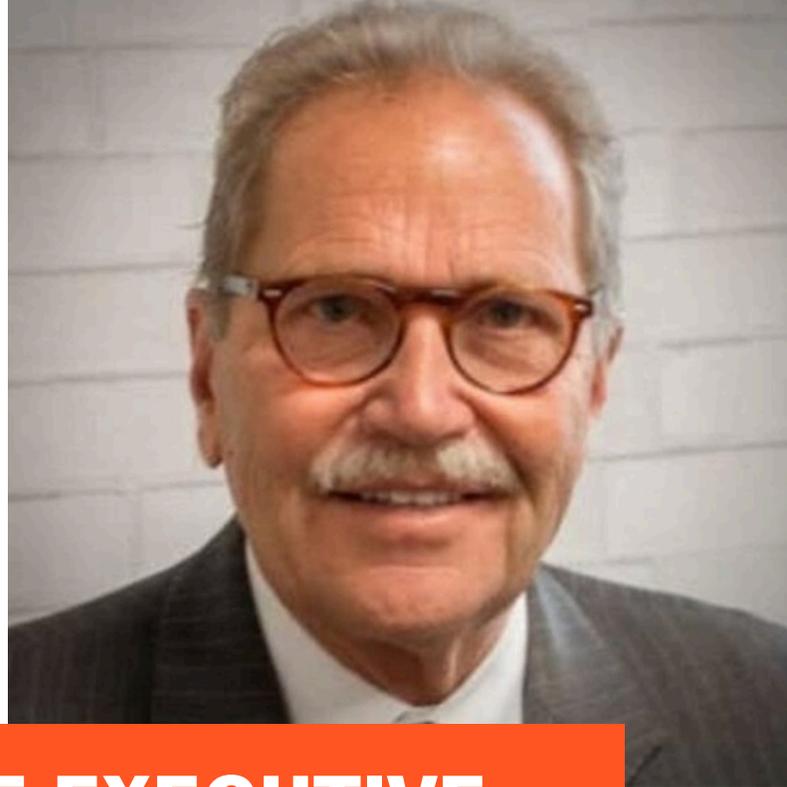


FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN



Eastern Montana Gratitude Report



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND BOARD CHAIR

Dear friends,

As we close out our second full year of service, we reflect with deep pride and gratitude for the children, caregivers, team members, donors, volunteers, and partners who make up our community.

Friends of the Children – Eastern Montana came to Billings rooted in the belief that our children are our future and deserve to be seen, heard, and supported. Today, we are walking alongside 50 incredible children, each matched with a full-time, professional mentor called a Friend, who stays with them year-round, from kindergarten through high school graduation. 12+ years, no matter what.

Each of these children brings their own hopes and dreams and faces significant barriers, but our work is grounded in prevention and powered by partnership. Through long-term, consistent relationships, we work to break cycles of generational poverty, violence, and trauma.

After just two years, we are seeing measurable growth across social, emotional, and educational milestones.

This year, our collaboration with Billings and Lockwood schools has been especially significant. Our Friends now work in 15 schools across Yellowstone County, supporting children where they spend much of their time. When we partner closely with educators, the impact on each child's growth nearly doubles. Together, we are creating a stronger, more connected system of support.

As we stand beside our children and their caregivers, we are continually inspired by their resilience, their progress, and their dreams for the future. ***As one of our children recently said, 'You're my favorite place.' We couldn't agree more. Our community's future is bright.***

With gratitude,

Bill Underriner, Board of Directors President & Nina Hernandez, Executive Director



LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In alignment with the values of Friends of the Children – Eastern Montana, as an organization, we acknowledge that our chapter is located on Apsáalooké (Crow) lands that have been home to Indigenous people since time immemorial. We acknowledge that we will never be able to replace what was lost. In the operation of our chapter, we are committed to respecting the inherent sovereignty and unique cultures of the First Peoples of this land.



92%

of youth go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve our country, or enter the workforce.

93%

of youth remain free from juvenile justice system involvement.

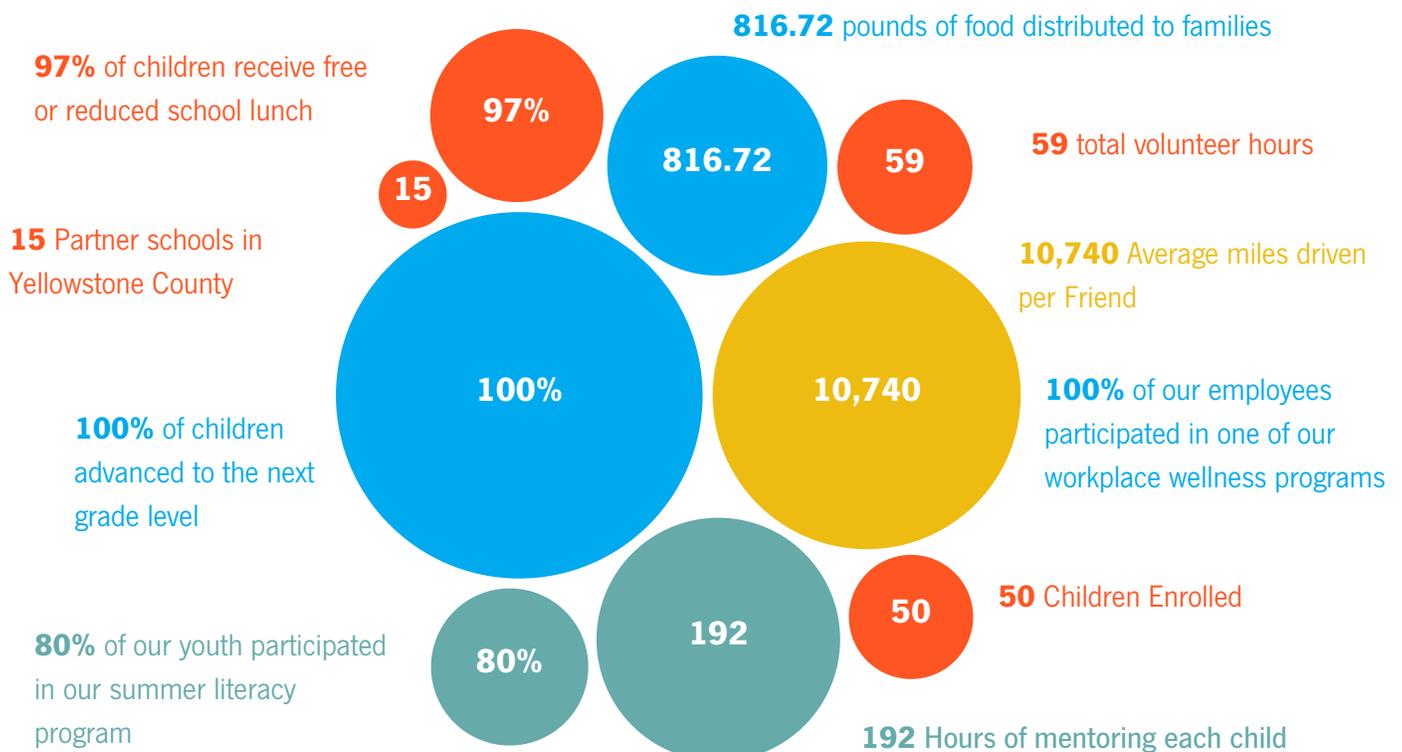
83%

of youth earn a high school diploma or a GED.

98%

of youth wait to parent until after their teen years.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS



HOW IT WORKS



SELECT

We identify children who will benefit most from long-term mentorship.



HIRE & TRAIN

We recruit and develop full-time professional mentors called Friends.



COMMIT

We stay for 12+ years, no matter what.



INDIVIDUALIZE

Our work is relationship-based, intentional, and tailored to each child.



MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

We work with youth in school, at home, and in the community.



MEASURE & IMPROVE

We continuously evaluate and refine our approach.

ABOUT THE WORK OF A PROFESSIONAL MENTOR

Each child gets a dedicated, one-on-one Friend who spends a minimum of 14 to 16 intentional hours per month with them. Friends and youth set goals and design activities that advance those goals and build life skills. Friends create meaningful experiences to explore each child's unique talents and interests.



YOUTH SPOTLIGHT

ZACH & ETHAN

Last year, Zach often ate alone at school. He'd mention to his Friend, Ethan, that the other kids were mean and would pick on him, and he rarely wanted to talk about school. But this year, everything has changed.

Zach has built a friend group he genuinely enjoys being around. He now plays with them at lunch, laughs with them, and meets them at school each day. Some of these friends are fellow program youth, including children mentored by Ethan and others in the chapter. For the first time, Zach talks about school with excitement and even asks when the next group hangout will be.

Zach has shown a strong sense of belonging, taking pride in being part of the program and finding happiness with Ethan, other mentors, and peers. He used to avoid spending time with other kids, but now he regularly asks for group outings and looks forward to being around others.

He is also working hard on improving his social skills, including being outgoing, joining group play, and practicing compromise when disagreements arise. Ethan has watched his confidence grow as Zach continues building healthier friendships.

One memorable moment happened during a school lunch. Ethan arrived to eat with Zach, and Zach immediately invited another program youth, who often struggles socially, to join them. She lit up, sat down, and the kids played together afterward. It was a small but beautiful reminder of how far Zach has come.

Zach is learning what it means to belong and how good it feels to help others feel that way, too. When asked what he's proud of this year, Zach's answer was sincere and straightforward: "I am really good at helping my friends feel happy."

Written by Ethan, Friend, who moved to Billings from Bozeman, MT, with his fiancée.

"I am really good at helping my friends feel happy."



OUR MISSION & VALUES

Impacting generational change by empowering youth who are facing the greatest obstacles through relationships with professional mentors—12+ years, no matter what.



Put Children First



Build Relationships on Love



Commit to Empowerment



Pursue Goals Relentlessly



Unlock All Potential

Our values guide us to achieve our mission. Each value applies not only to our youth, Friends, and program teams, but also to all Friends of the Children employees, volunteers, and partners. We use our values to make informed decisions; to hire, coach, and manage; and most importantly, we use our values to change the way the world treats and views the youth and families we serve.

WELLNESS INVESTMENTS



Mental Health Days

A monthly paid day that supports emotional health and long-term well-being.



Wellness Retreats

Biannual restorative sessions that deepen team connection and build resilience.



My Work BALANCE App

A wellness app providing tools and workshops to help staff manage stress and stay supported.

WHY IT MATTERS

When our employees are healthy, our children benefit. We invest in our team's well-being so they can show up fully, emotionally, mentally, and professionally for the youth and families we serve.

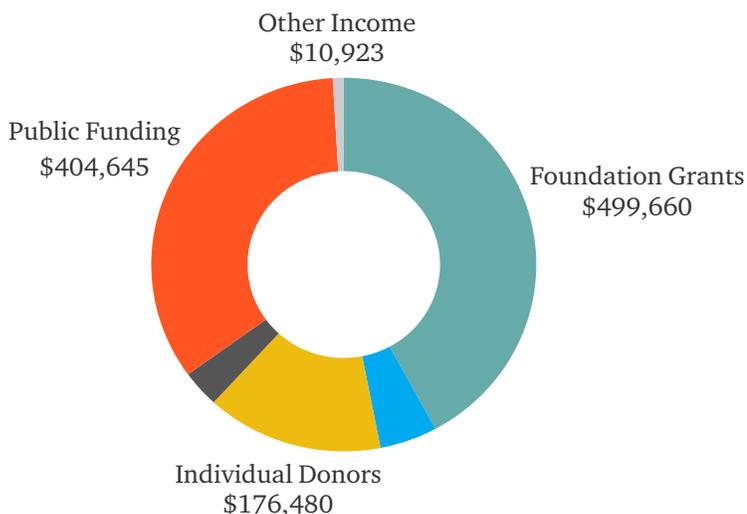


2025 FINANCIAL REVIEW

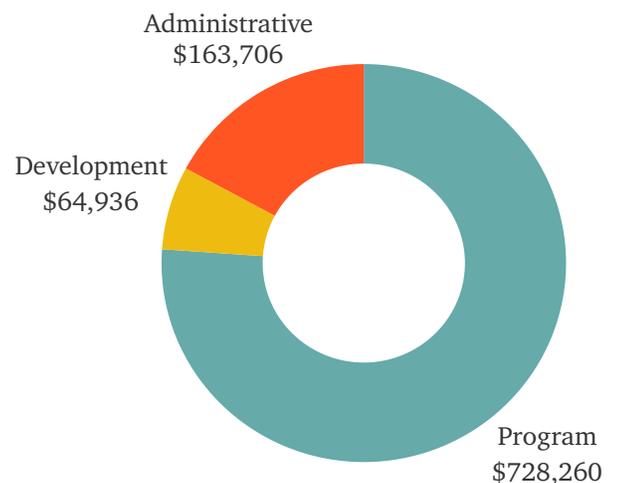
Thanks to generous community support, Friends of the Children – Eastern Montana raised \$1.19 million this year. With over 75% of expenses invested directly in program services, your support ensured that children and families received consistent, high-quality mentoring.

Foundation grants and public funding made up the majority of revenue, helping us sustain our long-term commitment to youth across Yellowstone County. Every dollar you give strengthens our ability to show up — 12+ years, no matter what.

Revenue Total: \$1,187,191



Expenses Total: \$956,902



YOUTH SPOTLIGHT

GABE & TED

Gabe is a determined 7-year-old who has made significant progress in phonics and reading this past summer. By the time he finished first grade, he was testing below grade level in both sight-word knowledge and his ability to sound out CVC words. But during summer school, Gabe showed up every day, worked hard, and steadily participated in all literacy sessions.

His Friend Ted supported this progress during outings by reading with Gabe, drilling flash cards, and having fun at the local arcade. At school, Ted joined Gabe's reading group and Walk to Read sessions, reinforcing the hard work Gabe was putting in each day.

As Gabe approaches the end of the first trimester, he has caught up to his peers and is able to name almost all kindergarten and first-grade sight words. He continues to work hard to sound out grade-level literacy benchmarks, demonstrating self-management and strong growth mindset skills through his consistent participation in daily reading.

Gabe's motivation doesn't stop at the classroom door. When asked what he is most proud of learning this year, Gabe said, "Smart goals... setting goals and choosing what place value to try or what to try next." He also proudly shared his goal of becoming a police officer because "they have really cool gear."

Outside of reading, Gabe loves hanging out with his Friend Blair and playing soccer during their outings. In the clubhouse, he enjoys beating all the staff members at air hockey. When asked what makes him laugh the most, Gabe said watching "funny videos of people getting hurt."

Each step of Gabe's journey is rooted in effort, consistency, and encouragement, and his literacy achievements this year show just how much he's grown with a Friend who shows up for him every day.

Written by Ted, Friend, and retired school Principal from Alaska.



What really pleased me was the moment he got out a book to reference for a writing assignment and was reading the text boxes that held the information he needed.



CAREGIVER SPOTLIGHT

JODEE JOHNSON

For families new to Billings, adjusting to a different school system, culture, and community can be overwhelming. For Jodee and her daughter, Remy, having a Friend walk alongside them has made all the difference.

My name is Jodee Johnson. I have a family of five, soon to be six. We have lived here in Billings since 2018, and I chose to move here so I could make a better future for my kids. I am proud to say they stuck it out with me and have come a long way.

It was difficult to get them comfortable and caught up in school due to a higher academic level and a whole new environment. My youngest was the one who struggled the most. Her name is Remy, and she was chosen to be with Friends of the Children in kindergarten. Now she is in 2nd grade.

Knowing she was chosen for the program brought me so much happiness and relief because I knew they could help me with her struggles. They started by finding her struggles in school and helping with that. They would also go out on fun activities, whether it was at their Clubhouse or on an outing. So far, Remy is more comfortable, confident, and keeping up in school.

They've also helped her accept the new changes in life. Coming from the reservation and small schools is so much different from the environment up here. Their activity outings and meeting new people were a big step for Remy, and it started to get easier and easier for her due to the push from you guys. Friends have had a huge positive impact on her in every way, and I'm thankful for that.



I also appreciate everything they do for us as a family. They've helped with food when needed and emergency gas money once. Remy's Friend helped me find employment. She helped with applications and my resume. The other staff helped with things they really didn't have to do, but they made time for it. Things like birthday invitations, my wedding invitations, printing important paperwork, and helping me fax and email things. They've let me use the phone when I didn't have one, and they've even let me catch Wi-Fi when needed. They even let me do laundry there, just so many things.

I appreciate everything they've done for us.

YEAR IN REVIEW

Q1: October - December 2024



COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Gramma B launches cooking and nutrition lessons.



NEW CONNECTIONS

Friends - Eastern Montana welcomed Ted Wilson to the team.

Q2: January - March 2025



NEW CONNECTIONS

Friends – Eastern Montana welcomed new Program Director Natasha Nesbit to the team.



BILL AND NINA VISIT D.C.

Executive Director Nina Hernandez and Board Chair Bill Underriner traveled to Washington, D.C., advocating for the Friend Act.

Q3: April - June 2025



3RD COHORT ENROLLED

Sixteen new youth enrolled for a total of 50 children served.



GREEK DINNER FUNDRAISER

Karen and A.J. Miller raised \$10,000 for Friends – Eastern Montana through a beautifully hosted Greek-themed dinner.



HANDS OF HOPE AWARD

Recipient of Western Security Bank's "Hands of Hope" award, a \$25,000 contribution and volunteer project.



YELLOWSTONE VALLEY GIVES

Celebrated this annual Community Giving Day with donations generously matched by Timothy and Melinda Brocopp.

Q4: July - September 2025



BIG SKY BIRD & BIRDIE

\$50,000 raised for Friends - Eastern Montana during this annual philanthropic event.



NEW CONNECTIONS

We welcomed new team members Ethan, Adam, and Savannah, who began working with our newly enrolled cohort.



CHINOOK LEADERSHIP CAMP

Friends youth participated in leadership development and equine therapy during this camp.



CLUBHOUSE EXPANSION

A new mini-classroom was added to support our growing literacy initiatives, with 80% of program youth participating this year.



CORE ASSETS



Growth Mindset

I love learning and know that my abilities will improve through dedication and effort.



Belonging

I understand who I am, have a place where I feel accepted and know that my contributions count.



Hope

When I have tough times, I believe it can get better.



Problem Solving

I know how to weigh the pros and cons and make a decision.



Perseverance & Grit

I work hard through challenges and finish what I start.



Self Management

I know how to manage my feelings and take care of myself in a healthy way.



Self Determination

I believe in myself and am able to set goals and achieve them.



Find Your Spark

I use creativity to explore my passions.



Positive Relationship Building

I get along well with others and am able to find people to support me.

FRIEND REFLECTION

ADAM & LEVI

It is funny to look back at the road and think about all the moments I was inadvertently training to specifically help Levi without even realizing it. How lessons in trust and education would play such a huge role.

Levi was a hard boy to build trust with, as his mother had worked tirelessly against a system that was stacked against her. When I came into the picture, she needed to make sure I was truly there to be on Levi's team.

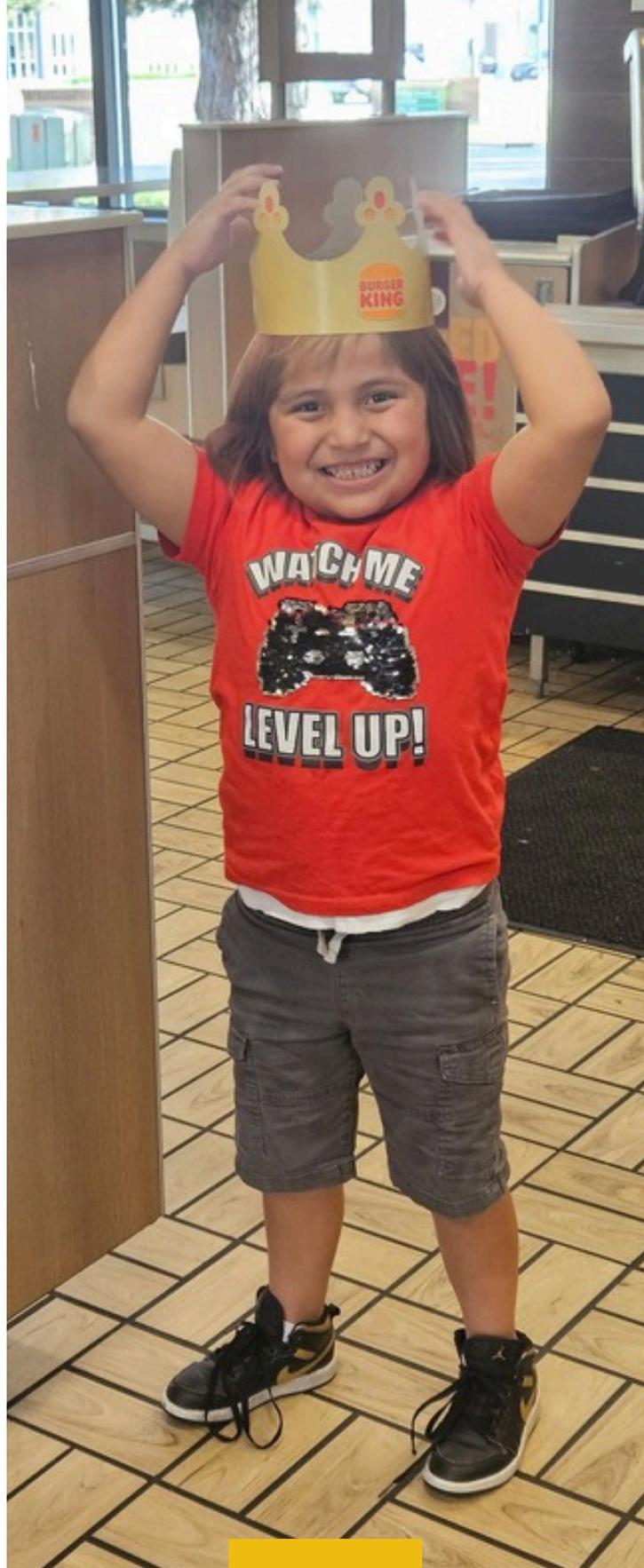
He was a short kid with long, magnificent hair and more energy than a fission reactor. Most of all, he had an imagination that spanned across universes. The first time I brought Levi to the clubhouse, his mother insisted on coming too; when she saw us playing together with the toy ships and make-believe pirates, she realized that we had been telling the truth when we promised that I was there as a friend.

This trust that we began to build was important, as we, as an organization, were making a push to promote reading literacy with all our youth. I had worked as a reading tutor for years prior to joining our team, and I had given all my friends reading diagnostic exams that I had created myself.

I was shocked at first to find that Levi—going into first grade—didn't have basic letter recognition. Levi became my regular pupil as we practiced the short vowels day after day.

Over that time, I was there for a loss in the family, home challenges, and mediations between her and Levi's school. It wasn't until I provided a ride to a doctor's appointment for Levi that his mother was ready to have a conversation about regression and how trauma affects learning.

Levi has been making steady progress with his letters. We read a book together every time we hang out. I am grateful for the opportunity to advocate for his literacy, as I believe everyone deserves to know how to read, and I am grateful to his mother, who found the trust to make that opportunity possible.



Written by Adam, Friend (Mentor)

Adam moved from Portland to Billings to be a Friend.

His love for literacy and play is admirable.

YOUTH SPOTLIGHT

KATIE AND NATASHA



Second-grader Katie is making meaningful gains in reading and growing her confidence along the way, thanks to the steady support of her Friend, Natasha. What began as summer reading practice has become a powerful reminder of what's possible when a child has someone who shows up, no matter what.

Katie's newest milestone is a measurable improvement in her reading achievement. Over the summer, she worked consistently with her Friend, Natasha, and carried that effort into the school year. As a result, her reading scores have increased, and so has her confidence.

This growth matters. Katie is learning that persistence pays off, and she now approaches reading with more courage and willingness to try challenging texts. Stronger reading skills have also helped her feel more comfortable participating in class and speaking up in group settings.

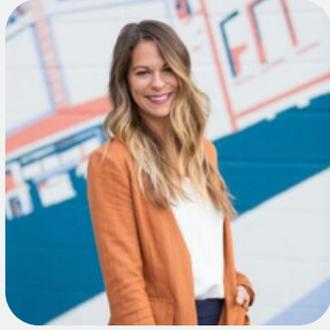
Katie is currently working on two personal development goals: practicing good manners in social situations and managing her screen time more independently. With Natasha's steady support and encouragement, she's learning to make thoughtful choices, build healthy habits, and reflect on how her actions impact those around her.

One memorable moment came during a literacy outing at a local smoothie shop. Eager to earn stickers for her reading chart, Katie chose to read aloud right there in the busy shop. Another customer gave her two thumbs up, and Katie beamed with pride. It was a small but powerful reminder of how far she's come.

When asked what she's proud of this year, Katie says earning stickers on her chart. Her favorite activity with Natasha is swimming, and she's especially excited about learning how to spell. One day, she dreams of being a volleyball player and a cop. Katie describes herself perfectly: ***"I am kind and like to have fun."***

Katie's journey is filled with joy, determination, and the confidence that comes from having a Friend who shows up — no matter what.

Written by Natasha, Program Director, who works with two youth. Natasha's background in education enriches her leadership for our literacy program.



"I jumped at the opportunity to serve on the Friends board and give due to the organization's direct impact on our community. Friends supports children and families facing massive barriers to healthy and safe livelihoods. By letting positive professional adult mentors into their lives, these children tap into their brilliance and find opportunities to share their gifts with our community. This only makes us, as a collective, better and our future more hopeful."

-Karen Miller, Board Member and Donor

DONORS

\$100,000+

Montana Opioid Abatement Trust

\$25,000+

Americas Foundation Inc.
Bill & Mary Underriner
Deborah Anspach & John Hanson
Frank Haughton Jr. & Shelley Haughton
J.R. & Amy Reger Charitable Fund
John and Patricia Burg Charitable Fund
Montana Healthcare Foundation
Steele-Reese Foundation
The Charles M. Bair Family Trust
Tykeson Family Foundation
Western Security Bank
William Randolph Hearst Foundation

\$10,000+

Buffalo Circle
Gianforte Foundation
Jim & Chris Scott
Montana Community Foundation
Montana Mental Health Trust
Phillips 66 Billings Refinery
Timothy & Melinda Brocopp
United Way of Yellowstone County

\$5,000+

Billings Community Foundation
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana
First Interstate Bank
Margaret V. Ping Foundation

\$5,000+

MasterLube
SCHEELS
Sibanye-Stillwater

\$1,000+

Charitable Chicks Foundation
Gene & Karen Jarussi
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1/1 Allies Monthly Giving Club

Denelle Chartier
Kristi Nolan
Dawn Wilson

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Mayflower Congregational Church
Myra Deavel
Phillips 66 Billings Refinery
Project Linus
Stefanie Kujaczynski
Stephanie Shannon
Theodore Wilson
Wentana LLC

OUR PARTNERS



Oasis Waterpark, a project of the Better Billings Foundation and Harvest Church, is the area's most extensive outdoor aquatic recreation facility offering wave surfing and swim lessons.



Billings Public Library provides our community with essential library services including access to research resources, computer technology, and educational opportunities.



The YMCA strengthens community through programs focused on youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility for all ages and backgrounds.



Family Service collaboratively assists individuals and families facing hunger, homelessness, and poverty through food assistance, rental support, clothing, and other essential resources.



Ka-Ko Jo's Arcade is a family-owned arcade providing youth with access to classic and contemporary game experiences, creating opportunities for fun, connection, and play.



As Montana's only statewide food bank and partner food bank of Feeding America, MFBN is committed to ending hunger through food distribution and nutrition advocacy.



Be Great Yellowstone supports local youth through mentorship, enrichment opportunities, and safe, engaging spaces that help them build confidence and thrive.



Riverstone Health provides comprehensive healthcare, public health services, and behavioral health support to ensure all community members have access to quality care.



The RMTLC supports Tribal communities in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho through leadership, research, advocacy, and family and social services.



St. John's United C.A.R.E.S. program provides wraparound family services and support across the whole arc of life, championing quality care for seniors, families, and children in the region.



Wise Wonders Science and Discovery Museum provides a playful learning environment for children and families to engage with STEM education through fun and interactive exhibits.



In just two years, Friends of the Children has become a vital partner in helping our students thrive. Their long-term commitment to children aligns perfectly with our shared goal of ensuring every child in our community has the support they need to succeed.



Dr. Erwin Garcia
Superintendent
Billings Public Schools

PARTNERSHIP HIGHLIGHT

We are proud to partner with schools across three districts throughout Billings and Lockwood, working alongside educators to help each child thrive in the classroom and beyond.

LOCKWOOD SCHOOLS



ELDER GROVE SCHOOLS



BILLINGS SCHOOLS



Through collaboration with our school partners, we identify children through a six-week intensive risk and protective factor assessment process centered around observation and interaction with children in the classroom. Once a child is enrolled, our Friends (professional mentors) communicate regularly with teachers to discuss student needs and to help facilitate school-family communication. Friends, particularly those serving youth in grades K-5, also spend time in the classroom providing 1:1 support to the student.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Bill Underriner, Board Chair
President/CEO, Underriner Motors

Tim Brocopp
Retired

Katie Edwards, Board Treasurer
President, Western Security Bank

Leslie Left Hand
Cultural Advisor

Karla Mendez, Board Secretary
Attorney, Moulton Bellingham

Amy Reger
Community Member

Karen Baumgart-Miller
Partner, Kaleidoscope Group

Tra Williams
Director of Nursing and Medical Clinic Operations
Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch

Dave Worstell
President and Publisher, Billings Gazette



Pictured: Board Members visiting our clubhouse to make friendship bracelets with our youth.

OUR STRATEGIC COMMITMENTS



1
We partner closely with youth-serving organizations to strengthen the continuum of care for children.



2
We ensure every dollar supports the joy, wonder, and growth of childhood.



3
We enroll the children facing the greatest barriers and least support, in collaboration with our partners.



4
We value the wholeness of our people and support continuous personal and professional growth.



5
We model accountability and empathy so every child receives what they need and everyone is supported.



“This year we look forward to a focus on chapter sustainability, team health, and most importantly, delivering excellent professional mentoring services for our community’s children.”



FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN Eastern Montana

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