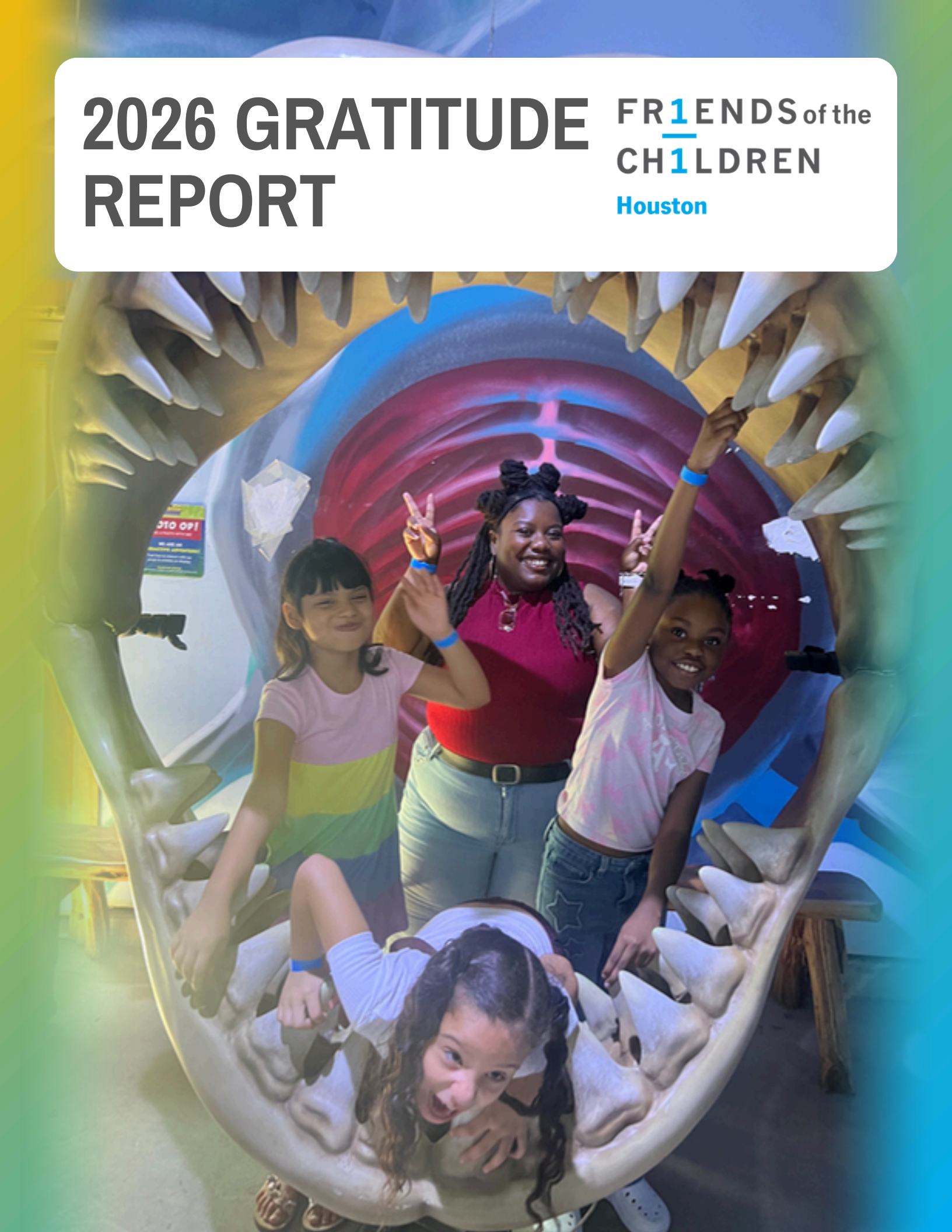
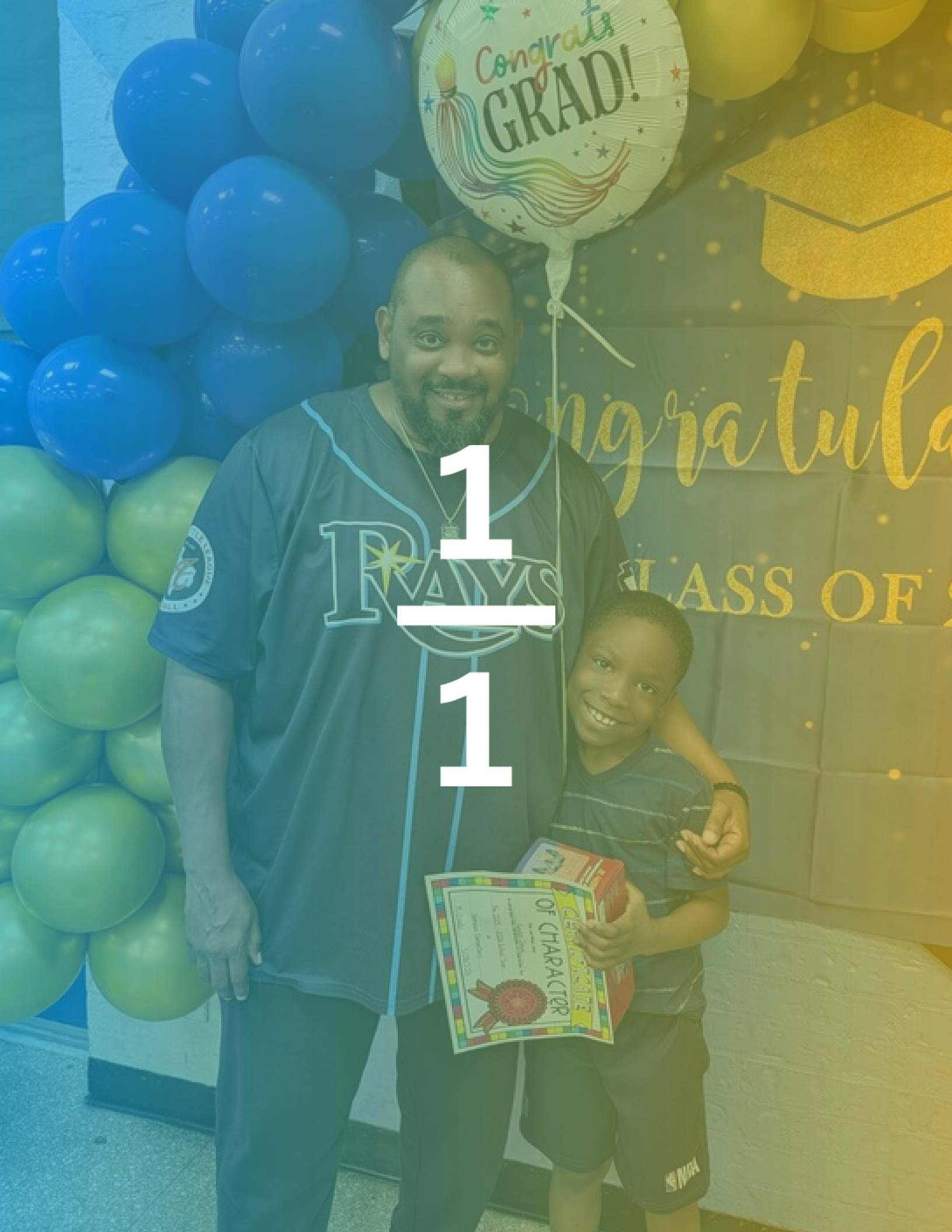
# 2026 GRATITUDE REPORT

FRIENDS of the CHILDREN
Houston




Congrats
GRAD!
RAYS
OF CHARACTER

# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



## Dear Friends and Supporters,

At Friends of the Children – Houston, we believe that every child deserves someone who believes in them, stands beside them, and helps them see the possibilities for their future. This year, because of your generosity and commitment, we continued turning that belief into lasting impact for children and families across Houston.

2026 was a year of growing our reach, strengthening our partnerships, and creating new opportunities for the children and families we serve. We expanded our team of professional mentors, known as Friends, increasing our reach by nearly 20%. Together, our Friends provided more than 10,000 hours of individualized support, encouragement, and meaningful experiences for youth and their families. These are more than hours of service.

***They represent relationships built on trust, moments of discovery, academic achievements, and the consistent presence of a caring adult who shows up, year after year.***

One of our most exciting accomplishments was the launch of Literacy Uplifts, our literacy initiative at BakerRipley's East Aldine Campus, made possible with support from the East Aldine Management District. Through focused literacy enrichment and individualized encouragement, 100% of participating youth demonstrated improvement in their reading skills. We also introduced Read with Friends, connecting caring volunteers with our youth through shared reading experiences.

With generous support from the Texas Bar Foundation, we also launched Caregiver Connections, an initiative designed to equip parents and caregivers with the knowledge, resources, and confidence to navigate complex family challenges. Through workshops focused on parental rights and responsibilities, understanding Child Protective Services processes, family reunification, and access to legal and community resources, we helped families become stronger advocates for themselves and their children.

But the true measure of our impact is found in the lives of the children and families we walk alongside. For Joseph, who once struggled with behavioral and academic challenges at school, having a Friend who consistently believed in him has made a meaningful difference. Through encouragement, guidance, and a relationship built on trust, Joseph began making significant strides in both his behavior and academic performance. His hard work and growth were recognized by his school when he was named Student of the Month, celebrating his improved behavior and academic achievements. Joseph's story reminds us that when a child has someone who believes in their potential and shows up consistently, remarkable things can happen.

As we look toward the year ahead, we are excited about the opportunity to bring our proven model of long-term, professional mentoring to more Houston communities, including Kashmere Gardens, Greater Fifth Ward, South Houston, and Gulfton. Our vision is to ensure that more children facing life's greatest obstacles have access to a Friend who will walk alongside them for 12 years or more, from kindergarten through high school graduation.

Thank you for believing in our children, investing in their futures, and being part of the Friends of the Children – Houston family. Together, we are not simply changing individual lives. We are helping build a stronger Houston, one child and one family at a time.

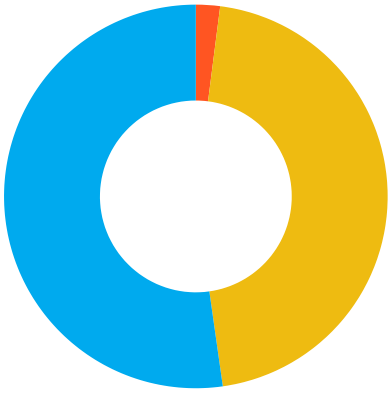
With gratitude,

Tre Maxie

**Tre Maxie**
Executive Director
Friends of the Children – Houston

# FY2026 FINANCIALS

## REVENUE TOTAL: $1,433,575



**52%**
Government grants

**46%**
Grants & Individuals

**2%**
Corporate

## EXPENSE TOTAL: $1,591,452

**74%** PROGRAM



**14%** Development

**12%** Admin

# PARTNERS



# MISSION

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

## Our Method

We select children who face multiple systemic obstacles. We amplify their voices as they write their own stories of hope and resilience.

## Our Model

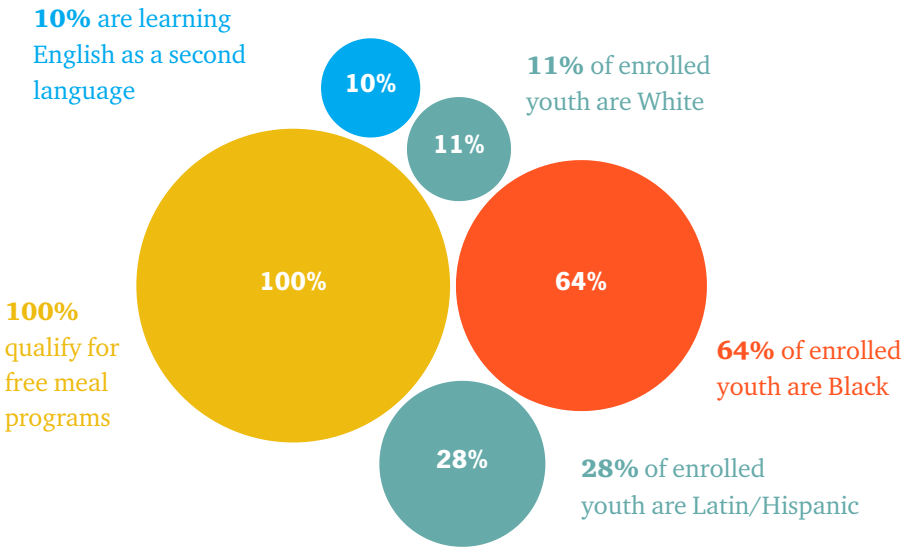
We commit to each child for the long-term. 12+ years, no matter what. Each child is paired with a paid professional mentor called a Friend.

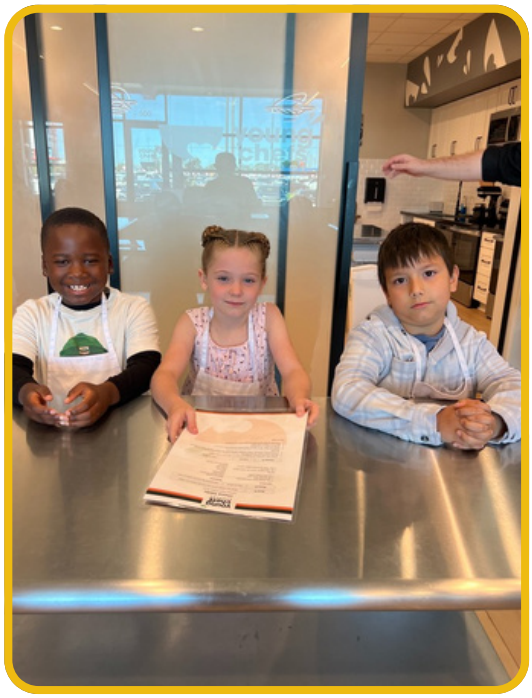
**Simone Biles helps bring Friends of the Children to her hometown of Houston, TX!**

**Scan here to watch a brief message from Simone!**



# YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS



## $1 = $7

**$1 invested, more than $7 in estimated lifetime social benefits**

### The Economic Case for Long-Term Mentoring

A national-model social return on investment study estimated more than $7 in lifetime social benefits for every $1 invested in the Friends of the Children model. These benefits are associated with improved educational attainment, delayed parenting, and reduced juvenile justice involvement. Together, these outcomes can strengthen economic opportunity and reduce future public costs.

*The estimate is based on a 2010 social return on investment analysis associated with the Friends of the Children model and is not a Houston-specific financial return or audited local savings.*

# LOCAL OUTCOMES

**10,000+** hours of mentoring both in and out of school

**250** youth and families, including 63 youth receiving 1:1 mentoring in and out of school

**100%** of youth who participated in our Literacy Uplifts made improvements in literacy

**96%** of youth made progress in school success, social emotional skills, and progress towards their annual goals

**Our youth are enrolled at 41 schools across 9 school districts and 4 charter schools.**

# Our Long-Term Outcomes

**92%** *of youth go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve our country, or enter the workforce.*

**90%** *of youth earn a high school diploma or a GED.*

**96%** *of youth remain free from juvenile justice system involvement.*

**95%** *of youth wait to parent until after their teen years.*

# 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**

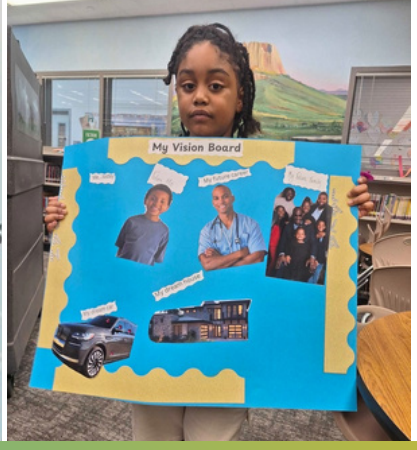
*I use creativity to explore my passions.*



**Positive Relationship Building**

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






# TWO GENERATIONS. ONE SHARED FUTURE.

**50%** **increase in families requesting basic needs assistance** compared with the previous year, including support with rent, utilities, and other household essentials.

**94%** **of caregivers reported that Friends of the Children – Houston helped them learn new things about their children,** strengthening understanding, communication, and family relationships.

Every family has strengths. Every caregiver brings wisdom, determination, and a deep commitment to their children's future. Every child has talents, curiosity, and dreams that extend far beyond their current circumstances.

*When caregivers thrive, children have a stronger foundation for success.*

That is why our Two-Generation (2Gen) Model extends beyond the youth paired with a paid, professional mentor, known as a Friend, to embrace the dreams, strengths, and aspirations of the entire family.

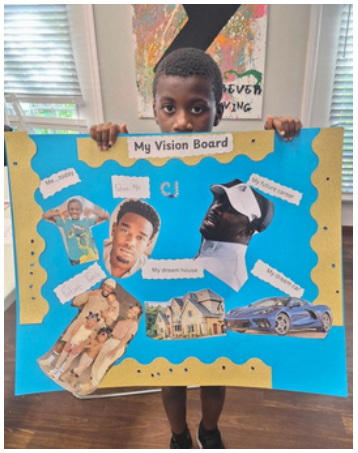
Through consistent engagement and trusted relationships, our Family Engagement Team works alongside caregivers to understand not only the challenges they face, but also their hopes for themselves and their children. Together, we develop personalized plans with immediate, short-term, and long-term goals that create pathways toward greater stability, opportunity, and family well-being.

Working alongside caregivers, our team helped five families experiencing homelessness secure permanent housing, creating a foundation for greater stability.

Our relationships make this work possible. On average, 90% of caregivers engaged with program staff at least twice each month, creating opportunities to celebrate progress, identify emerging needs, and work together toward family goals.

## Dreaming Beyond Today's Circumstances

What does your future look like when you are encouraged to dream without limits?




For youth at Friends – Houston, that question came to life through **vision boards** created alongside their professional mentors. Friend Steffon encouraged his youth to explore their aspirations, collecting pictures, words, and ideas reflecting future careers, relationships, personal strengths, and the people they hope to become.

Another youth, Raven, worked with her Friend, Zeyanna, to find inspiration, select materials, and create a vision board she was proud to display in her bedroom. For her, it became a daily reminder of what she hopes to achieve.

Because where a child starts should never determine how far they can go.

## Strong Families. Brighter Futures.

We don't define families by the obstacles they face. We invest in the strengths they bring and the futures they are building.

*Names have been changed for youth privacy.*

# HOW IT WORKS

## 1 We select children who could most benefit from a relationship with a long-term professional mentor.

Like all children, the youth we serve have unique talents, varied interests and big dreams. Unlike other programs, we exclusively focus on children who are also facing systemic obstacles and who have lived through a lot of trauma. Our youth have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) by the time they reach kindergarten. We partner with community organizations, schools and foster care systems to help us identify children ages 4 to 6 who could most benefit from a relationship with a Friend.

## 2 We hire and train full-time paid professional mentors called Friends.

Our Friends' full-time job is to empower and support youth and their caregivers. Moving mentorship out of the volunteer realm is key to getting the quality, consistency and commitment our children and their families deserve in the relationship.

*Each Friend works with eight youth, spending four hours every week with each child in and out of school.*

## 3 We commit for the long term.

We commit to every child for the long term, from kindergarten through graduation. 12+ years, no matter what.

## 4 Our work is relationship-based, individualized and intentional.

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 and literacy skills. Friends of the Children works with Caregivers to set goals and support their parenting and personal development skills.

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

We take a whole-child approach because we understand that lived experiences, home environment, systems, community and culture shape how a child develops and learns. Friends serve as a link between the different areas of a child's life to create stability and consistency – spending time in school as an advocate and support; time in their neighborhood to build connection and community; and time at home, becoming a trusted resource to the youth and their caregivers.

## 6 We evaluate, measure and improve.

We are equal parts head and heart. Data from Friends, youth and caregivers help us continuously improve and do our best day-to-day work. Ongoing third-party research and evaluation drive program improvement and innovation. We measure our ongoing effectiveness using qualitative and quantitative data to review and adjust on a monthly, quarterly, and annual basis.



# OPPORTUNITY SHOULD NOT DEPEND ON A ZIP CODE.

Houston is a city of extraordinary possibility. Our neighborhoods are home to talented young people, devoted families, vibrant cultures, strong schools, community organizations, and generations of residents committed to making their communities stronger.

Yet opportunity is not equally accessible across our region.

## Understanding Houston, a Greater Houston Community Foundation initiative,

estimates that **1.3 million households** across the three-county Houston region experience financial hardship—living in poverty or above the federal poverty line but unable to afford basic necessities.

## United Way of Greater Houston's ALICE research

similarly shows that families can be working and still struggle to cover housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and other essentials. In its four-county service area, **42% of households** were below the ALICE Threshold in 2023, including 14% in poverty and 28% ALICE households. **ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.**

*At Friends of the Children – Houston, we believe every neighborhood is a place of possibility—and every child deserves the relationships and opportunities to realize their full potential.*

Rice University's Kinder Institute has documented the long-term concentration of poverty and growing economic separation among Houston neighborhoods. United Way's ALICE data reveal striking differences within Harris County: in 2023, **78% of households** in ZIP code 77060 (Greenspoint) lived below the ALICE Threshold, compared with **14% in ZIP code 77059**.

## Turning Data into Action

Friends – Houston uses research from **Understanding Houston, United Way's ALICE initiative, Rice University's Kinder Institute,** and local education and community partners to **prioritize where we grow**. Our established work in Aldine/Greenspoint and our planned expansion toward Kashmere Gardens, Greater Fifth Ward, South Houston/Sunnyside, and Gulfton reflect an intentional commitment to Harris County communities experiencing concentrated economic hardship and unequal access to opportunity. We pair these indicators with neighborhood knowledge and the strengths identified by residents, schools, and local organizations.

# 1.3 MILLION

Households experiencing financial hardship in the Houston three-county region

***Understanding Houston, 2025***

# 78%

Share of households below the ALICE Threshold in Greenspoint ZIP code 77060 in 2023

***United For ALICE, 2025 Texas report***

# 12+ YEARS

Consistent professional mentoring, from kindergarten through high school graduation.

## The Ripple Effect of One Lasting Relationship

***One child.***
***One professional Friend.***
***12+ years.***

↓

Stronger educational pathways

↓

Greater family stability

↓

More economic opportunity

↓

Reduced public costs

↓

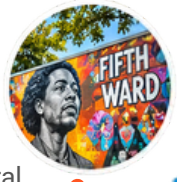
**A stronger Houston for generations to come.**

# STRONG COMMUNITIES. STRONGER CONNECTIONS. GREATER POSSIBILITIES.

Our **current and future service priorities** are intentionally aligned with Harris County neighborhoods facing longstanding economic pressures. That geographic focus is informed by poverty and ALICE data, but our approach begins with community assets: families' aspirations, educators' commitment, cultural identity, trusted institutions, and local leadership. We invest alongside these strengths rather than defining communities by their challenges.

## Greater Fifth Ward

• Growth priority




**Honoring Legacy and Opportunity**

Known for its rich cultural history, civic leadership, and enduring community identity, Fifth Ward offers opportunities to collaborate with neighborhood champions to help more children thrive.




## Gulfton

• Growth priority

**Celebrating Diversity and Possibility**

Gulfton's cultural and linguistic diversity creates opportunities to develop trusted partnerships that connect children and caregivers with mentoring, enrichment, and broader community resources.




## Aldine / Greenspoint

• Established service area




**Building on Established Relationships**

Our foundation in North Houston is strengthened by schools, families, and partners such as BakerRipley and the East Aldine Management District. These relationships help connect mentoring with literacy, enrichment, and family support.

## Kashmere Gardens

• Growth priority




**Investing in the Next Generation**

A community with deep roots, proud traditions, and committed educators, Kashmere Gardens is **the focus of our next planned expansion**. Our approach builds on existing school relationships and the strengths of families and community institutions.

## South Houston / Sunnyside

• Growth priority



**Supporting Community Aspirations**

We see opportunities to build on family networks, neighborhood institutions, and local leadership to strengthen educational pathways and expand access to sustained mentoring.



Our investment begins with a child, but its potential extends far beyond one life. Every young person who graduates, pursues a career, builds a stable future, and contributes their talents to our community strengthens Houston.

***We are not simply expanding a mentoring program. We are investing in Houston's future.***

# BE A FRIEND, NOT A BULLY



Scan to watch the PSA our youth made.

This October, our Friend Lawren led our youth through two days of learning built around National Anti-Bullying Month. We started with the basics. What counts as bullying, the different forms it takes, and what to do when you run into it or see it happening to someone else. Our youth talked through how bullying affects kids their age, and what it looks like to show up for a classmate instead of looking away.

Then they got in front of a camera. Our youth acted out scenarios for a PSA, each one pairing a problem with a solution they worked out themselves. They brought real talent to it. They also read a set of “I will” affirmations on camera, the kind of promises that are easy to say and harder to keep.

Those affirmations came from an Anti-Bullying Contract, and every young person signed one. It’s a commitment to kindness, to bravery, and to being the person a classmate can count on.

Our youth know what it’s like to have someone in their corner. Each of them has a Friend who shows up for them, year after year. **This was a chance to practice being that person for someone else.**




# MADE FROM SCRATCH

Six of our youth from Tomball spent a Saturday at Young Chefs Academy, a cooking school close to home. Our Friends Zeyanna, Sam, and Lawren came along, and together they made chocolate lava cake from scratch.

Chris McKelvey, who owns the academy's Tomball location, walked them through every step. Our youth measured, mixed, and learned how to handle food safely and move around a kitchen with care. They followed his lead, worked as a team, and supported each other along the way. When the cakes were done, they plated them with care and got to enjoy what they made.

Cooking is a skill our youth will carry with them for a long time. The day also gave them time with other kids from their neighborhood and a chance to get to know a local business owner.

Our Friends spend years learning what lights each young person up. Sometimes it's a book or a ball field. Sometimes it's a kitchen. For a few of our youth, that Saturday might be the start of a spark.

**We're grateful to Chris and the team at Young Chefs Academy for opening their kitchen to our youth.**

# SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND FAMILY WELLNESS

At Friends of the Children – Houston, we believe every child deserves to feel safe, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. We also recognize that a child's well-being is deeply connected to the emotional health and stability of their family. That is why we are strengthening our capacity to provide trauma-informed, relationship-centered support while expanding access to mental health services for the children and caregivers we serve.

## Investing in Our Team to Better Support Families

**100%** **of Friends Houston staff have completed Mental Health First Aid training.**

Mental Health First Aid is an evidence-based program that teaches participants how to recognize signs of mental health and substance use challenges, offer initial support without judgment, and help connect people to appropriate professional services. This training strengthens our team's ability to respond with empathy and confidence when children, caregivers, or colleagues need support.





Our staff have also received trauma-informed training, deepening their understanding of how adversity, chronic stress, and trauma can influence learning, behavior, emotional regulation, and relationships. This approach helps our professional mentors look beyond immediate challenges, recognize family strengths, and build consistent, trusting relationships.

Additional professional development includes the Texas Behavior Support Initiative (TBSI), which emphasizes positive behavior supports, prevention, de-escalation, and appropriate responses to challenging behavior. Together, these trainings help staff create supportive environments that promote safety, dignity, and connection.

As a partner site for the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, Friends – Houston also supports the preparation of future social work professionals and strengthens the connection between academic learning and community-based service.



## Expanding Mental Health Access Through Community Partnerships

Our new partnerships with **Clearhope Counseling & Wellness** and **Northwest Assistance Ministries** (NAM) strengthen our ability to connect youth and caregivers with counseling, mental health treatment, family support, and other community resources. These relationships expand our network of trusted providers and help families navigate barriers to care, from identifying appropriate services to securing referrals and ongoing support.

By combining the consistency of our long-term professional mentoring model with the specialized expertise of community partners, we are building a more coordinated network of care for the whole family. These partnerships also create opportunities for shared learning, training, and stronger connections to community resources.

## Family Impact: A Pathway to Healing and Hope

For one Friends of the Children – Houston family, the trusted relationship with their professional mentor opened the door to much-needed mental health support. Through consistent engagement and conversations with both the youth and his mother, our team identified an opportunity to connect the family with professional care.

**Both the young boy and his mother have now begun receiving mental health treatment, and the care is already making a positive difference in their lives.** They continue to benefit from the encouragement, advocacy, and trusted relationships provided through Friends – Houston as they move forward in their healing journey.

Their experience illustrates the power of our two-generation approach: supporting a child's emotional well-being means also supporting the caregivers who nurture, guide, and advocate for them. When both generations can access care, families are better positioned to build stability, pursue their goals, and thrive together.



## Our Commitment to Whole-Family Wellness

Our commitment extends beyond responding to immediate challenges. Through staff development, partnerships with mental health providers, and our unique 12+ year commitment to each child, Friends Houston is helping families build on their strengths, access support when they need it, and pursue their goals with confidence.

*Because when children and caregivers are supported together, the possibilities for their futures grow.*







# READERS IN THE MAKING

## Our year in literacy, from summer sessions to library cards

It started with Words & Wonders, our summer literacy and arts program. Thanks to support from the **East Aldine Management District** and other donors, we piloted Literacy Uplifts at **BakerRipley's East Aldine Campus** in July. Each week, 12 youth met with one of two literacy coaches to work through assessments and a structured reading curriculum, with activities they enjoyed mixed in. Families also received literacy kits in their home language to support reading at home.

Our Friends kept that momentum going through our **Literacy Uplifts Passport Program**, where youth earn stamps for effort and progress during literacy activities together.

We celebrated at our first Literacy Festival. Youth who completed Literacy Uplifts took home trophies of their own. Friends read aloud, kids painted t-shirts between word games, and the Barbara Bush Branch Library signed families up for library cards so the reading can keep going at home.

Reading took our youth out into the community, too. At the East Aldine District's Literacy Carnival, themed around *Around the World in 80 Days*, they read their way from stop to stop with their Friend.

From summer sessions to library cards of their own, our youth spent this year making reading part of everyday life.

***Their Friends will keep reading with them for years to come.***

# READY FOR DAY ONE

## How our youth started the school year

Every school year starts with a mix of excitement and a few first-day jitters. This fall, our youth had their Friends and caregivers there on day one to cheer them on.

That first day looks a little different each year. As our cohorts grow up, our youth are spread across more grades, with new schools, new teachers, and new classmates to get to know. Each step up brings something new to celebrate.

Getting ready started before the first bell. With help from Steve and **Tomball ISD**, Lily and Coco picked out their own supplies, and Steve nearly sent Lily home with everything in the building. Through our partners at **Buckner**, our Friend Sam took Shaun and his brother to pick up supplies and clothes, with some painting and dancing along the way. Thanks to partners like these, our youth started with backpacks full of what they need.

Steffon's youth kicked things off with new journals. They wrote about how they felt about school and friendships, then each set a goal for the months ahead. Several hoped to make a new friend.

When spirit day came around, Raven had an idea for a pair of painted jeans. She texted her Friend Zeyanna to ask for help. It wasn't a scheduled visit, but Zeyanna went anyway. Raven led the design, gave Zeyanna the outlining, and the two of them finished the jeans side by side.

Grades and backpacks will change from year to year. Our commitment won't.

***Every one of our youth has a Friend for 12+ years, no matter what.***








*Names have been changed for youth privacy.*

# CAREGIVER CONNECTIONS

Thanks to a generous grant from the **Texas Bar Foundation**, Friends of the Children – Houston expanded its commitment to strengthening families through Caregiver Connections, a series of educational workshops and family engagement experiences designed to empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge, confidence, and resources needed to advocate for their children and build more stable futures.

**53+**
Caregivers Engaged

**158**
Family Members Reached

**100%**
Increased Legal Knowledge

**94%**
Greater Confidence

## Four Sessions. One Goal: Stronger Families.

### 1 Know Your Rights: Navigating CPS and the Legal System

Led by Attorney Tolulope O. Kuteyi, this session helped caregivers better understand parental rights and responsibilities, CPS investigations, court proceedings, family reunification plans, and effective communication with child welfare professionals. Texas Legal Services Center provided practical resources, including access to legal clinics, neighborhood Legal Kiosks, and legal assistance hotlines.

### 2 Building Stability: Education, Housing, and Economic Opportunity

Caregivers learned how to advocate for their children's educational needs, navigate special education services, identify affordable housing resources, understand renters' rights, and pursue employment opportunities. Community partners included Region 4, Partners Resource Network, and Harris County Housing Authority.

### 3 Breathe & Balance: Trauma-Informed Parenting and Mental Wellness

This session created space for caregivers to explore the connection between stress, emotional wellness, and parenting. Participants learned strategies to recognize the emotions behind children's behaviors, manage their own responses, and strengthen family communication.

### 4 Growing Together: Creative Youth Engagement and Family Connections

In partnership with Mr. Leo Puppetry, caregivers and children participated in creative, hands-on experiences that encouraged communication, strengthened family bonds, and celebrated the importance of spending meaningful time together. Families also received activity kits to continue learning and connecting at home.

*"What I realized is that if I stop and ask him how he is feeling, we are usually both fearful, but he is expressing it through frustration." – Youth Caregiver*

## A Mother's Journey: From Uncertainty to Empowerment




For one Houston mother, Caregiver Connections offered more than information. Through Caregiver Connections workshops and individualized family support, she began developing a stronger understanding of her parental rights, learning practical parenting strategies, and discovering resources that could help her family before challenges became crises.

***Her story reminds us that when caregivers gain confidence, children gain stronger advocates, and families gain new possibilities.***

# BEYOND THE GAME

At Friends of the Children – Houston, we believe every child deserves opportunities to explore new interests, discover their potential, and experience the excitement of something extraordinary. For many of the youth and families we serve, attending a professional sporting event or learning from a professional athlete once seemed out of reach.

Through the generosity of community partners and our commitment to creating meaningful experiences, those dreams are becoming reality.



## A Field of Dreams: An Astros Experience to Remember

Thanks to the generosity of the **Houston Astros Foundation**, Friends – Houston was selected to receive game tickets, turning those dreams into an unforgettable family experience.

The joy of watching the game together, celebrating big plays, and creating memories extended far beyond the final inning.




***For our families, it was a reminder that they belong in the stands, in the excitement, and in the experiences that make Houston special.***

## Football with Friends: From the Stands to the Field!

Through our Football with Friends experience, more than 30 families participated in a Houston UFL football game at Shell Energy Stadium, enjoying an unforgettable day of sports, connection, and community.

The highlight of the day came when our youth and families were invited onto the field to greet players as they ran through the tunnel. The excitement, cheers, and energy created a once-in-a-lifetime experience that brought our families closer to the action than they ever imagined.

## Learning from the Pros: Jabari Smith Jr. Youth Basketball Camp

Through the **Jabari Smith Jr. Youth Basketball Camp**, hosted by the Houston Rockets forward, Friends – Houston youth participated in basketball drills, skill-building activities, and interactive coaching sessions designed to strengthen their fundamentals and love for the game.

Beyond basketball, the camp reinforced valuable life lessons about teamwork, discipline, perseverance, and confidence. Learning in an environment shaped by professional athletes and coaches gave our youth an opportunity to see how dedication and hard work can turn dreams into reality.

## More Than a Game. A World of Possibilities.

Whether cheering from the stands, welcoming players onto the field, or learning from professional athletes, these experiences represent something far greater than sports. They create moments of joy, strengthen relationships, build confidence, and expose our youth to new possibilities.

***Because at Friends of the Children – Houston, we believe a child's circumstances should never determine the size of their dreams.***

**Scan the QR code to watch our youth and families welcome the players onto the field!**

# Mahjong with Friends




On September 30, we filled the ballroom at Houston Country Club for our second annual Mahjong with Friends. Over lunch and mimosas, every table settled in for an afternoon of play, with Lacy Price of Mahjaholic keeping the games moving.

Between rounds, guests got to know our work. They learned how each of our youth is paired with a professional mentor, called a Friend, who stays with them for 12+ years, no matter what. Stories from our youth around the room showed what that looks like in real life.

**Together, through tables, sponsorships, and a silent auction of experiences from Houston businesses, our community raised more than $81,000 for Houston youth.**

# Thank you to everyone who played, hosted, gave, and planned. We'll see you at the table next year.



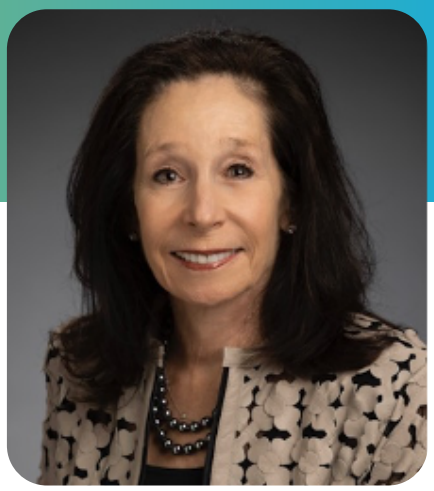

## PLANNING COMMITTEE

Nancy Atlas · Katherine Chambers · Annie Eifler · Gayatri Garg
Debbie Karakowsky · Suzanne McCarthy · Judy Schuler

## TABLE CAPTAINS

Neha Agrawal
Nancy Atlas
Barbara Bends
Victoria Benoit
Jessica Bertuccio
Cecile Cao
Maris Castro
Katherine Chambers
Barbie Clariday
Jennifer Costa
Liz Craig
Savannah Craig
Gail Culberson
Sonia Desai
Jennifer Dillee
Amy Doherty
Michole Easterly
Marc Eichenbaum
Annie Eifler
Sydney Eifler
Allison Fisher
Leigh Fitzgerald
Neha Goyal
Judith Haley
Lauren Hamner
Margaux Harbin
Jessica Haryanto
Sarah Hlavinka
Jennifer Jeffery
Brittany Jewett
Debbie Karakowsky
Shelly Katz
Meg Malone
Amy Melton
Nancy Pollard
Joan Pratka
Judy Schuler
Martha Ann Snyder
Kim Ta
Krystal Crane Thompson
Jessica Trammell
Allie Veselka
Meg Walker
Jessica Wood

# LETTER FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



## Dear Friends and Supporters,

When I reflect on the progress Friends of the Children – Houston has made this year, I am reminded that meaningful change is never accomplished alone.

***It takes people who believe in a mission, invest in its promise, and commit themselves to creating brighter futures for children and families.***

Thanks to your generosity and partnership, 2026 has been a year of meaningful progress and growing momentum.

As Board Chair, I have had the privilege of witnessing the extraordinary dedication of our staff, the commitment of our Board of Directors, and the generosity of a community that believes every child deserves the opportunity to thrive. Together, we are strengthening our organization and building a foundation for lasting impact.

One of this year's important milestones was the launch of our Advisory Council, bringing together community leaders and advocates who are helping us open new doors, strengthen relationships, and introduce more Houstonians to our mission. Their enthusiasm, talents, and connections are already making a meaningful difference.

We also celebrated the continued growth of Mahjong with Friends, our annual signature fundraising event. This year's event more than doubled the previous year's results, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of our sponsors, volunteers, and guests. Building on that success, we are excited to introduce Poker and Dinner with Friends in February 2027, creating another opportunity to engage new supporters and strengthen our community of champions.

As we enter the third and final year of our current strategic growth plan, our Board is also looking ahead.

We are beginning the development of a new strategic plan to guide our growth through 2030, building on our accomplishments while establishing a thoughtful, sustainable path to reach more children and families in Houston communities where the need is greatest.

Our commitment to strong governance, responsible stewardship, and long-term impact remains central to this work.

None of this would be possible without the remarkable people who make up the Friends of the Children – Houston community. To our donors and philanthropic partners, thank you for investing in our mission. To our dedicated staff and professional mentors, thank you for your unwavering commitment to our children and families. To my fellow Board members, Advisory Council members, and volunteers, thank you for sharing your leadership, time, talents, and generosity.

It is an honor to serve as Board Chair of an organization rooted in the powerful belief that relationships change lives. As we look toward the future, I am confident that together we will continue expanding opportunities, strengthening families, and helping more children reach their full potential.

Thank you for believing in our mission and for being part of the Friends of the Children – Houston family.

With gratitude,

Nancy F. Atlas

**Nancy F. Atlas**
Chair, Board of Directors
Friends of the Children – Houston

# 2026 DONORS LIST

We want to extend our deepest gratitude to all of our generous donors. Your support has been instrumental in enabling Friends of the Children – Houston to serve the youth and families who need it most. Thanks to you, we are able to provide critical mentorship, resources, and programs that make a lasting impact on the lives of those we serve. Your commitment to our mission is helping to build a brighter future for our community, and we are incredibly thankful for your partnership.

## *Thank you for believing in our work and for helping us make a difference!*

Alicia Raymond
Allie Veselka
Allison Chavez
Allison Fisher
Amanda Hingle
American Endowment Foundation
American Online Giving Foundation, Inc.
Amy Doherty
Amy Melton
Amy Thompson
Angela Graves-Harrington
Annie Eifler
Barbara Bends
Barbara Charles
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Barbie Clariday
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Sarah Hlavinka
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Shelly Katz
Sonia Desai
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Suzanne Sklar McCarthy
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Victoria Benoit
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***Deepening Impact. Expanding Opportunity. Strengthening Community.***

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**Divya Reddy**
Senior Director & Senior Corporate Counsel, Houston Methodist

**Katina Baldwin**
Senior Director of Development, Coalition for the Homeless of Houston/Harris County

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**Tamara Washington**
Executive Consultant, Boom Media and Image Consulting LLC

**Bruce Derrick**
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**Steven Gutierrez, Ed.D.**
Chief Operating Officer, Tomball Independent School District

**Adam J. Newar**
Managing Partner, Eden Capital








# LED BY OUR FRIENDS

## What our youth learned this year, one activity at a time

Our Friends plan activities that build skills our youth will carry for years. Here are a few from this year.

### Money Smarts

Our Friend Gabriel turned story time into a lesson on earning and spending. After reading *Those Shoes* together, our youth answered questions about the book to earn G Bucks, a play currency he created. Then they went shopping, weighing wants against needs and picking up the basics of budgeting.

### Naming Big Feelings

Before making slime with our Friend Lawren, our youth stretched out a Slinky Dog to show how they were feeling that day. Putting words to emotions helps kids handle stress and build relationships as they grow. Each of them took their slime home as a calm-down tool for whenever they need a moment.

**Scan to watch the videos.**

Money Smarts

In Their Own Words

### In Their Own Words

Our youth ran the set for an affirmation music video led by our Friend Steffon. Each of them took on a real role, from Director to Wardrobe to Camera Crew, while their Friends worked as assistants. They practiced leading, solved problems as a team, and saw a shared idea through to the end. Every line in the video is one they chose.

*I am creative.*
*I am loved.*
*I am confident.*

### Learning in Two Languages

Corey and Josiah asked their Friend if they could learn to speak English and Spanish fluently one day. He told them their curiosity would get them there, and that the journey started right then. The lessons have kept going ever since.

*Names have been changed for youth privacy.*




Friends of the Children – Houston team from left to right, Martha, Kristyna, Gabriel, Zeyanna, Sam, Barbara, Tre, Tiffanie, Lourdes, Steffon, Lawren, Neftali, and Dayana




Friends and Family Engagement Team

***Our paid, professional mentors walk alongside children for 12+ years, from kindergarten through high school graduation, while our Family Engagement Team helps caregivers build the stability and support systems their families need.***


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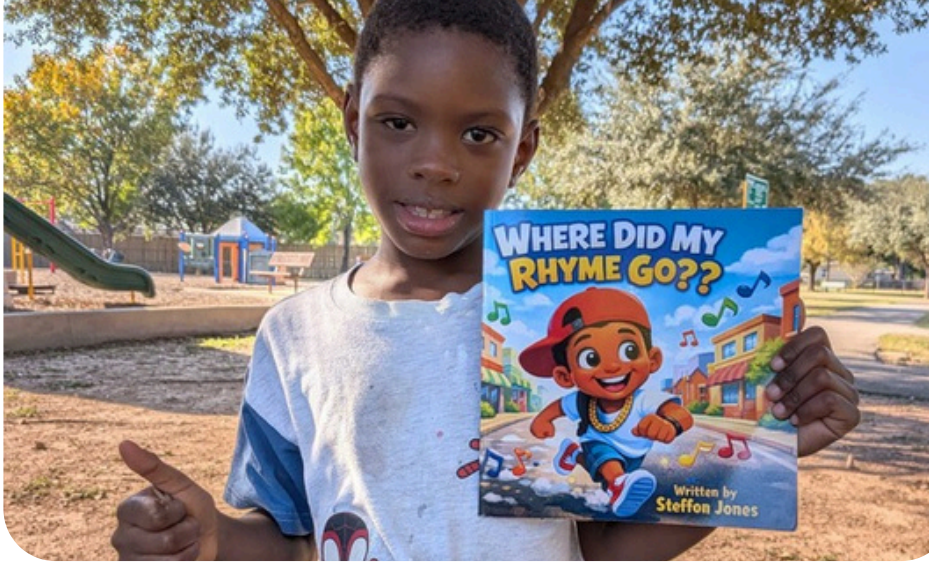
1






# FRIENDS of the CHILDREN

## Houston

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