma, but thankfully her tumors are currently "not-active!" She also has peripheral lesion (peripheral [side] vision loss) in the left eye. Sophia has recently begun learning braille virtually with Ms. Christina. In the video, Ms. Christina is shown teaching Sophia the letter S in braille. She uses a Boom Card she created to provide a visual model when learning the braille cell. Sophia's dad, Bobby, helps her make the letter S in braille using the APH Swing Cell. Her parents have been great attending class and private sessions as well as completing provided tasks and activities. In the video, she often looks for assurance from dad. Towards the end of the session, Sophia makes the letter S in braille independently and is very proud of work! Way to go, Sophia!



To watch the lesson, go to: <https://www.facebook.com/VisuallyImpairedPreschoolServices/posts/10157532223225965>.

We also celebrate **Talon**! His VIPS teacher, Ms. Lesley, and his mother, Kendra, have been working with him to activate his toy, teaching him the concept of "cause & effect." In this video, the toy is perched on a black towel to eliminate the visual clutter, then when it stops singing and lighting up, Talon swats at it to reactivate it! Talon has Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) so this lighted toy provides a great visual target for him to interact with and motivates him to use those motor skills. We and mama Kendra are so proud of Talon's determination! Yay, Talon!





Let's hear it for **Kennedy**, who was fearful of grass and refused to touch it previously but after a recent outdoor vision visit with her VIPS Interventionist, Mr. David, she is no longer scared! She even plays ball in the grass often! Plus, Kennedy is keeping her glasses on for longer and longer periods of time, which can be difficult to get used to for young children, especially those with sensory aversions. Way to go, Kennedy!



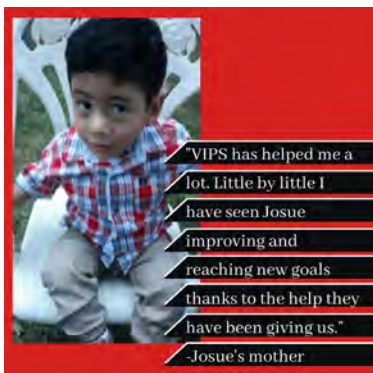
Celebrating **Leah Jo!** She took some of her first assisted steps during a recent virtual home visit! Her family and intervention team worked on setting up the visual environment and used



strategies to help her stand more independently and begin to take steps forward. She has had amazing success! Kids with visual impairments can struggle with understanding how to move their bodies in space, so special strategies are sometimes needed to cue their movements, help them understand spatial relationships, and be motivated to move. You are doing AMAZINGLY well, Leah Jo, keep up the great progress!

To catch the full excitement of the moment, go to the video, at: <https://www.facebook.com/VisuallyImpairedPreschoolServices/videos/334436484653411>.

**Josue**, who has CVI and Optic Nerve Hypoplasia, is three and has been receiving VIPS services since late 2018. His VIPS Interventionist, Ms. Tammy, said, "Josue loves to play with his siblings and learns so much from them, plus he has displayed so much progress!" He is maneuvering well in his environment and loves to play outside. Josue enjoys looking at books and singing with his mom, Laura. She does a wonderful job teaching and working with Josue in their daily routine. He has achieved so much because of his mom; she is a natural teacher for him! Josue and his family have been an absolute joy to work with. It has been amazing to travel this journey with them!



## Finding Joy in the Chaos

By Staci Maynard, TVI, VIPS KidsTown Preschool

*Editor's Note: It appears we will be in for several more months of our new "pandemic normal." Staci's thoughts are helpful as we continue through this difficult time. In addition to being a TVI, Staci also has a Master's of Divinity degree in Christian Education.*

When I first heard last year that VIPS was going to shut down temporarily in order to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, one part of my brain wondered if I would get to see my students again that school year while the other part was preparing as if we would be back in school in about two weeks. The teachers quickly prepared packets of activities for families to work on at home, and we began thinking about how we could post educational content on Class Dojo each day. It wasn't too long into the "healthy at home" process before I noticed myself beginning to feel irritable and discouraged, especially as I saw the school start date moved back again and again. Life felt like it was put on hold. I wanted to go out! I wanted to see the people that I loved. Let's just say I wasn't having much fun, and I wasn't happy about it. This may sound strange to anyone who knows me well, because I am generally quiet, and I need alone time to recharge. However, I like to be around people, quietly around people, as contradictory as that may seem. Needless to say, the abrupt change to my lifestyle and routine was more difficult for me than I might have anticipated.

Once I realized the bad state of my mentality, I had to change focus and take action. Here are some of the strategies I used. I hope that they will serve as a reminder to me and that they may help you through this pandemic. A disclaimer, I am not a professional counselor or anything of that sort. These are just practical steps that have benefited me personally.

1. Accentuate the positive, as the old song says. I find it helpful to make a written list of things I'm thankful for, but you can do this as a mental exercise if you prefer. This is also a good activity to do daily or weekly as a family. Even when it may feel like there are a lot of things going wrong, there are still many things that are so good about life.
2. Be sure to spend time with people that you love. If you happen to live with people that you care about, then these are great times to cherish the extra time together with conversations, meals together, playing games, reading, etc. It's also still important to connect to loved ones we can't be with right now over the phone, messaging, or video-conferencing. I am regularly talking to a few of my family and friends on video chats. I have found that it helps



how I'm feeling to get to see and hear my favorite people on a computer screen.

3. Get moving. Regular exercise has been great for my mental state and for helping me feel less restless. Make sure your children are getting plenty of movement too, as it is important for their physical development as well as their physical, mental, and emotional health.
4. Go outside. You can do yard work, gardening, play games as a family, or just enjoy the scenery quietly. There's something calming about just looking at the trees and flowers growing and listening to the birds sing.
5. Indulge in at least one hobby you enjoy, or find a new hobby if you don't have a current specific interest. I'm always reading something, but since I've been at home for longer periods, I've also worked puzzles and done some painting. I had not done any art for quite a while, and I forgot how relaxing it is for me.
6. Limit technology time. I think this is as important for the adults as for children. In my case, I found myself starting to feel overwhelmed by sad news and by seeing people's negative interactions on social media. I cut down on what I would look at and for how long, and I don't feel like I'm missing out on any vital information at all.
7. Listen. If we're not on technology, it allows us to be more present. Take in each moment. Talk with each other. Even if you've lived together for years, there are things you still do not know about one another. Ask questions, and absorb the answers. Our relationships are so important, and if nothing else, the consequences of this epidemic should show us to never take our time together for granted. Let your loved ones know you care by showing how much you value what they have to say.
8. Let it go. Though this is not one of my top three favorite Disney songs, it has a message that has proved valuable to me when life began to feel chaotic of late. Usually, I like to have plans in place based on predicted outcomes, but the past few months have not felt very predictable. I've had to admit that I am not in control of nearly as many things as I would like to be. All I can do is take some deep breaths and give my best effort in whatever is asked of me.

So, there you have it, my suggestions for how to find joy in the chaos of our current times. I find that these are really helpful points for me to apply to all times. Hopefully, I won't forget them when life is a little more "normal" again, and hopefully, you can find something that you can apply for all of life's seasons too. Perhaps, some time to sit at home, to think and prioritize is not such a bad thing after all.

## More Strategies for Making It Through COVID

*By Kathy Mullen, Director of Education*

Many years ago (I won't say how many), when I was in college, I had the opportunity to go to the CEC (Council for Exceptional Children) national conference. This was a dream come true for all special education majors. We loaded an Eastern Kentucky University van early one morning and headed off to Philadelphia for what we anticipated to be an amazing experience. I remember important things about the trip, primarily that we most likely had too many occupants in the van by today's standards and that the van offered very little comfort in the way of basic things like cushioned seats, seatbelts, and shocks. I also vividly remember that our beloved professor and his wife, another beloved professor, argued (loudly) all the way to Pennsylvania.

The trip did prove to be an amazing experience, though I must confess I do not remember very much about the sessions I attended. What I do remember is an elevator ride that doesn't typically occur even once in a lifetime. Somehow I was separated from my peers and found myself alone in the elevator. At least I was alone for a bit. When the elevator stopped at a floor midway down to the hotel lobby, who boarded but Fred Rogers and his assistant? Yes, that Fred Rogers. As in Mr. Rogers.

To say I was awe struck is an understatement. (Did I mention I was an early childhood nerd as well as special educator-to-be?) It took a couple more floors of descent for me to work up my nerve to speak to Mr. Rogers. When I said something profound, to the effect of "Hello, Mr. Rogers. I'm your biggest fan. I love your work. Let me shine your shoes," the superstar in the elevator turned his back to me and his assistant stepped between us and said something to the effect of "Back off, girl. Who the heck do you think you are? We have no time for your kind. Is there something wrong with you?" At least that's what I heard in my heart. I was devastated and grateful I was the only college student in the elevator to witness such an embarrassing encounter.

I remained hurt and mad at Mr. Rogers for years. I did not feel like I was a part of his neighborhood nor did I want to be his friend. I cannot pinpoint when my heart cracked open to let him back in, but I know it took some time.

So why do I tell you this silly (but not to me!) story? Because we all deserve to have a bad day. We all deserve to ask for space. We all deserve to have an assistant to act as a buffer between us and the outside world. And when a bouncer is not

nearby or events don't offer us the space we need, we maintain the right and responsibility to care for ourselves. We deserve to offer ourselves the grace of having a bad day and get on with it. If Mr. Rogers can have a bad day, so can we.

I have forgiven Mr. Rogers. I know that gave him much peace in his final days.

At the end of this journey we call COVID, my hope is that we can look back and count more good days than bad and more happy encounters than negative ones.

## In Memoriam

This issue of VISability is dedicated to the memories of:

### **Mia Kutella**

daughter of Katina Biggers & Greg Kutella of Madisonville who passed away on June 29, 2020 at age of 22 months

~ and ~

### **Dow Huffman**

long time VIPS supporter, of Louisville, KY who passed September 26, 2020 after a short battle with cancer

. ~ and ~

### **Bob Belknap**

former Development Director at the American Printing House for the Blind and past VIPS Board member, of Fulton, MO who passed away on October 6, 2020 due to COVID

~ and ~

### **Violet Strizu**

daughter of Meredith and Sebastian Strizu of Carmel, IN who passed away October 16, 2020 at the age of eight months

~ and ~

### **Krista Wozniak-Rust**

grandmother and primary caregiver of VIPS child Ashley of Nicholasville, KY who passed away on November 26, 2020.

~ and ~

### **Alexander Taylor**

son of Brittany & Sean Taylor of Camby, IN who passed away on December 16, 2020.

~ and ~

### **Bob Bracy**

grandfather of VIPS graduates Caden and Christian of Mt. Washington, KY, and very generous supporter of VIPS, who passed away on January 15, 2021

*Our hearts go out to all of those who loved them.*

## VIPS Parents & Teachers Recommend...

Even though holiday shopping is over, you might be needing some ideas to substitute for items you need to return or for upcoming birthdays or special occasions. Here are a few recommendations from parents and teachers that might just be that perfect solution, product, or toy you have been wanting for your child.

VIPS mom **Ashley** recommends this vibrating light toothbrush linked below! It may help a child with low vision locate the toothbrush, and either reach out to use it or anticipate it coming toward his or her mouth. This is a win for developing good oral hygiene and strong self-care skills -- \$16.95.

<https://www.amazon.com/Papablic-BabyHandy-Electric-Replacement-Months/dp/B07QL7KXBZ>



**Daniel & Charlene**, Avron's parents, recently purchased the COCOSAND sunglasses for Avron, and he does great with them! The frames are flexible (like the miraflex or dillidalli frames that many of our families like), have an attached strap, and are polarized. They come in a variety of colors, and are very affordable -- \$19.99. <https://cocosand.com/>



**Juanita Miles**, DI/VIPS Kids Town Preschool Teacher, recommends *Cry Babies Goodnight Coney Sleepy Time Baby Doll* (even though she does not care for the name!).

- baby doll with soft body
- interactive (press its tummy to hear it sing 5 lullabies for up to 10 minutes)
- baby doll's face can light up with a soft glow to serve as a nightlight
- available in various skin tones



- cries light-up LED tears when you take away her pacifier.
- face lights up with a soothing glow on return of her pacifier
- makes realistic baby sounds
- available from Amazon for \$19

<https://www.target.com/p/cry-babies-goodnight-coney-interactive-baby-doll/>

**Ashley Emmons**, TVI/COMS VIPS Kids Town Preschool Teacher recommends the *Skip Hop Explore & More Shape Sort & Spin Yeti Toy*.

One of my families recently got this shape sorter for their child. I had not seen it before. It is a great multi-sensory toy that makes sounds, lights up, and the Yeti spins and pops out, etc. During my O&M lesson, we used this toy to work on positional concepts. I gave the child verbal descriptions of where the shapes were located in relation to their body (i.e., in front, behind, left, and right). We also hid the shapes around the room for the child to locate with verbal clues such as “on top of your bed” or “under your bed.”



This toy offers three stages of learning and play:

- Stage 1 (exploration): shape pieces light up when pressed and the Yeti identifies the shape's names and colors.
- Stage 2 (shape sorter): shape pieces pop out, then child matches them back in the correct spots and is rewarded with lights, music, and cheers.
- Stage 3 (game mode): Yeti encourages child to find specific shapes and colors. Once all shapes are correctly placed, lights, music and encouraging phrases are the reward.
- Yeti spins and pops out shapes when switching to modes 2 and 3.
- Press Yeti's hair for fun giggles.
- 50 songs, sounds and phrases!
- Requires 4 AA batteries (included)
- Available from Amazon, Target, Walmart and online for about \$30.

[https://www.amazon.com/s?k=skip+hop+explore+%26+more+shape+sort+%26+spin+yeti+toy&crd=3IP2PQ3E4FKQP&srefix=Skip+Hop+explore+%26+more+sha%2Ctoys-and-games%2C177&ref=nb\\_sb\\_ss\\_fb\\_1\\_27\\_ts-a-p](https://www.amazon.com/s?k=skip+hop+explore+%26+more+shape+sort+%26+spin+yeti+toy&crd=3IP2PQ3E4FKQP&srefix=Skip+Hop+explore+%26+more+sha%2Ctoys-and-games%2C177&ref=nb_sb_ss_fb_1_27_ts-a-p)

## Spotlight on Braille and Cane Skills!

October was Blindness and Visual Impairment Awareness month. During this time, we celebrated National Braille Week and White Cane Safety Awareness Day.

Typically during our Kids Town Preschool classes, our children have access to tactile books to practice reading and become familiar with braille and tactile symbols. They also have activities that help isolate fingers and thumbs and strengthen their hands, such as modeling clay and other art materials. Parents and caregivers participating in NTI (Non-Traditional Instruction) with VIPS children are learning about braille and its importance as a key learning medium for students with visual impairments. VIPS is glad to say we are making this type of instruction accessible to our children, despite the pandemic!



Pre-COVID, Ms. Ashley worked with Bradley on using the braille writer.

### One Mom's Cane Story

**October 15, 2020 at 1:13 PM** It's White Cane Awareness Day!!! I'd be lying if I said I've always loved the cane. I have always loved the independence and confidence it has given Addy, but truthfully, when Addy was 3 and 4 years old and just learning to use a cane, I would have rather kept it in the car. Before the cane, we could walk into a grocery store or restaurant and everyone went on about their day, nobody noticed us or stared. When Addy starting using her cane we couldn't leave the house without feeling like the entire world was staring and my momma heart just couldn't take it. I tried to remind myself that it doesn't bother Addy when they stare, it just bothers me. I've came a long

way since then, and Addy happily uses her cane to travel safely and addresses questions when they come. My momma heart couldn't be more proud!

**Brittany Lynn Clarkson**

Using her cane, Addy demonstrates human guide techniques to a blindfolded Brittany!





# Notes of Interest



**The California School for the Blind offers a six-part Beginning Braille webinar**, designed to introduce parents, caregivers, and paraprofessionals to the Unified English Braille Code. Participants in this course will learn alphabetic braille, numbers, basic punctuation, alphabetic word signs, and some of the most common short form words and initial letter contractions. Each lesson includes a description, examples, and independent practices with answers. All that is required to complete these tutorials are motivation, internet connection, PC or Apple computer, the free Perky Duck download, and the lesson materials listed in the description box. You may access the webinars at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYwqS8JwdkoW7Kp5IVHoEIBAEUz-OrQb>.

**A free braille program** from Australia means a few of the words are spelled a little differently, but this is a fun, self-paced program that teaches both reading and writing braille but does not require a brailewriter. Checkout: <https://uebonline.org/>.

**The Children's Braille Book Club of National Braille Press is now offering FREE, one-year subscriptions.** Those who are eligible include children who are blind/visually impaired ages 10 and under or parents who are visually impaired. Free subscriptions are limited to one per child or household. This is the first of a 5-year program, after which they hope to make all subscriptions free. The books are beautiful, original publishers' editions that have had clear braille overlays inserted. To begin, there will be 125 free subscriptions available, which will be allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. Go to: <https://info.nbp.org/cbbc-info>.

**The DB Central and Central Michigan University's CHARGE Syndrome Research Lab has now made accessible, virtual oral readings** of some of the favorite children's storybooks. The stories are fully accessible as they are read aloud with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting and closed captioning. They also have corresponding vocabulary videos and experience boxes ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA\\_\\_ccTc9II](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA__ccTc9II))! To learn more about this Story Time readings project, watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7aK8pLQ5pw&feature=youtu.be>. They are adding to this resources page on a regular basis, so be sure to bookmark it and check back! Questions? Email [kristin.knight@cmich.edu](mailto:kristin.knight@cmich.edu).

**The American Printing House for the Blind is proud to present two new services that will enhance learning for educators and families: Access Academy and APH Hive.**

[Access Academy](#) offers webinars of interest and [APH Hive](#) is a free eLearning platform for educators and families. Easily enroll and take courses that are relevant to serving students from birth through graduation who are blind or visually impaired – all on your own schedule. Access Academy webinar participants can also earn ACVREP credit.

## APH Insights Art Competition

Now is the time to enter artworks in the Annual American Printing House for the Blind's Insights Art Competition. Last year, VIPS Kids Town Preschool student, Hannah Castenir, took home the first place prize in the Preschool/Kindergarten category!

**Entry deadline is March 26, 2021.**

Persons who are visually impaired of any age are invited to enter their artworks created in any visual arts medium.

**First Place - Preschool / Kindergarten**

**Hannah Castenir**  
Louisville, KY

**My Dog Lina**  
paper



*Hannah's winning artwork, done in bits of paper, to create a portrait of her dog, Lina.*

Works will be selected on the basis of originality of concept, expressive use of media, and artistic excellence. The artwork must be created by the artist, with minimal assistance from anyone else. The work of students in preschool through 12th grade will be judged in grade placement categories; the work of adult artists will be judged in categories according to medium. The judge(s) will be a professional in the art gallery/art museum field, an art educator, and/or a practicing artist.

Any person who meets the following definition of blindness may enter artwork: corrected visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye (determined by a Snellen Chart), or a visual field limited to 20 degrees or less. This includes those who function at the definition of blindness (FDB), listed above, due to brain injury or dysfunction. To register or get more information, go to: <https://insights-art.org/>.



## New Arrivals

***VIPS is pleased to welcome these new additions to the VIPS family:***

|   |  |                                       |
|---|--|---------------------------------------|
| Adelaine - 4 months, Corydon, KY        | Elizabeth - 2 years, Westfield, IN     | Moria - 1 year, Woodburn, IN          |
| Adonis - 9 months, Portage, IN          | Elliana - 12 months, Anderson, IN      | Muhammad - 2 years, Fort Wayne, IN    |
| Agnes - 7 months, Clarksville, IN       | Everleigh - 2 years, Grabill, IN       | Nicolas - 1 year, Churubusco, IN      |
| Allen - 2 years, Avon, IN               | Gabriel - 1 year, English, IN          | Noelle - 1 year, Sunman, IN           |
| Allyson - 1 year, Syracuse, IN          | Genevieve - 9 months, Indianapolis, IN | Oakley - 1 year, Sullivan, IN         |
| Ameelyah - 22 months, Fishers, IN       | Hannah - 9 months, Greenville, IN      | Oliver - 1 year old, New Albany, IN   |
| Amelia - 21 months, Westfield, IN       | Hunter - 21 months, Clay City, KY      | Olivia - 28 months, Florence KY       |
| Amy - 2 years, Sheridan, IN             | Isabelle - 1 year, Lafontaine, IN      | Owen - 1 year, New Albany, IN         |
| Angel - 21 months, Hanson, KY           | Izzabell - 4 months, Crothersville, IN | PaisLaigh - 2 years, Indianapolis, IN |
| Asa - 2 years, Evansville, IN           | Jabril - 10 months, Columbia, KY       | Patrick - 2 years, Bowling Green, KY  |
| Ava - 7 months, Indianapolis, IN        | Jack - 9 months, Indianapolis, IN      | Payton - 1 year, Greenwood, IN        |
| Avery - 2 years, Princeton, IN          | Jackson - 8 months, Jasper, IN         | Rayland - 1 year, Louisville, KY      |
| Ayza - 1 year, Union, KY                | Jamaal - 1 year, Oak Grove, KY         | Reese - 5 months, Louisville, KY      |
| Beau - 1 year, Middlebury, IN           | Jaelynn - 18 months, Alexandria, I     | Rio - 1 year, Indianapolis, IN        |
| Bethany - 2 years, Evansville, IN       | James - 2 years, Indianapolis, IN      | Rowan - 1 year, Indianapolis, IN      |
| Blakley - 31 months, Island, KY         | Jaxon - 1 year, Greenfield, IN         | Royal - 9 months, Kokomo, IN          |
| Brayden - 8 months, Dyer, IN            | Joshua - 20 months, Lewisport, KY      | Samuel - 1 year, Fort Wayne, IN       |
| Braxton - 2 years, Lafayette, IN        | Josiah - 2 years, Indianapolis, IN     | Serenity - 10 months, Pekin, IN       |
| Brysen - 4 months, Columbus, IN         | Josslyn - 2 years, Anderson, IN        | Serenity - 11 months, Terre Haute, IN |
| Carson - 1 year, Corydon, IN            | Kade - 12 months, Shepherdsville, KY   | Shelby - 7 months, Indianapolis, IN   |
| Celia - 3 years, Indianapolis, IN       | Kennadi - 5 months, Noblesville, IN    | Shravya - 1 year, Louisville, KY      |
| Charleigh - 2 years, Louisville, KY     | Kennedy - 23 months, Versailles, KY    | Titus - 1 year, Sullivan, IN          |
| Charlie - 2 years, North Manchester, IN | Kerstynn - 2 years, Peru, IN           | Trannel - 2 years, East Chicago, IN   |
| Cheyenne - 1 year, Pennville, IN        | Linux - 1 year, Corydon, IN            | Vanessa - 1 year, Louisville, KY      |
| Conway - 9 months, Bedford, IN          | Logan - 1 year, Fishers, IN            | Vivian - 7 months, Lexington, KY      |
| Daniel - 2 years, Carmel, IN            | Luis - 14 months, Indianapolis, IN     | Waylon - 2 years, Paoli, IN           |
| David - 2 years, LaPorte, IN            | Luke - 7 months, Valparaiso, IN        | Weston - 19 months, English, IN       |
| Deserea - 21 months, Clay City, KY      | Lytic - 2 years, Columbus, IN          | William - 1 year, Carmel, IN          |
| Desmond - 9 months, Indianapolis, IN    | Madison - 1 year, Floyds Knob, IN      | William - 19 months, Louisville, KY   |
| Dillen - 2 years, Dunkirk, IN           | Madison - 1 year, Fisher, IN           | Wyatt - 2 years, Evansville, IN       |
| Drayven - 2 years, Vincennes, IN        | Malcolm - 2 years, Sullivan, IN        | Zelie - 8 months, Louisville, KY      |
| Eleanor - 9 months, Fort Wayne, IN      | Mary Hart - 3 years, Evansville, IN    |                                       |
| Elijah - 2 years, Clarks Hill, IN       | Michael - 2 years, Churubusco, IN      |                                       |
|   | Morgan - 2 years, Indianapolis, IN     |                                       |

# VIPS Staff News

We are saddened to report that **Shai Mullins**, Classroom Assistant in the Kids Town Preschool, has resigned her position. We wish her all the best in the future.

Another Classroom Assistant in Kids Town Preschool, **Dani Savich**, has also left VIPS. Dani, husband Will, and daughter, Jaycee, moved to South Dakota to be closer to their families in Minnesota. They are family people at heart for sure! Jaycee is now a student at the South Dakota School for the Blind, and Dani is a classroom assistant for a middle school class in their public school district.

VIPS CK's Regional Director, **Kelly Easton**, was thrilled to represent VIPS as one of the 12 nonprofits to make it to the finals in the Social Venture Partners Cincinnati Fast Pitch event. Kelly, along with representatives from more than 120 nonprofits in the greater Cincinnati area, received training in effective storytelling techniques. Finalists delivered their resulting 3-minute pitch (speech) for a chance to win cash and consulting awards. While VIPS was not chosen as the winning nonprofit, we are beyond grateful for the opportunity this event gave us to share our mission with the greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky community. Check out Kelly's pitch here: <https://youtu.be/3jdRU6Ouou>. Congratulations, Kelly!

VIPS Education Staff made a number of presentations during a flurry of online trainings over the last several months.

- **Dixie Marz** (TVI/DI) from VIPS Central KY and **Paige Maynard** (TVI/DI) from VIPS Louisville, both Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Developmental Interventionists, were interviewed on *Ask the Expert*, an online show from the Louisville Downtown Lions Club. The topic of the show was their recommendations for safe toys for children, just in time for the holidays.
- Congratulations are due to **Kathy Mullen** (VIPS Director of Education), and teachers **Christina Allen**, (TVI/DI of VIPS Louisville), **Mindy Koehne** (TBLV) of VIPS Indiana, and **Tracy Webb** (DI) of VIPS Louisville, who presented virtually on VIPS services during COVID at the APH Annual Meeting. *Over 200 people registered to attend their session!* Obviously, a great many folks in the blindness services community want to learn from VIPS staff, a fabulous compliment.
- **Kathy Mullen** and **Paige Maynard** also presented during a day of training for ophthalmologists and optometrists across Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio, hosted by Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center. The topic was CVI and the importance of early identification.

- Additionally, **Kathy Mullen**, **Ashley Emmons** (TVI/COMS/Preschool Teacher), **Paige Maynard** (TVI/DI) and **Staci Maynard** (TVI/Preschool Teacher), all of VIPS Louisville, presented to the University of Kentucky's TVI and O&M certification class recently.
- Last, but not least, **Kathy Mullen** and **David Sterne**, (Provisional TBLV/First Steps Supervisor) of VIPS Indiana, earned accolades for VIPS from the Indiana Deaf/Blind Project on their work with the current Vision Impaired Inservice in America (VISA) training in Indiana.

We are so proud of how hard our Education Staff has worked to grow educators in our field and to expand understanding of infants, toddlers and preschoolers who have visual impairments.

We wish good luck to **Brittany Williamson** (TVI/Preschool Teacher) of VIPS Louisville, who has been accepted into the UK Orientation & Mobility Training Program! You go, girl!!

A huge shout-out goes to **Alexis Asamoah**, Development Coordinator, for her work on converting the Stampede for VIPS to a virtual event, and to **Kirsten Schmidt**, Guest Relations, for closely helping Alexis with race packets and deliveries. Alexis began her work with VIPS two weeks before shut-down and has done an amazing job while Safe-at-Home! She also rocked her very first day of Give for Good while handling tons of virtual details!

## We Are Family!

A virtual all-team meeting on November 20, in lieu of our annual Thanksmas celebration, included 37 staff members from all three offices as we celebrated 35 years of VIPS. Not only did we hear from Matt McMahan, our Board President, but also heard the story of how VIPS began, presented by the visionary Sharon Bensinger, our beloved founder, along with her hopes for the future. We then heard from Rebecca Davis, the fierce mother whose determination and passion convinced us to expand our services to the entire state of Indiana. Annie Hughes, VIPS Indiana's first teacher, also shared her experiences in blazing a new path. We lunched together (though virtually of course) thanks to Panera gift cards from Diane and Kathy, mailed to each of us in a beautiful, hand painted, seasonal card made by Diane's dear mother and VIPS volunteer, Aggie Nelson. Lastly, we shared our "basements and balconies," a moving account of the highs and lows of each staff member's pandemic experience. The day was filled with emotional highs, occasional lows, and tears caused by both. It was a wonderful staff "family" reunion since we have been unable to gather all together for so long.



# Angels Among Us

By Diane Nelson, Executive Director

The focus for our VIPS 2020 holiday card was “Angels Among Us” and I would like to recognize two very special angels who have changed the lives of so many through their quiet benevolence. **Dr. Mark and Cindy Lynn** were introduced to VIPS through longtime supporter, Dr. Jerry Bizer, who was the owner of Dr. Bizer’s Vision World until 1998 when the Lynns purchased the business. It is now known as VisionWorks where Dr. Mark Lynn & Associates optometrists provide eye examinations and prescription glasses. Over the years, Dr. Lynn has expanded the business to six states and over 90 offices.



Since that initial introduction, Cindy and Mark Lynn have made it their mission to help VIPS grow across Kentucky and Indiana in service to more and more families of the youngest children with blindness through the gifts of time, talent and treasure. Since 2004, the Lynns have generously blessed VIPS with approaching \$900,000 in financial support, provided too many community

service volunteer hours to count with their teams, provided free eyeglass cleaners for our VIPS children and connected us with many other generous supporters through their networks. In fact, the Lynns helped VIPS, in partnership with Kosair Charities and the Louisville Downtown Lions Club, arrange a “vision” field trip for 50+ students from a local elementary school whose performance was poor because they just needed glasses. On this special day, Dr. Lynn brought in teams and extra equipment from across his locations so every child could be examined, fitted with glasses and sent back to school with free, new glasses in just a few hours. It was amazing to watch these children beam with excitement, pride and a new visual awareness.

Mark and Cindy Lynn are very humble people who prioritize their focus on family, faith and community. The Lynns have been married over 40 years and have four children and 16 grandchildren. There are hundreds of thousands of other beneficiaries of their goodwill through charitable giving and support of community efforts. Not only have they supported VIPS, but also *Kids Center for Pediatric Therapies*, *The Lord’s Kitchen*, *The Hope Gala for*

*the American Cancer Society*, *The American Diabetes Association*, *The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation*, *Second Stride*, *4H*, *Future Farmers of America*, as well as scholarships for students at *Simmons College* and the *University of Louisville*. In addition to their church, they are engaged with *Eastern Area Community Ministries*, *Sacred Heart Model School* and *Bellarmine University*. They have opened the doors to professional soccer in Louisville by generously supporting the creation of the *Louisville City FC Lynn Family Stadium*. *Dr. Lynn has long been the Chairman of the Kentucky Fair Board and is actively involved with Evolve502* promoting education across Kentucky.

As you can see, Mark and Cindy Lynn are true “Angels Among Us” to all they encounter. There are no words that adequately express our gratitude for all they are and do, so I will simply say – THANK YOU!

## Gifts of Time, Talent and Treasure

### VIPS Kentucky

- ~ Thanks to our generous friends at **Kosair Charities**, Kathy Mullen, Director of Education, will participate in the Kosair Charities leadership Institute at Spalding University throughout the 2020-21 school year.
- ~ We are very grateful to VIPS board members **Nathan Holaday and Shari House** for championing our cause and introducing Truist, parent company of McGriff and Company, our insurance carriers, and also of BB&T, to our mission.
- ~ **Bria Byrd** is a teenager with amblyopia who lives in Elizabethtown, KY. Though just sixteen, she has already participated in several scholarship pageants with the mission of raising awareness of visual impairments. She was asked to be a “VIPS Ambassador” and to tell our story along with hers. She has actually written a book about her diagnosis to raise awareness of early screening for amblyopia. (By the time many children learn they have amblyopia, it is often too late to change the negative impact on their vision.) Bria has promised part of her book, *These Heels Are Made for Talking*, proceeds to support VIPS and is doing an online fundraiser. Here is a link to her story: [https://www.thenewsenterprise.com/features/tuesdays\\_teen/byrd-uses-platform-to-raise-awareness/article\\_aeb1d757-7df1-5970-ba00-67f2c663eea3.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=email&utm\\_campaign=user-share](https://www.thenewsenterprise.com/features/tuesdays_teen/byrd-uses-platform-to-raise-awareness/article_aeb1d757-7df1-5970-ba00-67f2c663eea3.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=user-share).



- ~ Thank you to **KAT Construction** for the amazing gift of the fence around our newly developed Newburg Road parking lot. They are the company that built our parking lot and installed a gate to minimize inappropriate traffic. They donated \$11,000 in services to us along with the “free” gate. KAT Construction is owned and operated by Richard and Scott Young and Family who are truly moved by our mission. We are very grateful.
- ~ Thank you to the **Ford Motor Company** for your generosity in donating 2,200 face masks and 1,000 face shields to VIPS!! Thank you for ensuring that we can continue providing our much needed services, while keeping our children and families safe.



Alexis Aasamoah, Development Coordinator (center), and Diane Nelson, Executive Director (right), receive PPE from Todd Kraus of Ford.

- ~ Thanks to **Brooklawn/Seven Counties Services** for donating children's clothing that had been donated to them by The Children's Place clothing store but did not fit the clients served at Brooklawn. In turn, VIPS donated to them boxes of Girl Scout cookies gifted to us by the **Girl Scouts of America**.
- ~ Thanks to **Karin and Leonardo Geraci**, of Northern Kentucky and parents of VIPS graduate Josephine, for their generous support of VIPS through their annual Korean Dinner. In 2019, the Geracis raised over \$12,000, when they began asking their longtime attendees to make a donation to VIPS as a thank you for being invited. For 2020, they converted the dinner into a drive-through event and raised almost \$15,000 for VIPS. We are wowed by the generosity of this family!
- ~ VIPS Director of Education **Kathy Mullen's family** initiated a 60th Birthday celebration honoring Kathy's many community contributions with a request for gifts to VIPS. Kathy's celebration raised almost \$5,000!
- ~ We are so touched by the generous donations by the family of Past VIPS Board Member, **Bob Belknap**, who passed away recently of COVID. Bob's family donated \$10,000 to VIPS in Bob's memory. Additional gifts of over \$1,500 from Bob's family and friends have been received in honor of his contributions to the field of blindness, and especially, to VIPS.

- ~ Generosity in sorrow has also been shown to VIPS by the family of **Dow Huffman**, a longtime VIPS supporter, who recently passed away after a short battle with cancer. Dow's family generously requested gifts to VIPS in his memory; those gifts have raised \$2,200 so far.

*(A brick in the name of a loved one who is honored or memorialized through gifts to VIPS is placed in our Sensory Garden.)*

## VIPS Indiana

- ~ Thank you to the **Indianapolis Alumnae of Delta Gamma** for holding a Silent Auction to benefit VIPS and our Family Resource Center. With 82 items in the Silent Auction, it was a smashing success and all proceeds, approximately \$9,000, will go to the building fund! We are honored to have such a wonderful partnership with our DG friends!

- ~ A big thank you to **WISH-TV** for featuring our very own capital campaign manager, Kristi Howard-Schultz, during Blindness/Visual Impairment Awareness Month. You



Awareness Month. You can see Kristi talk about VIPS and the Envision The Future Campaign! You can see Kristi's interview here: [https://www.wishtv.com/news/local-news/indy-moms-blog-visually-impaired-preschool-services/?fbclid=IwAR3kSL0EV8ZnMwgXnCLTQpDWXdljd9JGD7ALF3QPBIPi3i8rT2P4c5Ev3\\_g](https://www.wishtv.com/news/local-news/indy-moms-blog-visually-impaired-preschool-services/?fbclid=IwAR3kSL0EV8ZnMwgXnCLTQpDWXdljd9JGD7ALF3QPBIPi3i8rT2P4c5Ev3_g).

- ~ VIPS Indiana would like to express a heartfelt thank you to the kind folks at **BarnRaisers of Indiana** for gifting us with \$7,500! These funds will help us build our VIPS Family Resource Center--a space that will welcome all of Indiana's youngest babies and toddlers who are blind or visually impaired and their families! BarnRaisers was set to hold their annual BINGO Night fundraiser but COVID 19 came along and the event had to be cancelled. BarnRaisers asked the ticketholders if they would like to donate the money back or get a refund--95% donated back!



VIPS IN Regional Director Meredith Howell accepted a check from Scot Rigney, co-founder of BarnRaisers.

- ~ We are grateful to **MudLOVE** for celebrating Blindness/Visual Impairment Awareness Month with us the entire month of October as they donated 50% of the sale of select bracelets back to VIPS. We received over \$825 thanks to our supporters and MudLOVE!

# Recent Grants and Donations

VIPS is so grateful to the following organizations and foundations that make it possible for us to serve young children who are visually impaired and their families throughout Kentucky and Indiana.

## VIPS Central KY

- \$12,500 - **Lexington Lions Club** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program and sponsorship of the Cupcake Classic 5K (despite not being able to hold their annual fundraiser!)
- \$12,500 - **Karston A. & Ethelyn O. Osmondson Charitable Fund, Inc.** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$30,000 - **iHeartMedia** for media promotion between January and March 2021
- \$40,000 - **Linda Neville Trust** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program

## VIPS Louisville

- \$1,000 - **CHI Saint Joseph Health Foundations** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$1,866 - **V.V. Cooke Foundation** for IT/Technology for the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$2,000 - **Dollar General Literacy Foundation** for IT/Technology for the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$3,000 - **The Kentucky Division of Childcare/Cabinet for Health and Family Services**, awarded to VIPS for our repeated 5 Star Rating
- \$3,000 - **Toyota** for Kids Town Preschool Program
- \$3,000 - "Anonymous" for Kids Town Preschool
- \$5,000 - **The Cralle Foundation** for general operating support
- \$5,619 - **Jacob Koch Charitable Trust** for the purchase of ten iPads for families to use in the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$6,350 - **The Independent Pilots Association** for the new air purifying Bi-polar Ion system for our Louisville facility.
- \$8,000 - **Mary P. Gill Foundation** for Early Childhood Intervention Program in the Louisville Metro area
- \$10,000 - **The Bob Bender Family** (the 3rd of 10 installments in their 10-year, \$100,000 pledge)
- \$10,000 - **The Eva Junega Foundation**, by Fahr and Jamie Junega in memory of their daughter, Eva.
- \$20,000 - **Truist** for support of our operations.
- \$20,000 - **The Gheens Foundation** for program support

- \$30,000 - **Fred & Opal Woosley Foundation** for the Family Services Program
- \$37,500 - **Karston A. & Ethelyn O. Osmondson Charitable Fund, Inc.** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$55,000 - **Irvin & Alice Etscorn Charitable Foundation** for the purchase of two new fleet vehicles



Our two new fleet vehicles, just waiting for the VIPS logos!

- \$75,000 - **Louisville Downtown Lions Club** for scholarship endowment
- \$90,000 - **KSB Charitable Foundation** for Family Retreat, Stampede and the Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$225,000 - **Kosair Charities** for the Kids Town Preschool and Early Childhood Intervention Program

## VIPS Indiana

- \$5,000 from the **Louis and Mary Haddad Foundation** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program across Indiana
- \$15,000 from the **Smithville Charitable Foundation** for the Early Childhood Intervention Program across Central and Southern Indiana
- \$5,000 from **The Costco Wholesale Foundation** for the VIPS Indiana for Early Childhood Intervention Program
- \$8,700 from **The Caesar's Foundation of Floyd County** the Early Childhood Intervention Program In Floyd County

## A Child's Dream of Giving

Six-year-old Sebastian is the son of VIPS Indiana Regional Director, Meredith Howell, and he is no stranger to philanthropy. Throughout his short life, he has watched his parents give back to their community, whether through time, talent or treasure.

While his parents support many different causes, their hearts are always with VIPS since it is the agency that helped their daughter, Lola, who is visually impaired, so much. Being Lola's brother has had a profound impact on Sebastian, who has seen his parents concern for Lola; he has stepped up to be



his sister's best friend and one of her best advocates. He has watched as she has progressed.

Recently during one of Sebastian's e-learning sessions, students were asked by their teacher, "If you had money, what would you do with it?" Sebastian's response is a testament that children learn by example. He didn't say he would buy a new toy or go on an adventure -- instead, he said he would give \$1,000,000,000 to VIPS!

We aren't sure where you are getting that billion dollars, Sebastian, or how you came up with that number. But your heart of gold is a shining example for all of us -- adults and children alike!



## Fund-Raising in a Pandemic --

### Flexibility & Creativity Yield Success!

~ VIPS raised \$59,785 from 110 donors during **Give for Good Louisville** in September, plus \$700 in earned prize money. Our donations earned us the 23rd spot on the top contribution list out of 500+ nonprofits. We were 13th in nonprofits over \$1.5 million in size and were also chosen as one of about 30 nonprofits (selected from over 500 nonprofits) to be interviewed during a live broadcast to share our mission. Our thanks to **Dr. Mark and Cindy Lynn** for their extremely generous and unexpected gift of \$25,000; to **The Louisville Downtown Lions Club** for a \$10,000 matching grant; to **The Bonnie Bizer Foundation** for the generous \$5,000 matching grant; and to **Steve and Jeanne Deeley** who donated a match of \$1,400.

~ The **2020 Virtual Stampede for VIPS** took place during the month of September and had over 200 participants. The event raised approximately \$60,000 (\$30,000 of which is from **Dr. Mark and Cindy Lynn**).

- ~ Thanks to **YUM! Brands** for sponsoring our **Virtual Bourbon Tasting** event, held instead of the Yum! Brands Golf Tournament which was not possible due to COVID 19. This netted VIPS nearly \$16,000. The event could not have taken place without the help of VIPS board members **Andy Steinbach** and **Shari House**.
- ~ Thanks to the generous \$5,000 matching donation of the **Malhotra family**, VIPS Indiana raised over \$10,000 on **Giving Tuesday** on 12/1/20 -- That is more than we have ever raised before! We are so grateful to those who donated!
- ~ Our **Holiday Campaign** has been amazing! We are nearing our \$128,800 goal. In a disrupted economy, this is an amazing feat accomplished by hundreds of people who generously want to invest in our life changing work. A huge thank you to VIPS board member, **Mark Stiebling**, for creating our amazing holiday message of joy.
- ~ VIPS Indiana has decided to cancel our multi-sensory art show, **reVISION** for 2021, due to the unknown situation associated with the pandemic. Rest assured, reVISION will be back bigger and better in 2022 at our new Family Resource Center.

## Fund-Raisers Going on Right Now That Could Use Your Help!

### Pappy Bourbon Raffle

**Purchase Tickets NOW!! Drawing Is Feb. 14!**

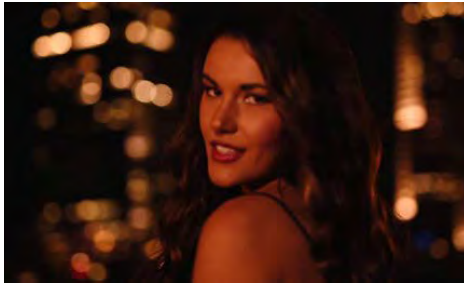
VIPS is having a Pappy bourbon raffle! Buy a ticket and you could win a flight of five Pappy bottles. Tickets are \$100 each and only a limited number are being sold. **The raffle includes one bottle of each of the following:** Pappy Van Winkle 23 Years; Pappy Van Winkle 20 Years; Pappy Van Winkle 15 Years; Van Winkle Special Reserve 12 Years; and Old Rip Van Winkle 10 Years. The drawing will be held on February 14 live on the VIPS Facebook page! You can purchase your tickets at: <https://secure.vips.org/np/clients/vips/product.jsp?product=43&>.



## VIPS Indiana Capital Campaign

The **VIPS Indiana Family Resource Center** will be a game changer for VIPS children and families in Indiana. If you would like to support the capital campaign, please visit: <https://vips.org/vips-indiana/family-resource-center/>!

### “The View” Music Video



VIPS Indiana is feeling extra grateful this holiday season as we are thrilled to announce we have partnered with talented pop artist, **Xtina Louise**, for the release of her brand new “The

View” music video. Xtina is generously donating all proceeds from the song and video directly to VIPS to benefit Indiana’s babies and toddlers who are blind or visually impaired. **You can help make a difference by watching Xtina’s video and sharing it.**

Also, there is a link in the description to make a donation that would be in honor of Xtina Louise. We can’t express our gratitude enough to Xtina Louise! Click the link to watch the full video!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzU7Me6ih7k>.

**VIPS was recently recertified by the Better Business Bureau for meeting all 20 Standards for Charity Accountability, an accreditation process that occurs every two years.**

## VIPS Wish List

### VIPS Indiana

- Amazon Wish List: <http://a.co/aeRar2N>
- Metal whisks
- Shiny red pompoms
- Office supply gift card
- Black bath towels
- Disinfectant wipes
- Red or yellow slinkies
- Red shiny pom poms
- White computer paper
- Jingle bells
- Mylar material
- Baby wipes
- Vinyl
- Snacks for events
- Grocery store gift cards for family events

### VIPS Louisville

- Bluetooth Dual Pairing Speaker Set
- 2 gallon zipper bags
- Disposable latex-free gloves
- Facial tissue
- Clorox Wipes
- Lysol Spray
- Hand Sanitizer
- Cricut Maker Machine
- Cricut mats
- Self-Adhesive Laminating Sheets, 9” x 12”
- Astrobrights Cardstock, 8.5” x 11”, 65 lb “Vintage” 5-Color Assortment
- All colors of cardstock especially white and black
- White construction paper
- Adhesive Hook and Loop Velcro, Black, 1-Inch x 10-Foot Industrial Grade and Wear and Tear Resistant
- Crayola Silly Scents Twistables Crayons, 24 Classic Crayola Colors Non-Toxic Art Tools for Kids 3 & Up, Scented Self-Sharpening No Mess Twist-Up Crayons
- Washable Glue
- Colored duct tape
- Elmer’s Jumbo Glue Sticks
- Dry Erase Markers (black) thick and thin
- Scented markers
- Play-doh (small containers)
- Large paint brushes (large handles)
- Washable paint
- Acrylic paint (all colors)

### VIPS Central KY

- Scotch brand thermal laminating pouches
- Copy paper
- Fun & Function Cozy Canoe
- DK Braille Touch and Feel books
- Lysol spray
- Child size table
- Two child-sized chairs to fit at table
- Powdered tempera paint
- Disinfectant wipes
- Baby wipes
- Black and white card stock
- Slinky toys (preferably red, yellow or metallic)
- Sturdy metal open shelving units
- Glue sticks
- 3 oz. paper cups
- Paper towels



Visually Impaired  
Preschool Services

1906 Goldsmith Lane  
Louisville, KY 40218

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Permit No. 284  
Louisville, KY

Change Service Requested



VISability is made possible through grants from the Linda Neville Foundation and the Fred B. and Opal S. Woosley Foundation.



## Upcoming Events

**Thursday, February 4, 2021, 7 p.m.**

*Parent Meeting, via Zoom. Gordon Homes, Financial Advisor and Planner, will present on special needs estate planning and preparation. If interested, please RSVP to Jenny at [jcastenir@vips.org](mailto:jcastenir@vips.org).*

## Looking Ahead

Mark your calendar for these dates now and watch for additional information as 2021 brings new successes and challenges!

**Monday, May 18, 2021**

*YUM/BB & T Corporate Cup Golf Tournament* will be held in Louisville.

**Sunday, May 23, 2021**

*Walking for Dreams* will be held in Indianapolis, perhaps virtually.

**Thursday, July 15, 2021**

*VIPS Parents are invited to tour the Charles McDowell Center* of the KY Office for the Blind.

**Saturday, July 11, 2021**

*VIPS Pickleball Tournament* will be held in Louisville.

**Saturday, September 26, 2021**

*Mark & Cindy Lynn Stampede for VIPS* will be held in Louisville.

**Saturday, October 24, 2021**

*Huffman Auto Group Peddle through the Parklands* will be held in Louisville.

**Sunday, October 25, 2021**

*VIPS Cupcake Classic* will be held in Lexington.

## Low Vision Clinics Scheduled

In order to for your child to attend a Low Vision Clinic sponsored by the Kentucky School for the Blind, you must go through your child's VIPS teacher. The following dates and locations are scheduled.

Jan. 29 & 30, 2021 – KSB, Louisville

Feb. 15, 2021 – Paducah

Feb. 26, 2021 – Bowling Green

Mar. 12, 2021 – Somerset

Mar. 19, 2021 – Lexington

Apr. 23, 2021 – Prestonsburg

Apr. 24, 2021 – Ashland

May 13, 2021 – VIPS in Louisville

May 14, 2021 – KSB

May 15, 2021 – KSB

Additional KSB LVC information can be accessed at: <https://www.ksb.k12.ky.us/Content/42>.

### VIPS Non-Discrimination Policy

VIPS does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, gender, national origin, age, disability, veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law in policies or practices related to: children and/or families served; employment, contractors, or volunteers; and membership on the VIPS Board of Directors or advisory boards.

VISability is a quarterly publication of Visually Impaired Preschool Services, Jan Moseley, Editor.

### VIPS-Louisville

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Toll free 1-888-636-8477 E-mail: [info@vips.org](mailto:info@vips.org)  
Website: [www.vips.org](http://www.vips.org)

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Kathy Mullen, Director of Education

Alexis Asamoah, Development Coordinator

Christina Frasher, Controller

Carol Dahmke, Office Manager/HR Director

Christina Allen, TV/Preschool Teacher

Bob Boyd, IT

Jenny Castenir, Family Services Coordinator

Kristan Decker, Preschool Classroom Assistant

Ashley Emmons, TV/COMS/Preschool Teacher

Pauletta Feldman, Special Projects

Marchelle Hampton, Preschool Classroom Assistant

Debbie Hardesty, Preschool Classroom Assistant

Pam Holladay, TV/Developmental Interventionist

Kristen Horlander, Kids Town Preschool Director

Paige Maynard, TV/Developmental Interventionist

Staci Maynard, TV/Preschool Teacher

Juanita Miles, Developmental Interventionist/Preschool Teacher

Jan Moseley, Visual Impairment Specialist

Brenda Pharris, Preschool Classroom Assistant

Kristen Schmidt, Guest Relations & Support

Carla Vied, Developmental Interventionist

Tracy Webb, Developmental Interventionist

Maury Weedman, O&M Specialist/Facilities Manager

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Rita DeVore, Administrative Asst./Special Projects Coord.

Mindy Koehne, Teacher of Blind/Low Vision

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Amy Nichols, Teacher of Blind/Low Vision

Ashley Ross, Development Coordinator

David Sterne, Provisional Teacher of Blind/Low Vision/

First Steps Supervisor