

# YOU ARE MAGIC

A close-up photograph of a child's face, slightly out of focus, with their hands held up in front of them. The hands are holding a large amount of colorful star-shaped confetti. The child's face is visible in the background, looking directly at the camera. The overall tone is warm and celebratory.

2019  
ANNUAL  
REPORT

**KidsFirst**  
making children's voices heard

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# MISSION

Kids First gives children a voice in divorce, custody, and other conflicts by providing focused legal representation and services for kids. Kids First's overall goals are to create stability for children, lessen the effect of conflict on kids, connect families to support systems and needed resources, and make children's voices heard.



## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

You make magic – not a rabbit pulled out of a hat or any other trick. This kind of magic is real and it's filled with wonder and awe and even delight.

It's the feeling you get when two parents who stopped talking to each other years ago soften and realize their kids are better off if they communicate. It's a child's sense of awe when they learn their feelings and voice matter to their teacher or classmate. It's our team's delight every time we hear raised angry voices morph into genuine laughter during a mediation session. It's magic.

Thank you for making this magic happen. Thank you for your generosity that lets this small, grassroots organization dream big. Thank you for believing in what's possible so we can achieve great things together.

  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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## THE REAL MAGICIAN: YOU, OUR DONOR!

Nate and Ruthie Dunn know how important Kids First is to children. Nate says, "Kids First is personal to Ruthie and me. We both are products of divorced families. Divorce is a life-changer and whatever little bit we can do to help out we are all for." At Christmastime, the F&M Bank team made a surprise and impactful gift to Kids First in CEO Nate's honor. Ruthie serves as a Kids First workshop volunteer and occasionally pops in the office with treats just because she's thinking of us!



Long-time Kids First supporter and local attorney, Kelly Baier, remembers why he made his first gift to Kids First back in 2006: "Jenny was on the Board of Governors of the Linn County Bar Association when I was President. She was bright, hard-working and insightful. When she started Kids First, I saw it as a great idea and knew Jenny would make it work." And every year since then, Kelly and his wife, Rachelle, have shown their loyalty to Kids First with generous gifts.

Some donors have our back – literally! When Jenny Schulz injured her back, she was referred by her doctor to Kepros Physical Therapy. She received more than relief from pain: Ted Kepros and his wife, Sara, became generous donors to Kids First. Ted and Sara agree, "We are so happy to be able to assist great local organizations that take great care of kids!" Kids First is grateful for the many generous owners of small businesses who support our small business.





## MAGIC IN ACTION

CHILD REPRESENTATION

**KIDS IN 99% OF CASES  
GAVE US PERMISSION  
TO SHARE THEIR VIEWS  
WITH THEIR PARENTS**

“I just wanted to thank you for all of your help and the kindness that you showed to the children. They felt very comfortable with you in a short period of time. You are very good at what you do.”

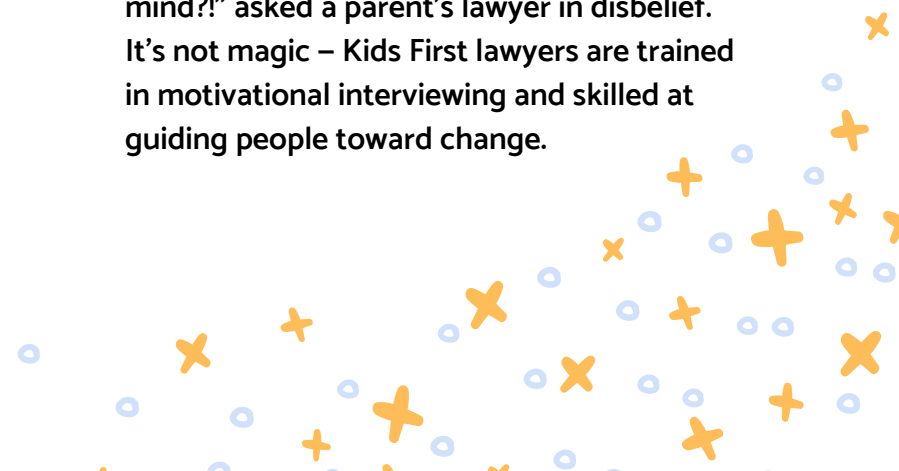
- Parent of Clients

Kelli just wanted her parents to stop fighting. Her Kids First lawyer met with Kelli's parents together and asked each to make a list of things they were willing to change. As Kelli's dad read his heartfelt list to his ex-wife, she began to cry. They resolved the case and attended counseling.

**85% OF KIDS REPORTED  
DECREASED CONFLICT  
BETWEEN PARENTS**

**91% OF PARENTS WERE  
COACHED IN MANAGING  
CONFLICT**

“How did you get them to change their mind?!” asked a parent's lawyer in disbelief. It's not magic – Kids First lawyers are trained in motivational interviewing and skilled at guiding people toward change.



“Without Kids First, our divorce would have been more difficult for my kids. It was VERY GOOD for my kids to hear how decisions were made in divorce cases from someone other than their parents. She kept me informed and worked as a liaison between my kids and me as well as between their dad and me.”

- Mother of Clients

## 87% OF KIDS REPORTED STRONGER BONDS WITH PARENTS

After Brooke and her mom got in an argument, her mom stopped giving her rides to school. When Brooke forgot her mom's birthday, her mom cut her phone service. They stopped talking to each other.

The Kids First lawyer helped Brooke's mom understand that her actions made her love feel conditional. Brooke's mom wrote an apology letter and agreed to try counseling with Brooke. And Brooke invited her mom to her tennis meet – a chance for a fresh start.

## 97% OF ORDERS REFLECTED THE KIDS' WISHES FOR SAFETY AND STABILITY

Jeremiah and Jason lived with their mom, who left them alone during the night to engage in criminal activity. She brought violent men home and struggled to get the boys to school.

The Kids First lawyer filed an emergency motion to change custody. Kids First's advocacy convinced the judge to change custody and order counseling and substance abuse treatment for the boys' mom. This gave Jeremiah and Jason a stable home.

## 94% OF FAMILIES WERE CONNECTED WITH OUTSIDE PROFESSIONALS

Angela had trouble keeping emotions in check around her teenagers – and the kids stopped seeing her. Their dad was resistant to counseling for Angela and the kids, but the Kids First attorney helped him understand why it was needed and set up therapy. The kids started spending time with their mom again and the parents settled the case.







# THE POWER TO TRANSFORM

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

## BY THE NUMBERS

### 542 Students Served

95%

of circles  
ended with  
an agreement

97%

of students  
gained social  
emotional  
skills

I have been incredibly appreciative of how Kids First has listened and responded to our unique and evolving needs. They have worked tirelessly to not only support resolving conflict, but have also built adult capacity, creating a strong sense of teacher efficacy. Thanks to Kids First, students have a safe space to self-regulate, learn social skills, and resolve conflict in a healthy manner.

– School Administrator

In 2017, Kids First took its conflict-resolution magic beyond the realm of family conflict to the school setting. “Kids experience so much conflict with peers,” says Director Jenny Schulz.

The project launched in one middle school in November 2017. In August 2019, the project expanded to three elementary schools.

Kids First facilitators help students resolve conflict, which gets them back to learning quickly. When differences are resolved early, they are less likely to grow. With the right tools, kids do better in school and get in less trouble.

In the three elementary schools served, major and minor disciplinary referrals dropped 26%.

Kids First’s two project facilitators make the perfect duo. Therapist and former teacher Nicole Brighton works at the elementary school level. Attorney Judy Goldberg, an experienced mediator and child advocate, is stationed at McKinley Middle School.

## WHAT’S A CIRCLE?

The people affected by a conflict meet together in a circle. They talk about what happened. When the person who did the harm learns how their actions affected others, they often apologize and offer to repair the harm. The participants agree on what’s needed to make things right.

## WHAT'S IN YOUR BACKPACK?

Kids were making fun of a boy whose shoes were too big. The teacher invited Nicole to lead a classroom circle. Nicole brought a backpack and pulled out items like a pillow (“some kids don’t have a bed”) and a toy police car (“some kids have had the police visit their house”). Students marked which things had happened to them. They were surprised by how much they had in common: “24 of 28 of us have come to school hungry!” They learned kids might have things in their backpack they can’t see. Bullying around the student’s shoes ended that day.

## A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Justin yelled at Charlotte in class but André got blamed and the school called his parents; André was grounded for a week. André and Justin later met in a circle. Justin felt bad that André had been blamed for his wrongdoing. To make things right, Justin decided to write André’s mom a note:

“Hi Mrs. Smith, I’m sorry for the mess up. André is not to blame. It was his friend Justin. So I’m sorry. Justin”

Youth Peace Project Facilitator Judy Goldberg brings a little magic to a middle school classroom.



— “ —

Judy was awesome at facilitating. I felt like I was able to share my concerns and my students and I came to an understanding with each other. I think more empathy was built and we were able to create solutions together. Thank you.

— McKinley Teacher

— ” —





# MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE

MEDIATION

Kids First therapist and mediator Laura Martin, LISW, helps separated parents co-parent. Laura says, “Once parents’ communication improves, other topics magically resolve.” Here are two tricks she uses to improve communication:

**Co-parenting apps:** Apps feature an exclusive channel for communication, a shared calendar, easy expense tracking, and contacts for kids’ doctors, teachers, and counselors. Two of Laura’s favorites are AppClose and Our Family Wizard.

**BIFF statements:** To improve communication, Laura coaches parents on BIFF techniques (from the High Conflict Institute). Before parents click “send,” they review their email. Is it:

- Brief? – long arguments can elevate conflict
- Informative? – focus on facts, not opinions
- Friendly? – begin and end on a friendly note
- Firm? – make a proposal and set a reply date



## MORE THAN A BAG OF TRICKS

Brittany didn’t want Dave to see their 5-year-old son because he was drinking. Things were so tense Laura Martin (pictured above) had each parent leave the first session separately to avoid a fight.

But during that session, Laura used her training and experience to set the stage for change. She acknowledged Brittany’s hurt and gave hope Dave could recover.

After more sessions with Laura, the parents resolved every issue. Dave got treatment and Hayden was seeing his dad again. The best magic is that a little boy has two sober parents and time with both.



134

Parents participated in mediation

95%

Parents had a reduction in conflict



# Thank you!

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 Maddie Weston



Leah Rodenberg of the Alliant Energy Foundation makes magic happen for the Youth Peace Project.



# CEDAR RAPIDS HONORARIA & MEMORIALS

## In Honor of:

In honor of the 5th Grade Class at Grant Wood Elementary  
by Mike & Gloria Tilson

In honor of Jeanne Brandes  
by Colleen Arnold  
by Tom & Mary Burke  
by Tris Dows  
by Mike & Mary Flynn  
by Ed & Molly Kempf  
by Jack Kenney  
by Mark Kenney  
by Nikki & Dick Kettelkamp  
by Betsy Kigin  
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In honor of Emily Good & Dave Good  
by Kathy Good

In honor of Vincent & Carrie Greene  
by Vincent & Rachel Mills

In honor of Lillian Janzam  
by Brian & Karen Middleswarth

In honor of Kids First employees  
by Rich & Marion Patterson

In honor of Kristin Miller  
by Sarah Betz  
by Deb Hardy  
by Michael Trask  
by Marsha Westbrook

In honor of Jenny Schulz  
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In honor of Roger Schulz  
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In honor of Morgan Smith  
by Morgan Claypool  
by Stephanie DePasquale  
by Jim & Mary Jo Dressen  
by McKayla Herink  
by Jennifer Raes  
by Jeanne Smith  
by Sharon Viner

In honor of Emma Stahlberg & Katie Kish  
by Kim & Marlene Johnson  
by Melanie & Ron Stahlberg

In honor of Issabell St. Charles  
by Sjonna Paulson  
by Sarah Shuss

In honor of Mike Tiernan  
by Bankers Trust

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In memory of Gary Braet  
by Norma Hohensee

In memory of James C. Brandes  
by Mary M. Brandes

In memory of Ed Carstens  
by Dick & Avona Lehmann

In memory of Tanya Clow Chidsey  
by Don & Toni Clow

In memory of Randy Evans  
by Vicky Evans

In memory of Robert Fletcher  
by Margie Fletcher

In memory of Darold Godfrey  
by Luis & Jodi Castillo  
by Jan Godfrey

In memory of Karen Grummer  
by Jo Osing  
by Patty Sebetka

In memory of Allan L. Harms  
by Sally Harms

In memory of Anita Johnson  
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by Shirley & Terry Benfer  
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by Walt & Jan Schulz  
by Marcy & Terry Shie  
by Jorie Shire  
by Roger & Oline Stigers  
by Anne Thomas  
by Judy Thompson  
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In memory of Anne Lavery  
by David & Kristin Janssen  
by Susan Malaise  
by James & Joan Mosel  
by Lora Summerwill

In memory of Joan Nath  
by Vicki Nath

In memory of Dale Repass  
by Diane Repass

In memory of Hon. William Thomas  
by Hon. Dave & Betsy Remley



Rinderknecht Associates surprise the staff at Kids First with a check and easels from the Kids First wish list!



Brandy Lindsey and Nordstrom employees band together to make a difference for the kids in our community.

Dear, Kids First law  
This halloween I hosted a  
haunted forest and collected  
I decided to pick Kids First donations  
because when I grow up I want  
to be a child advocate lawyer. I  
found out about your company  
through my friend (she's going through  
a battle with her parents) and my dad.  
Sincerely  
Riley

Riley was our youngest magician in 2019. At her Haunted Forest party, Riley asked for donations to support Kids First. We tip our hats to you, Riley! You're a real class act!

# Thank you!

## Des Moines Individual Donors 2019

### Investors \$10,000+

Michael & Barbara Gartner  
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### In honor of:

In honor of Amy Christensen  
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by Kathleen Murrin  
by Kathy Reardon  
In honor of Diane Dornburg  
by Jim Hegeman  
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by Polly Moore  
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### In memory of:

In memory of Chief Justice Mark Cady  
by Jennie & Bob Allbee

# Thank you!

## Des Moines Corporate & Community Partners 2019



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Berkshire Hathaway Energy  
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### In-Kind Donations:

Community Youth Concepts  
The Meredith Corporation  
Telligen Community Initiative

\*Funds of the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines  
\*\*Gift given as part of an honorarium/memorial





Drawing by girl, age 8. She drew herself looking into a crystal ball, wishing for her parents to get along.

# BELIEVE IN MAGIC!

You give children in conflict a voice. Here's what Kids First means to the children we serve – in their own words and pictures.

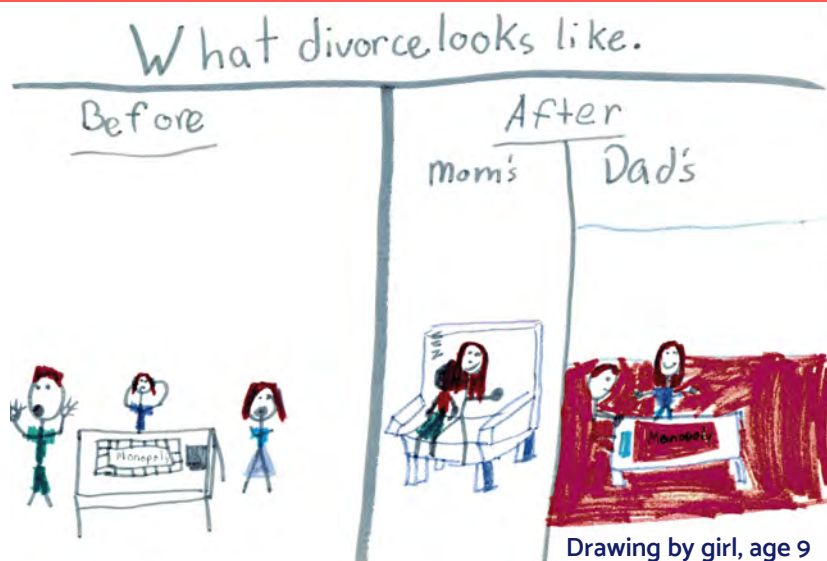
"You listened to me."  
- Boy, 14

"You were always honest with me."  
- Girl, 11

"You are kind. You help me  
with my problems." - Girl, 10



Drawing by girl, age 11



Drawing by girl, age 9

"You were there when we all  
needed it. Thank you for the help."  
- Boy, 13

"You helped me understand  
what's going on." - Girl, 12

"You were always interested in me  
and what was best for me. I  
thought everything you did was  
great." - Girl, 14

## A NEW MAGICIAN JOINS THE TEAM



In August 2019, Nicole Brighton joined the Kids First team as a conflict-resolution facilitator for our restorative justice project. Nicole's experience as a therapist and teacher prepared her perfectly for this role. Nicole has a masters in Marriage and Family Therapy. She worked as a school-based therapist and then taught eighth grade at McKinley Middle School before she joined Kids First.

A school principal noted Nicole's circles "resulted in students being able to repair relationships and successfully return to their learning environment." The principal saw that once kids had practice and modeling, they began resolving conflict on their own.

Nicole says, "I love communicating with both children and teachers in a way that makes them feel heard and understood."

[www.kidsfirstiowa.org](http://www.kidsfirstiowa.org) | 319.365.5437

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