

HOMELESS CHILDREN'S EDUCATION FUND
 ONE HOPE SQUARE
 1901 CENTRE AVENUE, SUITE 301
 PITTSBURGH, PA 15219-4378

2024



HEADLINES of HOPE

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER | FIRST QUARTER 2024

AJ'S Communiqué



I have so many cherished memories of 2023. So many students whose smiles brightened my day and whose stories invigorated my purpose. But one student stayed with me and continues to guide me as we kickstart 2024.

I met Jayden at our 2023 Champions for Children Gala. She and her mother were our guests of honor. When Jayden walked up to me, I gasped! She looked just like me when I was her age. Same smile, same hair, same shyness.

As I learned more about Jayden's story, I realized how connected we truly were. Jayden and her mom were staying at a relative's house, where Jayden was expected to stay quiet, confined to her room and out of the way. She had to always be mindful to not make too much noise, go into rooms she wasn't allowed, or eat food that was "off limits."

I didn't realize until I worked at HCEF that I too had experienced a form of homelessness. Suddenly all the stress made sense. Jayden and I weren't allowed to be kids.

We weren't allowed to move, be silly, ask questions and eat snacks in the ways our growing bodies and minds needed. We were stifled in the one place we should've felt free to be ourselves. We were silenced by the very people who we thought were protecting us.

I think about Jayden every time I walk into a meeting or write a speech. I think about all the Jayden's of this region and all the stories I've yet to hear. These thoughts fuel me to keep pushing, keep dreaming big, and keep growing this organization so that one day these stories will no longer be told.

AJ Jefferson
Chief Executive Officer

I hope it's not too late to wish you a Happy 2024! Each new year inspires a moment of reflection. What are my resolutions? What does this year have in store for me? What do I want to achieve and what do I want to leave behind?



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FIRST
QUARTER
2024

STAFF HIGHLIGHTS



DAINNA GRAY
Family Engagement Coordinator

Dainna Gray joins us with 8 years of social work experience. Supporting primarily our older youth and young adults, Dainna inspires them to build a better life through strengths-based support and college and career planning.



SONJIA HOSTON
Administrative Coordinator

Sonjia Hoston has more than 10 years of experience managing and coordinating administrative operations in various organizational structures. She fosters a supportive and positive environment for HCEF staff and students to thrive.



LAMEKA-LESHE DOLBY
Individual and Corporate Giving Specialist

LaMeka-LeShe Dolby joined the HCEF team in January 2024. As a fundraising professional with lived experience of housing instability, she has a unique understanding of our students' needs and can connect our donors to the HCEF mission in meaningful ways.

UPCOMING DATES

MAY 4 - 5, 2024
2024 DICK'S Sporting Goods Pittsburgh Marathon Weekend

JUNE 1, 2024
Champions for Children Gala:
The Silver Jubilee,
Presented by Dollar Bank

JULY 17, 2024
Hope Through Learning
Award Ceremony

www.homelessfund.org

creating hope through learning

K-8 HIGHLIGHT

HCEF celebrated a HISTORIC night on November 1st, 2023, inviting close to 100 of our dearest supporters, friends, staff, and leadership to formally introduce Winnie's Wagon, its mobile classroom on wheels. The first of its kind, Winnie's Wagon marks the beginning of a new era for HCEF, driving HCEF's resources, services, and educators directly to the families of this region who need it most.



our partnering shelters. Neal Donovan, Out-of-School Time Coordinator, recounts the first time our students at Salvation Army saw Winnie's Wagon: "Their faces lit up! They loved sifting through the books, art supplies, and STEM gadgets on board. One student, who has been working very hard on her vowels, made note of the vowel magnets on the wall and helped the other students read them out loud. It was amazing to see how naturally that space ignites an excitement for learning."

About 70% of HCEF families experiencing homelessness are not living in a shelter or a residential facility. Many face transportation barriers and/or reside in crowded spaces, doubling up with other family members, and lack access to quiet spaces for deep focus.

After 19 months of envisioning, planning, fundraising, designing, redesigning, and building, we can finally give this incredible oasis of learning to our students." says AJ Jefferson, CEO, in her opening speech.

Since the launch of 2024 programming, Winnie's Wagon has been a HUGE hit with our students and families at

our partnering shelters. Neal Donovan, Out-of-School Time Coordinator, recounts the first time our students at Salvation Army saw Winnie's Wagon: "Their faces lit up! They loved sifting through the books, art supplies, and STEM gadgets on board. One student, who has been working very hard on her vowels, made note of the vowel magnets on the wall and helped the other students read them out loud. It was amazing to see how naturally that space ignites an excitement for learning."

A special thank you goes to the incredible speakers at the Winnie's Wagon Dedication Celebration on November 1st: Representative Aerion Abney, Saleem Ghubril from The Pittsburgh Promise, and Anne, and Anne Fullenkamp, Senior Director, Center for Creative Experiences at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh.

We look forward to a prosperous year of boundless, accessible learning!



▲ REPRESENTATIVE AERION ABNEY STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN ALL FORMS



TEEN HIGHLIGHT

Since November 2023, HCEF has been hosting monthly Teen Nights where we welcome high schoolers and caregivers from various school districts to connect with our teen outreach staff and spend quality time.



▲ ALL SMILES AT TEEN NIGHT!

"Spending time with peers who get what they're going through, who view them as people, who don't judge them, is vitally important."



"It's a great time to keep a pulse on our students. They can get homework help, receive peer mentorship, and hang out with other students who have similar experiences. It's important we make our students feel seen and safe. Spending time with peers who get what they're going through, who view them as people, who don't judge them, is vitally important." says Dainna Gray, Family Engagement Coordinator.

Our students recently received a visit from the newly appointed Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato at the March Teen Night. Innamorato shared excellent insight into local governance, the role we all play in community advocacy, and answered our students' tough questions about what's in store for Allegheny County's future. We are grateful to the County Executive for her willingness to sit down with our students and invite curiosity surrounding community issues.

HCEF hosted a Teen Night once a month until April 2024. If you're interested in volunteering for the teen outreach program, please email dgray@homelessfund.org.

And thank you to the peer mentors from Duquesne University, The University of Pittsburgh, and Jack & Jill of America – Pittsburgh Chapter who volunteer their time!



▲ THE HCEF TEAM WITH ALLEGHENY COUNTY EXECUTIVE SARA INNAMORATO

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