

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



KidsFirst
making children's voices heard

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OUR MISSION: **KIDS FIRST GIVES CHILDREN A VOICE IN DIVORCE, CUSTODY, AND OTHER CONFLICTS BY PROVIDING FOCUSED LEGAL REPRESENTATION AND SERVICES FOR KIDS.**



FROM THE SWINGSET: DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Childhood can be a time of wonder, discovery, and play. But many children—especially those whose homes are full of conflict—are thrust into adult situations and have to grow up too fast.

Kids First's mission is centered on building safety and stability for children caught in conflict. With your help, Kids First builds peace for kids in their homes and at their schools.

Your commitment to Kids First made 2023 another year of growth and hope. You created environments **where kids can simply be kids**. I'm grateful every day to work alongside this team of 19 committed and talented individuals.

We envision a world where children are protected from harm at home, at school, and in the legal system. As a grassroots nonprofit, we know we couldn't do this without you. Thank you for being so generous.



JENNY ZAHRT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Jenny teaches a child how to do a backflip off the swing



NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

In 2023, Kids First served more children than ever before. Your support added three staff members to grow our restorative justice project at school, child representation in divorcing families, and organizational capacity.



MEGAN SELBERG
Peace Facilitator

★ **At Work:** After nine years as an elementary teacher Megan brings classroom expertise to resolving conflicts at Hoover elementary.

★ **At Play:** An avid sports fan, Megan cheers for the Hawkeyes and the Vikings.



RACHEL LEIGH
Staff Attorney & Mediator

★ **At Work:** Rachel represents children in family law cases and is passionate about settling matters outside of court in mediation.

★ **At Play:** Rachel fosters dogs and spends time with her close-knit family.



CAVAN HALLMAN
Development Associate

★ **At Work:** Cavan writes grants and content to inform funders and the public about Kids First's community impact.

★ **At Play:** Passionate about the arts, Cavan writes and directs for the stage.



HIGH CLIMBERS: 14 UNDER 14 AWARDS

Our name reflects one of our core beliefs that children come first. When we value all children, we create a better future for everyone. Kids First created the 14 Under 14 awards to showcase the incredible contributions of youth. In its second year, we received 50 nominations, all from teachers in the Cedar Rapids Community School District. **Students honored are empathetic, kind, inclusive, and positive leaders—using their gifts in extraordinary ways.**

Thank you to Kirkwood Community College for being the 14 Under 14 presenting sponsor, Bruce Thayer for capturing the honorees and their personalities on film, and the dedicated teachers who nominated students for the award.



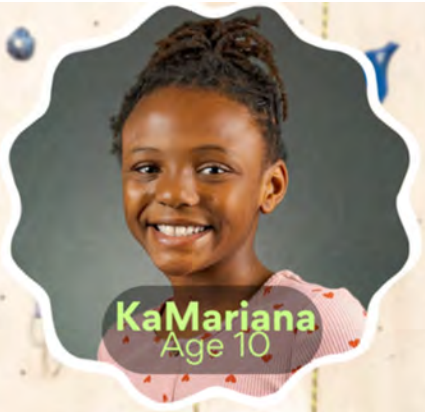
Scan this QR code to read more about
the 14 under 14 honorees.



Ella
Age 13



Jack
Age 11



KaMariana
Age 10



Mira
Age 11



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Age 10



Dakota
Age 10



Nayca
Age 13



Brett
Age 11



Kalli
Age 12



Blaise
Age 11



Gianna
Age 12



Martha
Age 9



Bridgith
Age 13



Lilah
Age 11

LETTING KIDS BE KIDS

Like many Kids First clients, 10-year-old "Zoey" was having to grow up fast. As a judge noted, Zoey "is not experiencing a normal childhood." Zoey saw her dad threaten her mom with a gun; she couldn't have both parents at her basketball games; and she had to go to the police station for every custody exchange.

With her Kids First lawyer's help, Zoey learned to self-advocate to her parents. Zoey's attorney advocated for her at trial and now Zoey has a new schedule and a plan to keep her safe.

Zoey wrote to her lawyer, **"You helped me a lot with my family. I am finally doing good in school."** Zoey added: "When you picked me up from school, my friends thought you were a movie star and I said, "Ya, and she is my attorney and if you mess with me, I will sew [sue] you. My friends stopped bullying me when I said that."

188

Children represented

89%

Settled without a trial

*Nationally, only 15% of high-conflict cases settle outside of court

97%

Decrees reflected children's wishes for safety

BUILDING BRIDGES ONE PLAYGROUND AT A TIME

Our playground isn't just a place for fun and games; it's a symbol of harmony. When separated parents face challenges, our Kids First mediator, Laura Martin, LISW, provides a safe and supportive space for parents to work through their differences in **joint parenting sessions**. By helping parents reach agreements outside of court, Laura builds bridges between separated families. Whether it's establishing consistency in parenting or offering ways to improve communication, these sessions create a healthier and happier environment for everyone involved—especially for children who deserve peace in both homes.

Joint Parenting Sessions



371

Parents coached



159

Mediation sessions



MAKING THE PLAYGROUND A SAFE SPACE

Even in the happiest of places, children can face challenges. When families go through divorce, kids may feel lost and alone. **Kids First divorce workshops** provide a safe and supportive space for children to understand what to expect from the divorce process. Through engaging activities, role plays, and open discussions, Kids First workshop leaders help children build skills and cope with family changes. Just as a playground provides a safe place to explore and discover, Kids First workshops offer children a safe haven to navigate the challenges of divorce and emerge stronger.

Divorce Workshops



394

Kids served



90%

Felt less alone



YOUTH PEACE PROJECT

ALTERNATIVES TO TUG-OF-WAR



Turning tug-of-war tensions into teamwork. Kids First's peace facilitators help students find common ground—pulling kids together, not apart.

Your support made 2023 the best year yet for our restorative justice program:

The Youth Peace Project team grew to eight peace facilitators stationed in 10 schools and served 2,369 students.

Kids First created and led middle school advisory groups to infuse youth input into program design.

Kids First peace facilitators also created a matrix for Cedar Rapids schools with restorative ways to respond to student misbehavior, including links to age-appropriate resources for kids. The matrix allows students to stay in school and learn from their mistakes. It also helps ensure that disciplinary responses are more equitable in the education system.



2,509

Student-student restorative circles (mediation)



503

Student-teacher restorative circles (mediation)



94%

Gained social-emotional skills



92%

Circles ended with agreement



PLAYGROUND PEACE

A group of elementary girls at Grant Wood Elementary had drama in their friend group. Through a series of peace circles with Kids First's Negebe Sheronick, the girls restored their friendship and gained skills to handle conflict in the future. As the girls practiced peacemaking, they started take turns at recess "playing Ms. Negebe," as one child listened to and mediated the others' problems, both real and imagined.

**Thank you for
letting kids
count on you—
and letting
them know
they count.**

**You have given children
a voice in conflict.
In their own words:**

**“I really liked that
you would always
listen to what I had
to say and would
come up with
suggestions on ways
to solve any problem
that I came to you with.”**
Child client, age 16

**“I was mad because of what
she said but we worked it
out and I understand
her more.”**
6th grade student after
a restorative circle

**“I learned you can tell your
friends [about the divorce].”**
Divorce workshop participant

LEAPING FORWARD

3,227

**Children &
families served**

\$1,104,705

2023 Budget

\$1,093,503

2023 Income

\$1,081,673

2023 Expenses

\$41.84

Hourly cost to Kids First
to provide services
(including overhead)

2023 PLAYGROUND PARTNERS: CORPORATE & COMMUNITY DONORS



Champions \$20,000+

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*Funds of the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation

Acknowledging your support is critical to us, so we triple checked our list. If you spot an error, please call Sarah at 319-365-5437 so we can correct the digital edition.

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The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers **doesn't stick their neck** out for just any organization. Award presented by attorney Jake Koller.

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Metro North Rotary **delivers a big check to support Kids First's restorative justice work with kids in school.** Thank you for helping our peace facilitators create a safer school environment for everyone.

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Nate Dunn's golfing foursome from F&M Bank generously donated their winnings from the CBJ's Corridor Executive Open. **You're the best, by par!**

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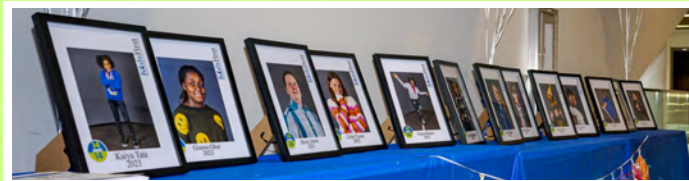


Joe & Geri Schmitt were the winning bidders at Happy Hour for the ultimate Hawaiian luau dinner prepared by Ken & Cathy Terukina. Thank you to Tim Oberbroeckling & Richard Cooley for the historic poolside setting at The Ausadie.

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Beloved volunteer, Bruce Thayer, photographs 14 Under 14 honorees before and during the ceremony. Honorees received a framed portrait as part of their award. Jack poses here with his favorite stuffed animal.



Color us grateful! Thank you to David Maier & Matt McGrane for generously bolstering our lending library to help separated parents gain tools to coparent. And hats off to Sharon Wagner for stocking our client room with fresh art supplies. Games and crafts help kids open up while confiding in their Kids First attorney.

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Donald Johnson, a 107-year-old supporter, keeps spreading joy as he donates the stuffed animals he wins at Bingo. Child clients love choosing a furry friend to take home.

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 In memory of Paula van Deest
 by Sue & Kirk Plagge
 by Tom van Deest



Students at Johnson STEAM Academy play basketball with Jordan Hardy, Kids First's University of Iowa law school intern. It might look like we're just H-O-R-S-E-ing around, but building rapport with kids is key to helping them resolve conflicts.

2023

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 Cedar Rapids Country Club
 Cedar Rapids Kernels
 Cobble Hill
 DoubleTree by Hilton Cedar Rapids
 F&M Bank
 The Gazette
 Graduate Iowa City
 Great Harvest Bread Company
 Hotworx Cedar Rapids
 House of Colour
 Hyatt Regency Coralville
 Informatics
 Iowa Brewing Company
 Iowa Children's Museum
 Ivy Salon & Spa
 Joy Boutique
 Kate Ahn Design
 Katie Milden Family Dentistry
 Kirkwood Community College
 Kinkead Poultry
 Konomi Grill
 Lucky Pawz
 Massage Therapy Professionals
 McGrath Family of Dealerships
 Mercy Medical Center
 NEAT Method Cedar Rapids
 OPN Architects
 Pure Salon and Spa
 RAYGUN
 Revival Theatre Company
 Revive Aesthetics
 Riverside Casino & Golf Resort

Rodina
 Ruze Spa
 Scheels
 SCOUT of Marion
 Table for One
 Theatre Cedar Rapids
 Theisen's Home, Farm, Auto
 Tierra y Vino
 Toulou Yoga
 Trader Joe's
 University of Iowa Athletics
 Weyerworks
 Wig & Pen Pizza Pub
 WineStyles
 Your Tanning Bar
 Zeppelins

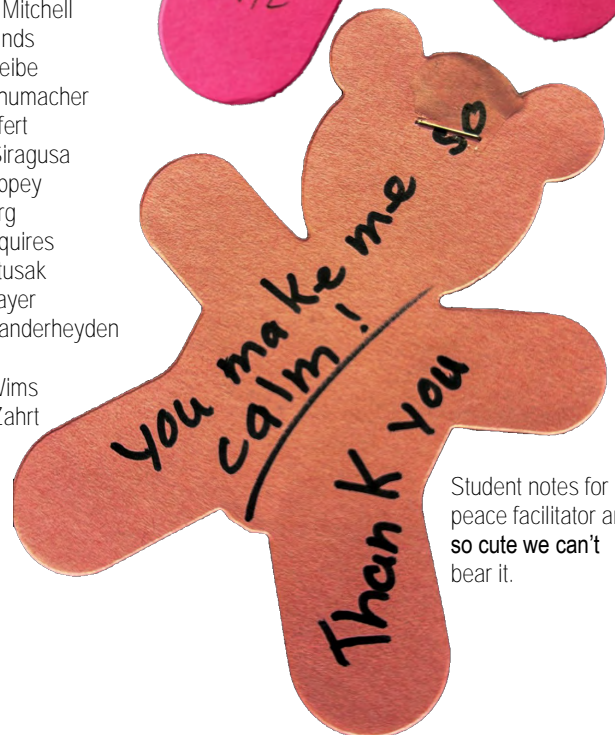
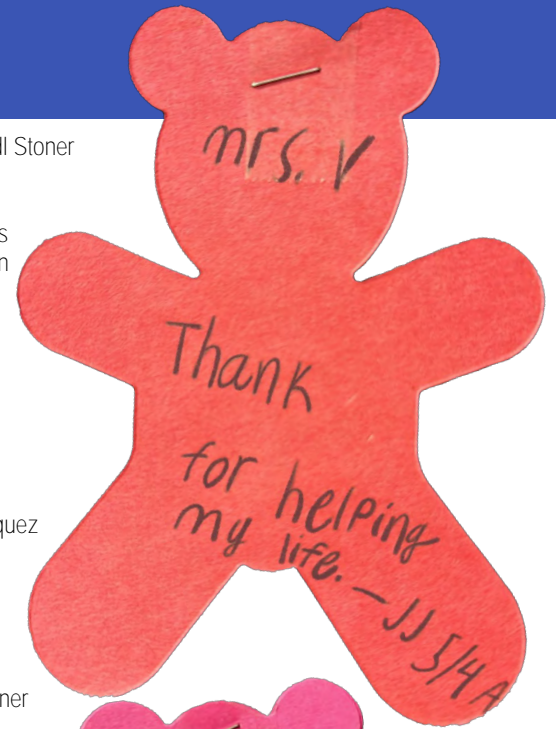
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Student notes for a peace facilitator are so cute we can't bear it.



A child's drawing of enjoying their time with each parent after the divorce.

Kids First

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Thank you to Mercy Medical Center for printing this annual report!