



**SPARKLE AWARDS**  
**PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE**  
ROCHESTER COMMUNITY SCHOOLS SPECIAL EDUCATION

# 2026

# Sparkle Book

The PAC is an organization dedicated to empowering families of students receiving special education services through communication, education, and support with the purpose of obtaining the finest programs and services available within the Rochester community.

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*\*Special Recognition Recipient*

## A Note from Our PAC Chair

As we gather to celebrate this year's Sparkle Awards, I want to take a moment to reflect on our theme for the year: Inclusion in Action.

This theme was never meant to be just words, it was meant to be something we see, feel, and experience in our schools every single day. And this year, we saw it in a truly powerful way.

We received a record number of nominations, and that alone tells an incredible story. It tells us that across our district, inclusion is not just an idea—it's being lived out in classrooms, hallways, and everyday interactions.

Each nomination represents someone who goes above and beyond—someone who sees every student, values every voice, and creates spaces where all learners can belong and thrive. These are the individuals who bring inclusion to life through their actions, big and small.

To our nominees:

You are the reason this work matters. You are the reason families feel supported, students feel seen, and our community continues to grow stronger. Tonight, we celebrate you—not just for what you do, but for who you are and the impact you make every day.

On a personal note, as my first year as PAC Chair comes to a close, I want to share how truly honored I have been to serve in this role. I continue to be inspired by our special education families, their strength, their advocacy, and their unwavering commitment to their children. It has also been incredibly meaningful to build strong partnerships with our district leadership and staff, all working toward the same goal of supporting every student.

Thank you for being part of this journey and thank you for showing us what Inclusion in Action truly looks like.

Jacki Markert  
PAC Chair

# Early Childhood Special Education

## ECSE at Brewster

### *Gina Ruffini, Teacher*

Gina exemplifies everything a truly exceptional educator should be. Her passion, dedication, and commitment to her students shine through in every interaction. From day one, she welcomed our son with warmth and understanding, instantly making him feel comfortable and supported. In the short time he has been with her, we have seen tremendous growth—not just academically, but emotionally and socially as well. Gina pours her heart into her work. She takes the time to understand each child's strengths, challenges, and unique personality. She encourages curiosity, builds confidence, and celebrates every milestone, big or small. Her classroom feels safe, positive, and full of energy—an environment where students want to be and are excited to learn.

What makes Gina truly extraordinary is her genuine love for the kids. She treats every student with patience, kindness, and respect. She sees their potential even before they see it in themselves, and she motivates them to reach it. Our son's progress is a direct reflection of her unwavering belief in him. We feel incredibly fortunate to have Gina as our son's teacher. She has made a lasting impact on his life and on ours. Teachers like Gina don't just teach—they inspire, uplift, and transform. She is beyond deserving of this award, and we are honored to nominate her.

—Mack Allen



Mrs. Ruffini has all the love and patience towards her classroom. She always challenges her students to excel in the classroom. My son is extremely happy to have her as his teacher.

—Susana Urquijo-Apiquean

You do such an amazing job with Skyler I am so grateful for you. He wakes up everyday asking to go to school, "fini's house" is what he calls school and it is just so cute! He has made a tremendous amount of progress thanks to all of your help and

effort in getting him there. Thank you

—Samantha

### *Katherine Tash, Teacher*

Ms. Katie is truly deserving of a Sparkle Award for the extraordinary dedication, compassion, and heart she brings to the class. She consistently goes above and beyond to ensure every student feels seen, supported, and capable of success. Ms. Katie meets each child where they are, celebrating small victories while patiently guiding them toward bigger goals. Her calm

presence, creativity, and unwavering belief in her students make a lasting impact not only on their academic growth, but also on their confidence and sense of belonging. Families and colleagues alike admire her professionalism, kindness, and tireless advocacy for students with special needs. Ms. Katie's work embodies the true spirit of Brewster, and her daily efforts add genuine sparkle to our school community.

— Anonymous

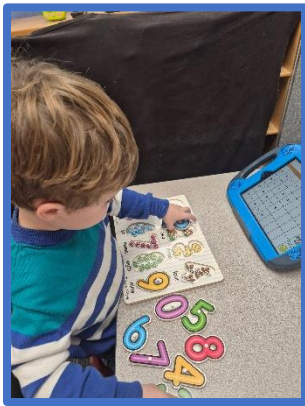
*Laura Washer, Occupational Therapist*

Always goes above and beyond for her students

—Bridget Nash

## ECSE at North Hill

*\*Melissa Buffa, ECSE Visually Structured Teacher*



I am honored to nominate Melissa Buffa, ECSE Visually Structured Teacher at North Hill, for the Sparkle Award. My nomination comes from not a single event, but her dedication over multiple years to helping kids with disabilities.

Melissa has been an extraordinary presence in our son Bennett's life during one of the most critical and vulnerable stages of his development. As parents of a child with learning differences, we carry constant worry about progress, transitions, and whether our child is truly being seen and understood. Melissa has done far more than ease those worries, she has replaced them with confidence, trust, and hope. One moment in particular will stay with me forever. When Bennett

was transitioned out of another preschool class (because he was struggling) and into Melissa's classroom, we were understandably anxious about how he would adjust. That very first day, after school had ended, Melissa took the time to message me personally. She told me Bennett was already doing amazing and that he was going to do awesome—because he IS awesome. That simple message meant everything. It wasn't just reassurance, it was conviction. The way Melissa spoke about our son, with certainty, warmth, and genuine belief, shifted how we felt as parents. In that moment, we knew Bennett wasn't just being taught; he was being championed. Through her visually structured approach, patience, and deep understanding of early childhood special education, Melissa has helped Bennett grow academically, socially, and emotionally. She meets him where he is while helping him move forward with dignity and encouragement. Just as importantly, she communicates with families in a way that builds trust and partnership, reminding us that our children are more than their challenges, they are capable, worthy, and full of potential. And I have heard the same feedback from many of the parents of children in her classroom, she is a ray of sunshine in a sometimes gloomy day.

Melissa embodies the very essence of the Sparkle Award. She brings light, belief, and understanding to children who need it most, and to parents who are learning how to navigate an unfamiliar path. She also treats these kids like they are her own, and her affection for them is palpable. Her impact on our son and our family will transcend far beyond this school year, it

will stay with him forever. And that in my mind, is what makes her qualified under going "above and beyond" for her students.

We are deeply grateful for her, and I can think of no one more deserving of this recognition.

—Bianca

*Natalie Johnston, Teacher*

Mrs. Johnston is an excellent ECSE teacher. She welcomed my child mid year into her classroom as his first assigned classroom was not the right fit. Now he comes home and actually tells us that he is SO happy in Mrs. Johnston's room. We are so thankful to have her and love watching our son progress in her class!

—Kimberly Hanney

Ms. Johnston always welcomes the children with joy and warmth. She is an example of patience and optimism and shows a strong vocation for working with children. She has supported my son in his adjustment and guides him with discipline, patience, and positive communication. Over the past five years in the Rochester school district, she has stood out as an exceptional teacher who truly makes a positive difference in her students' lives.

—Rosalida

## Elementary

### Baldwin Elementary

*Alaina Bos, Speech-Language Pathologist*

Alaina's compassion, expertise, and kindness make a lasting difference in our school every day! She always goes above and beyond to support students and staff. Alaina is incredibly knowledgeable and dedicated to helping each of her students grow their speech and language skills with confidence and success. Baldwin is so lucky to have her!

— Anonymous

Alaina has demonstrated exceptional dedication and skill in her role as a speech pathologist serving our students with disabilities. She has taken deliberate time to understand each student's unique profile, discovering their interests and identifying their specific communication needs. Her personalized approach to speech and language services ensures that every student receives targeted, meaningful support tailored to their individual goals and learning styles. Her commitment to her students is exemplified through her work with one student in particular, who uses an AAC device. Alaina never gave up on helping this student find her voice and a way to communicate her wants and needs. Through persistence, creativity, and unwavering dedication, she helped this student successfully incorporate her AAC device into her daily life, transforming her ability to express herself and participate more fully in her school community.

Alaina demonstrates remarkable flexibility and strategic thinking in delivering speech and language services. She thoughtfully provides instruction through multiple formats—small group

sessions in the classroom, individualized one-on-one instruction integrated into activities that capture students' interests, and focused sessions in her office to target specific speech and language skills. This multi-faceted approach ensures that students receive the services they need in contexts that are meaningful and engaging to them. Beyond her direct work with students, Alaina is an invaluable team member who is always willing to brainstorm, problem-solve, and support her colleagues. Her collaborative spirit, genuine care for students, and expertise have strengthened our entire special education program. The students in our classroom and their teacher are incredibly fortunate to have such a dedicated, caring, and amazing speech pathologist on our team. Her impact on our students' communication development and overall growth is truly remarkable.

—Jazmin

Mrs. Bos is an absolute superstar and such a vital part of our Baldwin team! She pours so much heart and thought into her lessons, always dreaming up the most creative and fun ways to truly connect with her students. She is such a dependable and brilliant colleague who is always ready with a sharp insight or a helping hand to make sure every single child at Baldwin shines

—Anonymous

#### *Jamie Buckley, 3rd Grade Teacher*

Mrs. Buckley has shown incredible dedication this year to understanding and connecting with her students. She has taken on the challenge of navigating complex situations with a commitment to finding the best path forward each student. The Baldwin team appreciates her persistence and the extra heart she has put into building relationships during a year with many moving parts. Baldwin is lucky to have a teacher who doesn't give up on finding the right way to support every learner!

—Anonymous

#### *Laurie Dare, Social Worker*

Laurie is a total champion for our Baldwin team! We are so thrilled with the fresh perspective she brings, and we're especially grateful for the way she jumped right in to tackle new challenges with us. She is incredibly warm, engaging, and such a joy to work with! Our shared student absolutely lights up during their time with her, and we couldn't be more thankful for her amazing flexibility and expert guidance!

—Anonymous

#### *Wayestha Febles, Paraeducator*

Wally has made an extraordinary impact on our students in just a few months since joining our school. Despite being new to our team, she has demonstrated an exceptional ability to work with each student with genuine love, understanding, and compassion. She approaches every situation with patience and empathy, recognizing that each child has unique needs and perspectives. Her commitment to building meaningful relationships with our students is evident in the time and care she invests in getting to know each child—learning their likes, dislikes,

interests, and personalities. Through these intentional connections, she has created a foundation of trust that allows students to feel seen, valued, and supported throughout their day. Wally has proven to be an invaluable addition to our special education team. Her positive attitude, collaborative spirit, and unwavering dedication to our students have strengthened our classroom community and enhanced the overall learning environment. The impact she has made in such a short time speaks volumes about her character and commitment to special education. We are truly fortunate to have her on our team, and we look forward to the continued positive influence she will have on our students' lives and growth.

—Jazmin

*Jenny Grimm, 5th Grade Teacher*

Team teaching with Ms. Grimm has been an absolute dream! She has an incredible intuition for her students, always anticipating exactly what they need before they even ask. I am constantly impressed by how she expertly accommodates assignments while keeping her standards high. She keeps every single student engaged and seems to know instinctively what each child needs at any given moment. Plus, her positive energy makes every day at Baldwin a joy!

—Anonymous

*Michelle Guest, Teacher*

My daughter has had the privilege of having Mrs. Guest as her teacher in both kindergarten and first grade. She is truly an outstanding educator. I believe some people are simply born for this profession, one that requires immense patience, compassion, and dedication...and Mrs. Guest is one of them.

Beyond her daily teaching responsibilities, Mrs. Guest consistently takes extra time to support students who need additional help. Our daughter has benefited from that support over the past two years. In every interaction (whether a quick email update, an encouraging phone call, or sending extra learning activities home) it is clear how deeply Mrs. Guest cares about each student's success.

With more than 20 students in her classroom, our daughter could easily have slipped through the cracks. But because of Mrs. Guest's kindness, attentiveness, and willingness to go above and beyond, we have watched our daughter grow in confidence and ability. We are incredibly grateful for the positive impact she has made in our child's life and very fortunate to have had her as a teacher!

—Andrea

Michelle demonstrates flexibility in adapting her instruction to meet the needs of all learners, including students with autism. She works collaboratively with support staff and shows willingness to try different strategies to help students succeed. Her efforts to ensure that all students feel included in classroom activities reflect her dedication to education.

Her work with students who have diverse learning needs contributes meaningfully to their academic progress and classroom experience. She is a dedicated educator who strives to support all students and help them access the curriculum. Her students are lucky to have her!

—Amanda Hall

*Jess Guoin, Paraeducator*

Ms. Jess is truly one of a kind! Our Baldwin students are incredibly lucky to have someone as dedicated and caring as she is. Every single day, she arrives with a positive spirit, ready to tackle any challenge with grace. We love that we can always count on her to have her 'running shoes' ready to go! Ms. Jess has a beautiful way of meeting students exactly where they are while still encouraging them to reach their highest potential. She is a reliable, shining light in our school, no matter what the day brings!

—Anonymous

*Amanda Hall, ASD Teacher*

Amanda has made an exceptional impact on our district this year as an autism spectrum disorder teacher. Since joining our team, she has brought tremendous energy, expertise, and dedication to our special education program. Her ability to advocate fiercely for her students is truly remarkable—she ensures that each child's voice is heard, their needs are understood, and their rights are protected. The relationships she has built with her students are one of a kind, characterized by genuine care, deep understanding, and authentic connection. She takes time to truly know her students and what makes them tick, using this knowledge to create a learning environment where each child feels valued and understood.

What sets Amanda apart is her skill in designing lessons that incorporate her students' interests and passions, transforming learning into something engaging and exciting. Her students are eager to come to class and eager to learn because she meets them where they are and builds instruction around what motivates them. Beyond the classroom, Amanda is an exceptional teammate who is always willing to lend a helping hand and has everyone's back in all situations. She brings collaboration, positivity, and support to every interaction with colleagues. Amanda embodies what it means to be a special educator—combining expertise, compassion, advocacy, and teamwork to make a meaningful difference in the lives of students with autism. We are extremely fortunate to have her on our team, and our district is better because of her presence and dedication.

—Jazmin

Amanda is a kind and compassionate teacher for our shared student. She has all her students' best interests in mind and shows deep patience and care for their well-being and success. She is flexible and open to finding routines and strategies that will most benefit the growth of her students. Thank you, Amanda for being such an excellent partner!

—Jill West

Amanda is such an amazing ASD teacher! She brings incredible patience, positivity, and so much heart to her classroom. She consistently goes the extra mile by creating meaningful visuals to support her students and thoughtfully adapting lessons to meet each student's needs, strengths, and abilities. Baldwin is so lucky to have her! 😊

— Anonymous

### *Emma Harry, Paraeducator*

Emma exemplifies exceptional dedication and compassion in her role as a Paraeducator in our categorical classroom. In her first year working with students with disabilities, she has demonstrated remarkable growth, deep commitment to student advocacy, and an inspiring ability to build meaningful connections with every child she supports. From day one, she committed herself to truly knowing each student in our classroom, investing time in understanding their unique needs, strengths, and challenges. This deep understanding has enabled her to become a powerful advocate for each child, ensuring their voices are heard and their individual needs are met. She consistently finds creative and evidence-based approaches to help students with emotional and behavioral regulation, thoughtfully adapting her methods to meet each child where they are.

Emma is also an invaluable collaborative partner with teaching staff. She proactively prepares classroom materials and activities, works collaboratively to solve instructional challenges in real time, and provides unwavering support on both challenging and successful days. Perhaps most importantly, she has an extraordinary gift for connecting with students—helping every child grow academically and socially while filling the classroom with laughter, smiles, and genuine warmth. Her ability to balance high expectations with kindness creates an environment where students feel safe, valued, and motivated to learn. Students with disabilities deserve educators who see them fully, and Emma embodies this philosophy. In just over a year, she has become an indispensable member of our team and a model of what exceptional special education support looks like.

—Jazmin

### *Yvette Hooks, Teacher*

Yvette is an exemplary general education teacher who truly embodies the spirit of inclusion and collaboration. She currently has two students who are also part of our categorical classroom program. She demonstrates exceptional flexibility and intentionality in ensuring these students feel valued, included, and fully part of her classroom community. She actively includes them in everything her class does and consistently encourages their participation and belonging. What sets her apart is her keen ability to learn her students deeply noticing their individual strengths and weaknesses and using this knowledge to identify the perfect times and contexts for meaningful inclusion experiences. She has thoughtfully adapted their work to meet them where they are academically and developmentally, ensuring that inclusion is not just physical presence but genuine access to learning and community.

Beyond her direct support, Yvette has cultivated a classroom culture of kindness and peer support by enlisting her general education students to help welcome and support the categorical students in her room. She has empowered her classroom peers to be buddies and helpers, ensuring that the students from our categorical classroom always have a friend to help them navigate their schedule with ease and feel welcomed throughout the day. This peer support system reflects her understanding that true inclusion happens when all students work together to create a supportive, accepting community.

With many years of teaching experience, Yvette is someone that newer educators look up to and learn from. She fiercely advocates for her students, maintaining amazing classroom

management while creating an environment where all learners can thrive. Beyond her own classroom, Yvette is an outstanding teammate who is always willing to answer questions, listen to ideas, and collaborate with colleagues to find the best educational journey for every student. Her openness to partnership, combined with her expertise and genuine care for students, strengthens our entire special education program. She demonstrates that inclusion is not just a program—it is a mindset rooted in respect, high expectations, and a commitment to helping every child succeed. Yvette is truly an amazing educator and an invaluable partner in our mission to serve all students with excellence and compassion.

—Jazmin

#### *Tania Kachucha, Building Secretary*

Ms. Tania is an essential support for the students at Baldwin, consistently going above and beyond to ensure every child has what they need to succeed. She has become a vital "safe person" for a student navigating significant anxiety, providing the steady encouragement necessary for her to practice the difficult task of speaking with adults. Whether she is bringing a smile and a laugh to our monthly lunch bunch sessions or stepping in to help with any challenge that arises, Ms. Tania is someone the entire staff can count on. Her willingness to support all students in whatever capacity is needed makes her an invaluable member of the Baldwin community.

—Anonymous

#### *Heather Kapanka, Media Teacher*

Heather is a dedicated and compassionate educator who brings genuine kindness and an infectious love of books and reading to her media center every single day. She understands the transformative power of literature and is committed to sharing that passion with all students, especially those with disabilities. She thoughtfully designs lessons that incorporate students' individual interests, recognizing that when students see themselves in stories and topics they care about, they become engaged and excited learners. Through her intentional approach, she is helping students discover and nurture their own love for reading and books—planting seeds that will last a lifetime.

Heather is an exceptional collaborator who is always willing to work closely with our special education team to find the best ways to help our students access media and books meaningfully. She goes above and beyond by consistently offering our classrooms additional books, ensuring that quality literature is readily available and in students' hands. Her generosity and initiative extend further as she actively helps us discover and incorporate engaging reading programs and resources tailored to our students' needs and interests. Her proactive approach to building our classroom libraries and expanding access to books demonstrates her deep commitment to fostering a love of reading across all learners.

Heather embodies what it means to be an outstanding educator and teammate. Her genuine care for students, combined with her expertise and passion for literature, creates a media center that welcomes and celebrates all learners. She recognizes that every student deserves access to books that inspire, comfort, and empower them. Heather is truly an amazing educator

whose dedication to promoting literacy and inclusion strengthens our entire school community and opens doors to new worlds for our students.

—Jazmin Yasso & Amanda Hall

*Lavinia Kirdani, Art Teacher*

Lavinia is a remarkable educator who has dedicated herself to truly understanding and supporting students with disabilities in her art classroom. Over the past year, she has invested considerable time and effort in learning about each student—not just their disabilities, but who they are as individuals, their interests, their strengths, and their unique perspectives. This deep understanding has allowed her to create an art classroom that students are genuinely excited to attend. Students actively ask to go to art class, and they return to their regular classrooms beaming with pride over the work they have created. Her classroom has become a place where students feel safe, valued, and inspired to express themselves through art.

Lavinia demonstrates exceptional collaboration and flexibility in her approach to instruction. She is always willing and eager to work with our special education team to develop thoughtful plans that help students get the most out of their art experience. Whether through adapted materials, modified projects, or individualized support, she ensures that every student can access the curriculum and experience success. Her commitment to inclusion means that all students—regardless of ability—can participate meaningfully in art class and take home work they are genuinely proud of.

The impact of Lavinia's work is evident in the hallways of our school, where beautiful student artwork is proudly displayed, and in the homes of our families, where students eagerly share their creations with their parents. She has transformed art class into a joyful, empowering experience where students discover their creativity and build confidence in themselves. Lavinia is truly an amazing educator whose passion for art and genuine care for all students creates a classroom where learning, growth, and pride flourish. She is an invaluable member of our school community and an inspiration to both students and staff.

—Jazmin Yasso & Amanda Hall

Ms. Kirdani is a standout educator who has proactively sought out specialized training to better support students with autism in her art room. By implementing sensory-friendly strategies and tailored instructional methods, she has removed barriers to creativity and ensured that every student can express themselves comfortably. Her commitment to understanding our diverse population and adapting her environment accordingly makes her an invaluable asset to the school. —Anonymous

*Kathleen Lawson, Resource Room Teacher*

Our son, Leo, has been lucky enough to work with Ms. Lawson for three years now in the Resource Room! Ms. Lawson demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that every student receives individualized instruction tailored to their unique strengths and needs. Students in the Resource Room feel safe, supported, and empowered to grow both academically and socially. We are so thankful for everything Ms. Lawson does to help Leo succeed!

—Claire Agnello

Mrs. Lawson is a helpful addition to the Baldwin team. She approaches her role with a collaborative mindset and is always ready to assist where she is needed most. Baldwin appreciates her willingness to step in and support our students' various needs, making her a dependable part of the daily environment at Baldwin!

—Anonymous

I want to nominate my teacher, Mrs. Lawson. She is so helpful to me and everyone in my group. She helps me learn math. Math is very hard for me. She is very, very, kind. When I get anxious or upset, she helps me calm down. Mrs. Lawson is the best!

—Teagan and Jen

### *Heath Lemons, Gym Teacher*

Heath is an outstanding physical education educator who demonstrates a genuine understanding and deep love for all students, including those with disabilities. He approaches his role with creativity and flexibility, consistently adapting his classes and designing new activities that allow our students with disabilities to participate meaningfully and joyfully. Rather than seeing inclusion as a challenge, he views it as an opportunity to help every student experience success, build confidence, and develop a love for physical activity and movement. His thoughtful modifications and engaging activities ensure that all students—regardless of ability—feel welcomed and capable in the gym.

Beyond the gymnasium, Heath has proven to be an invaluable member of our special education team. He is always willing to step in and provide support not just during physical education class, but throughout the entire school setting. He has taken time to build meaningful relationships with each student, getting to know them as individuals and understanding what motivates and encourages them. His commitment to inclusion extends to actively finding creative ways for our students to join their general education peers in gym class, fostering friendships and a genuine sense of belonging within the school community.

Heath exemplifies what it means to be an exceptional teammate. He is consistently willing to lend a helping hand when our special education team needs support, demonstrating collaboration, kindness, and a shared commitment to student success. His positive attitude, genuine care for all learners, and unwavering dedication to making physical education accessible and enjoyable for every student make him an invaluable asset to our school. Heath is truly an amazing educator and teammate who strengthens our entire school community through his inclusive practices and heart for all students.

—Jazmin Yasso & Amanda Hall

### *Alaina Lyon, Resource Teacher*

Alaina is very kind, compassionate and caring about meeting the individual needs of every student she works with! Alaina is extremely knowledgeable and insightful, especially when it comes to IEPs and her area of expertise. She approaches every situation with professionalism and care. I have learned so much from Alaina- she is always willing to share her knowledge and

support to those around her. Her dedication, support, and leadership makes such a positive impact at our school- Baldwin is so lucky to have Alaina!

—Danielle

Mrs. Lyon is a thoughtful and caring resource teacher. She is often a pillar of calm and a voice of reason when presented with tricky situations. She has cultivated meaningful relationships with all of her students. Baldwin is so lucky to have Mrs. Lyon!

—Anonymous

Mrs. Lyon exemplifies what it means to be a top notch teacher! Mrs. Lyon takes the time to get to know her students which provides them with a safe space for learning. She is consistent with delivery and is intentional with her teaching. She always has the students best interest at heart. Baldwin is blessed to have an amazing teacher like Mrs. Lyon as part of their support staff!

—Anonymous

We would like to nominate Mrs. Lyon for the Sparkle Award in recognition of her unwavering dedication and support. She consistently goes above and beyond to meet not only our son's educational needs, but also our family's requests and concerns. Her compassion, professionalism, and commitment truly make a meaningful difference in our son's growth and confidence. We are incredibly grateful for the care and effort she pours into her work every day.

—Raluca

#### *Marco Marando, Principal*

Mr. Marando is an exceptional leader who consistently operates with the best interests of both staff and students in mind. Even on the most challenging days, he prioritizes forming genuine relationships with students and their families to ensure the most successful educational experience at Baldwin. His commitment to these connections creates a foundation of trust and support that defines our school community.

—Anonymous

#### *Lynn Nowicki, Paraeducator*

Ms. Nowicki is truly the 'calm in the storm' during our busiest days at Baldwin! She brings such a steady, peaceful energy to our team, approaching every challenge with a cool head and a helpful heart. She is constantly going the extra mile, checking in with everyone to see where she can lend a hand. We are so incredibly lucky to have her—she always seems to be in the exact right place at the exact right time!

—Anonymous

#### *Meghana Oza, Paraeducator*

Meghana came into her role as a Paraeducator this year and quickly became an invaluable member of our team. She demonstrates genuine care and skill when working with students,

building strong relationships and creating a positive learning environment where every child feels supported and valued. Her willingness to take on responsibilities, learn new tasks, and support both students and staff reflects her deep commitment to making a real difference in the lives of the children she serves. She brings enthusiasm, reliability, and a positive attitude to her work every single day, setting an example of professionalism and dedication for everyone around her.

What truly speaks to Meghana's character and commitment is how she handled a temporary absence from work due to personal circumstances. Rather than losing focus or becoming discouraged, she was eager and motivated to return to our team and get back to supporting our students. When she came back, she seamlessly flowed right back into our classroom schedule and routines as if she had never left, demonstrating her deep understanding of our students' needs and her genuine dedication to them. Her dedication to learning and growing as an educator is remarkable—she approaches every day as an opportunity to improve her skills, deepen her understanding of students with disabilities, and contribute more meaningfully to our classroom community.

—Amanda Hall and Jazmin Yasso

#### *Teagan Pankau, Student*

Teagan goes above and beyond to help our friends with special needs. She is always so kind and inviting during class. Teagan is patient and willing to help them learn and be involved in our class.

—Heath Lemons

#### *Sharon Parthum, Paraeducator*

We couldn't imagine Baldwin without the amazing Mrs. Parthum! She is the definition of a team player, always ready to pivot and support us whenever a challenge arises. Her resourcefulness and reliability are unmatched, but it's her kindness that truly draws the students to her. She creates such a positive atmosphere for everyone, and her ability to bring a laugh to any situation makes her a true treasure on our team!

—Anonymous

#### *Danielle Patsarikas, Speech and Language Pathologist*



Mrs. Patsarikas is the most wonderful Speech and Language Pathologist! We are lucky enough that both of our sons get to work with her and they both look forward to seeing her each week. Mrs. P is patient, creative, and provides individualized support that empowers her students to overcome challenges. She is committed to helping her students strengthen their communication skills and build confidence. Her advocacy and encouragement have a lasting impact in the classroom and beyond. . We sincerely appreciate the meaningful difference she makes in the lives of both of our boys!

—Claire Agnello

Baldwin is so much sweeter with Danielle on our team. She is incredibly dedicated to her students, always going the extra mile to support their speech and language journeys with patience and love. Her signature smile and kind spirit make every interaction a joy. We are so lucky to work alongside such a supportive, thoughtful, and genuinely wonderful colleague!

—Anonymous

Danielle is truly amazing and an invaluable member of our team. She goes above and beyond, generously giving extra time and effort to help each student reach their goals. Her deep love and understanding of our students shine through in everything she does—she takes the time to truly know them and their unique needs. She is incredibly responsive and adaptive, consistently adjusting her approach to meet each child where they are. Her dedication and expertise make a profound difference in our students' progress and confidence. I am deeply grateful for her partnership and could not do this work without her. She is simply the best.

—Amanda Hall

#### *Amy Przygoda, 5th Grade Teacher*

As an amazing educator, Ms. Przygoda understands that true learning begins with a human connection, and she intentionally builds that bond before asking her students to tackle the "hard things." Ms. Przygoda is deeply cognizant of her students' individual needs, creating an inclusive environment where her even-keeled and calm demeanor provides a steady foundation for growth. Her impact is most evident in her ability to change the trajectory for students; notably, she has transformed a once struggling and reluctant math student into someone who now finds genuine joy in the subject. She is a brilliant example of how empathy and composure can spark a lifelong love of learning.

—Anonymous

#### *Rachel Robinson, Teacher*

Rachel exemplifies what it means to be an inclusive, compassionate educator who embraces all learners in her classroom. She currently has two students who are also part of our categorical classroom program. She demonstrates remarkable flexibility and intentionality in ensuring that these students never feel left out or separated from their peers. She actively includes them in everything her class does and consistently encourages their participation and belonging. Her commitment to inclusion goes beyond compliance—it reflects a genuine belief that all students deserve to be part of the classroom community and have access to meaningful learning experiences alongside their general education peers.

What truly sets Rachel apart is her dedication to one student in particular who receives all core instruction in her classroom. Rather than viewing this as a challenge, she has proactively created resources and modifications to help this student access the general education curriculum at his level. She has also become a powerful advocate for this student, working collaboratively with our special education team to ensure he receives all the services and accommodations he needs to be successful. Rachel brings a genuine love for teaching and an unwavering care for every child in her classroom, regardless of their abilities or needs. She

approaches education with expertise, warmth, and a deep commitment to helping all students grow and thrive. She is truly amazing at what she does—balancing the needs of diverse learners while maintaining high expectations and fostering an inclusive, welcoming environment. Rachel is an exceptional educator and an invaluable teammate to work with. Our special education program is stronger because of her collaboration, flexibility, and heart.

—Jazmin

Ms. Robinson truly has a heart of gold! She has an incredible gift for seeing the very best in every single student who walks through her door. We love how she encourages each child to shine in their own unique way, all while maintaining the high expectations that help them grow. No matter what the day brings, she always has a warm smile on her face that makes her classroom feel like home. Baldwin is so lucky to have her!

—Anonymous

#### *Haley Rottermond, Paraeducator*

Haley has been a wonderful addition to our team this year. As a first-year Paraeducator, she eagerly accepted the challenge and has demonstrated a genuine commitment to growth and learning. Her willingness to take on new responsibilities and ask questions shows her dedication to continuous improvement. What stands out most is her deep love and care for the students—she connects with them and creates a supportive environment. We are very grateful to have her on our team and look forward to watching her grow in this role.

—Amanda Hall

Haley shows her students so much patience and kindness. She supports her students with compassion and scaffolding to be successful in each task. She's so encouraging and calm. Thank you, Haley for being such a great partner!

—Jill West

#### *Shea Socrates, Music Teacher*

Shea is an exceptional music educator who opens the doors of his music room to all students, creating a welcoming and inclusive space where every child can experience the joy and power of music. He demonstrates remarkable creativity and flexibility in adapting his music lessons to incorporate students' interests through carefully selected songs and engaging activities. He is constantly finding innovative ways to keep students motivated and excited about learning, recognizing that music can be a powerful tool for connection and growth. His dedication to inclusion is exemplified through his work with one of our ASD students, whom he successfully integrated into the third-grade concert. This meaningful experience created a cherished memory for both the student and their family—a moment of pride, accomplishment, and belonging that will stay with them for years to come.

Shea consistently encourages students with disabilities to join their general education peers in music class and performances, understanding that these shared experiences build friendships, foster a sense of community, and cultivate a genuine love for music in all students. He

approaches his role with both expertise and heart, using his passion for music and his deep care for his students to create an environment where everyone feels safe, valued, and inspired. The music room has become a sanctuary for so many children—including our students with disabilities—where they can express themselves, build confidence, and experience success. Shea is truly an amazing music teacher who recognizes that music has the power to transform lives and bring people together. His commitment to inclusive music education and his unwavering support for all students make him an invaluable member of our school community.  
—Jazmin Yasso & Amanda Hall

Mr. S is an exceptional educator who consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that every student, regardless of their challenges, feels seen, heard, and loved. His ability to think outside the box has transformed the educational experience for many, particularly those with significant needs. This was beautifully demonstrated when he drew in a reluctant student by tapping into his personal interests, a connection that ultimately led to the student discovering a passion for the ukulele. Furthermore, Mr. S showed incredible ingenuity and heart when he incorporated sign language into a performance specifically to maximize the participation of a student who struggles with speaking. By prioritizing inclusivity and creative problem-solving, he ensures that every child has a voice and a place on his stage. It is teachers like Mr. S who truly change the trajectory for their students by proving that with the right connection, anything is possible.  
—Anonymous

*Jennifer Spencer, 1st Grade Teacher*

Mrs. Spencer is the true definition of a master teacher! She is constantly going above and beyond to ensure our shared students thrive, and she does it all with the most wonderful, sunny attitude. No matter how busy the day gets, she leads her classroom with incredible calmness and grace. She is truly one of a kind, and our Baldwin community is so beyond lucky to have her heart and expertise!  
—Anonymous

*Ally Stanick, School Psychologist*

Ally is a caring and competent psychologist. She is our hype lady, behavior specialist, and has such a cool and calm demeanor, bringing clarity and support to any situation. Baldwin is so lucky to have her!  
—Anonymous

Ms. Stanick has been such a wonderful gift to our Baldwin family! From the moment she joined us, her positive energy has made such a difference. She has a true servant's heart and is always the first to offer a helping hand to any student or teacher in need. No matter how busy the day gets, she meets every situation with a warm, genuine smile that truly brightens our school!  
—Anonymous

Ally is the absolute sweetest! She's incredibly knowledgeable and always goes above and beyond to support all Baldwin students. She's great to work with—very approachable, supportive, and always willing to help others succeed. Baldwin is so lucky to have Ally!  
— Anonymous

*Amanda Starick, Social Worker*

Amanda is our caring and kind social worker. She is always willing to jump in and help out, even in difficult situations. She not only provides support to her students, but also to our staff. We are so lucky to have Amanda here at Baldwin!  
—Anonymous

Mrs. Starick works with Benny on social skills and emotional intelligence. Since he began working with her, his behavior at school has greatly improved, along with his relationships with classmates. I can also see a difference at home in his attitude toward school and homework. Benny has gained more confidence and developed a more positive outlook on learning. She has worked hard to find creative ways to inspire him through challenges and rewards, such as candy and LEGO kits, and she has been an integral part of his growth.  
—Brian Marvin

Ms. Starick is an absolute gem! As a social worker, she goes the extra mile (and then some!) to make sure every student feels seen and supported. Her creative approach to motivating kids is second to none, and her dedication to the Baldwin community shines through in everything she does. No matter the situation, she meets it with kindness and a smile that lights up the room!  
—Anonymous

Amanda is an exceptional social work professional who embodies the very best of what it means to dedicate oneself to supporting children, families, and colleagues. She consistently demonstrates unwavering commitment by always making time for others, providing steadfast support when colleagues and students need it most, and creating a safe, welcoming space where people feel truly valued and heard. Her work with children is remarkable—she meets each one with genuine care, creativity, and innovative approaches that keep them engaged, motivated, and hopeful. Whether working through challenges or celebrating successes, she brings compassion and expertise to every interaction, helping students navigate their emotions, build resilience, and develop the social-emotional skills they need to thrive. Amanda inspires everyone around her through her unwavering compassion, reliability, and genuine passion for making a real difference in the lives she touches. She is a trusted colleague who listens without judgment, offers thoughtful guidance, and stands beside our team through both easy and difficult moments. Her presence transforms our school community—strengthening relationships between students and staff, supporting families through challenging times, and creating a culture of care and inclusion. Amanda is truly an amazing social worker and an invaluable part of our school family. Her dedication, heart, and unwavering commitment to helping others exemplify what it truly means to be an exceptional

social work professional. We are incredibly fortunate to have her on our team, and her impact on the lives of children and families will be felt for years to come.

—Amanda Hall and Jazmin Yasso

*Abigail Stone, Kindergarten Teacher*

Abby is a sweet and enthusiastic kindergarten teacher. She has gone above and beyond this year to support a student in her class with a hearing impairment. She has been pro-active, helped him get what he needed for success in the classroom, and she also made her student feel extra special and proud of his new hearing aids and HAT. —Anonymous

Abigail makes adjustments to her teaching when needed and works with the support team to help all students learn, including those with autism. She shows openness to trying new approaches and demonstrates a commitment to making sure every student has the opportunity to participate and succeed in her class. She is extremely welcoming to all in her room, always making everyone feel included. Her willingness to collaborate and adapt her practice positively impacts her students' learning and classroom experience. She is a dedicated professional who values inclusion and works to support the needs of all learners.

—Amanda Hall

*Aida Toth, Paraeducator*

Aida truly goes above and beyond for every student, making sure each one feels seen, supported, and valued. She always finds ways to go that extra mile, creating a kind, welcoming, and encouraging environment that helps students thrive. Her genuine care and kindness shine through in everything she does, and she has a special way of making everyone feel included and important. Aida's dedication, compassion, and positive spirit make such a difference every single day! The ASD program—and the Baldwin family—are so lucky to have her!

—Anonymous

Aida is so patient and kind. She supports our shared student with compassion and provides him with the scaffolding to be successful in each task. She's so encouraging and her calm presence sets a peaceful tone for our students and our classroom. Thank you, Aida for being such an excellent partner!

—Jill West

Aida is an exceptional Paraeducator who consistently goes above and beyond for our students. She demonstrates unwavering support and reliability, always having her students' backs when they need it most. What truly sets her apart is her genuine commitment to knowing each student on a personal level—she takes the time to understand their individual strengths, challenges, and interests. Her outstanding work ethic is evident in everything she does, from meticulous preparation to thoughtful follow-through on every task. She is a valued member of our team and makes a meaningful difference in our classroom every single day.

—Amanda Hall

*Emaleigh Waters, Teacher*

Mrs. Waters is an outstanding teacher! Our son, Leo, is lucky enough to have her for third grade and she goes above and beyond to meet his specific needs. She has taken the time to understand Leo's unique needs and has offered support that has helped him grow tremendously this year. Mrs. Waters also collaborates with Leo's Special Education teachers in order to provide instruction that will help him be the most successful. The love Mrs. Waters has for her students is evident and she creates a classroom environment that is built on trust and support. We are so thankful for Mrs. Waters and all she does to help Leo succeed!

—Claire Agnello

Mrs. Waters brings so much light to Baldwin! She is incredibly dedicated to our shared students, always going above and beyond to ensure they have the tools they need to succeed. Whether she's adapting her teaching or finding new technology accommodations, she approaches every child with kindness and a focus on their unique strengths. She truly defines what it means to be an exemplary educator!

—Anonymous

*Lauren Weisgerber, 5th Grade Teacher*

Mrs. Weisgerber is a truly exceptional educator who consistently puts the needs of each child at the forefront of everything she does. Her flexibility and willingness to adapt ensure that every student has the tools necessary to succeed, regardless of the challenge. This dedication is most evident in her recent work with a specific student and family; she went well above and beyond to build a strong connection and implement tailored steps that have secured a path toward continued success. A wonderful collaborator and colleague, she is a vital pillar of support for both her students and our entire school community.

—Anonymous

*Jill West, Teacher*



Mrs. West is an exceptional teacher! Our son, Milo, is lucky enough to have her for Kindergarten and she goes above and beyond to meet his specific needs. Mrs. West creates a classroom environment that is built on trust and support and Milo loves going to school each day. The love Mrs. West has for her students and her commitment to their academic and personal growth is evident. She has taken the time to understand Milo's unique needs and has offered individualized support that has helped him grow tremendously this year. We are so thankful for all she does to help Milo succeed!

—Claire Agnello

Jill consistently goes above and beyond to create a welcoming classroom where every student, including those with autism, can thrive. Her willingness to adapt instruction, collaborate with

support staff, and continuously seek new strategies demonstrates a genuine commitment to meeting each child's unique needs. She approaches every challenge with flexibility, creativity, and a student-centered mindset, always keeping their best interests at the forefront of her decisions. Her classroom is a model of true inclusion—a place where differences are celebrated and every student feels valued and supported.

Her dedication to understanding and supporting students with autism makes a profound difference in their academic success and sense of belonging. She is an exceptional educator who leads with compassion, collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to ensuring that all students have access to meaningful learning experiences. Her work exemplifies what inclusive education truly means.

—Amanda Hall

*Beth Winters, Resource Teacher*

Mrs. Winters goes above and beyond to engage with students and make their time at Baldwin memorable and impactful. She's humble, kind, generous, and a beam of light. We are so thankful for her dedication to our students!

—Josh

Beth is truly one of the kindest and most compassionate educators! She consistently goes above and beyond to meet the individual needs of every student- making sure they feel supported, understood and successful. Beth is a wonderful leader at Baldwin, always showing positivity and dedication! No matter what challenges arise, she always has a smile on her face and continues to show up for all her students and staff! :)

—Danielle

Mrs. Winters always goes above and beyond to help her students and co-workers. She spends much time each week preparing an exciting and inspiring learning environment for her students. The Baldwin family is so lucky to have Mrs. Winters as part of our team!

—Anonymous

Mrs. Winters has worked with Benny since 3rd grade and has been a great influence on his learning at Baldwin. She is always exploring new ways to inspire Benny and help him calm his mind and body so he can focus on his work. Communication has been great, with regular updates on Benny's progress that inform us when he has good weeks and, at times, not-so-good weeks. There have been many ups and downs over the years, but she has never lost patience with Benny or her enthusiasm for her work. She is often present at after-school events. We truly appreciate all she has done for our son.

—Brian Marvin

*Jazmin Yasso, Special Education Teacher*

Jazmin is an amazing co-teacher and a true asset to her classroom. She has an exceptional ability to connect with students and consistently demonstrates that she has everyone's best

interest at heart. Her genuine care and compassion create a positive, supportive learning environment where students feel valued and encouraged. She is incredibly supportive of both her students and colleagues. Her positive attitude is contagious and uplifting—she brings energy and optimism to every day. It is a pleasure to work alongside her, and I am grateful for her partnership, professionalism, and dedication to our students' success.

—Amanda Hall

## Brewster Elementary

### *Brewster Elementary School 5th Grade Students*



The entire group of 5th-grade students at Brewster Elementary School should be recognized for their outstanding efforts in inclusion, kindness, and resilience. I am a parent of one of these magnificent 5th graders; however, my 5th grader has even more magical, uniquely different abilities. These different abilities weren't always as noticeable or prevalent when our journey at Brewster began, but now they are undeniable

to everyone, except in the eyes of her classmates, it seems.

The story begins the way many other kids' story does in a kindergarten classroom with an abundance of energetic children, nervous parents, and varying personalities and abilities. What sets 5th graders in general around the world apart from any other grade level of students is the fact that COVID hijacked the beginning of their kindergarten experience. This forced students and teachers to meet on a computer screen to connect, learn, and communicate. For the parents of unique learning abilities, this was, as the kids say, "low-key super fun". We faced a whole bunch of new communication challenges, in addition to the speech delay, brought on by our global situation. This is when the fear and uncertainty start to set in for us as a parent of a school-aged child in general, but it was magnified for a parent of a child with disabilities. How in the world will my daughter make friends, be understood, and be accepted by her peers over a screen when we struggled to understand her in person? This is also when it became clear that this group of Brewster students was unlike any other group; they had super-inclusion powers



from the very beginning, it seemed.

As kindergarten ended and first grade began, still at home, and still "low-key super fun," we began to see a literal way outside at the end of the COVID tunnel. This is when this group of students' super-inclusion powers came alive! As we emerged from our Covid cocoons, birthday party invitations, play date requests, and a million homemade paper projects overflowed from Renee's backpack. As first grade ended and

second slid into third, these inclusive efforts never wavered. The groupings changed along with the teachers each year, but the comments about the students at Bingo night, Girl Scout meetings, and parent-teacher conferences remained the same. "This is the most inclusive, kind, and respectful group of students, and they all love Renee."

As a parent of a child with special needs, you anticipate the novelty of waiting for someone who takes a little longer, or whose speech isn't always intelligible, and someone who's requesting you repeat saying the same thing for one more laugh over and over will come to an end sooner rather than later. However, this particular group continued to defy the odds. Time and time again, we were blown away by the kindness that radiates from them. By this time, Renee had become somewhat of a celebrity within the halls of Brewster. Unsolicited waves and "hi, Nay" were flying from every direction when we attended school functions and even as we stepped out into the community as a family.

As fourth grade began, Renee was invited to her first-ever sleepover party. We, as parents, were equally thrilled and terrified of her participating in the experience. Renee, however, confidently walked into the party where she was greeted as if it were HER birthday instead. It was also about this time that I tried to stop responding to invitations with "are you sure", "do you want me to attend", "I can pick her up at any point if needed", and started saying "she can't wait, thank you for inviting her". In the spring of her 4th-grade year, Renee attended Girl Scout camp with her troop. It was a truly amazing experience for me to witness, along with the other moms, as she insisted on climbing to the top bunk independently. All ten years of physical therapy were worth that moment as her friends cheered her on and helped her along.



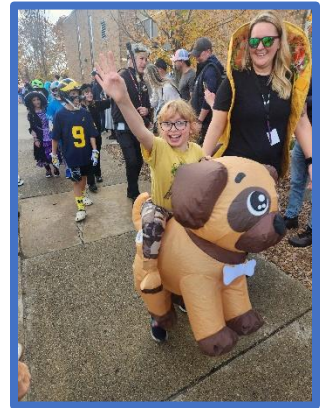
As all of their 5th-grade year began, we knew as Renee's parents that this would more than likely be the last year she shared with this amazing group of individuals. The gap that was a crack in kindergarten had grown into the Grand Canyon by the beginning of this year. However, she was never made to feel different, excluded, or otherwise by this chasm. She was celebrated when she made the infamous Brewster "impossible shot" in gym class (picture a drain pipe and a tennis ball, it was epic). She was encouraged along the way when she insisted on walking to school independently (with a large note attached to her bag and a sneaky father watching from afar). And, her classmates were laughing WITH her, not at her, when she joined in and got them participating in a rousing rendition of the Macarena at the DIA last month as the students waited to board the bus. Furthermore, this resilient group of individuals rallied around one another and their amazing teacher this year after losing a classmate to illness. They are a one-of-a-kind bunch, and we feel beyond thankful to have been a part of this group of students for the last 6 years.

If I'm being honest, I do not know all of their names or recognize their parents, but they sure know Renee. Most likely because their child went home and told a classic Nay story or moment that happened (she has a million), and they were happy, giggling, or even curious. The parents of this group should be thanked as well because they took the time to thoughtfully respond, answer questions, and I can only imagine directing them to continue being their kind and silly

selves.

I am confident we would not be where we are today if it weren't for this group of 5th graders. Next year, Renee will most likely transition to a different middle school. One that can meet her needs as a learner today. However, even though her experience may be different than the rest of her classmates in middle school, she will have the memories, and I can confidently say continue the friendships she's made at Brewster. We are so thankful for each one of these young people. We're thankful for their kindness, support, and the laughter they've shown and shared with Renee over the years. This group of super-inclusive individuals will do amazing things at Van Hoosen and beyond!

—Laura Reinke



*Alyse Burke, Resource Room Teacher*



I am honored to nominate Mrs. Burke for recognition as an exceptional resource room teacher. As the parent of a student who has directly benefited from her dedication, compassion, and expertise, I have seen firsthand the incredible impact she has had on my daughter, Ella. Mrs. Burke has gone above and beyond to support Ella's growth, not only academically but emotionally as well. She has helped build Ella's confidence in ways that have truly changed how she sees herself as a learner. Through her loving and caring approach, Mrs. Burke has created a safe and encouraging environment where Ella feels understood, supported, and capable. The trust she has built with her is remarkable, and it is clear that she genuinely cares about each of her students as individuals. What makes Mrs. Burke especially deserving of recognition is her ability to keep learning fun and exciting—even when the work is challenging. She has an incredible talent for staying in tune with Ella's needs and adjusting her support so that Ella can succeed without feeling overwhelmed. Because of Mrs. Burke's patience, encouragement, and dedication, Ella approaches school with more confidence and enthusiasm than ever before.

It is rare to find an educator who blends professional excellence with such heartfelt compassion. Mrs. Burke is truly a gift to her students and their families, and I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this recognition. She has made a lasting difference in my daughter's life, and for that I am deeply grateful! Ella would like me to add "I love you, Mrs. Burke" to this letter because she truly does love her!

—Erin Reaume

*Megan Gaura, 3rd grade Teacher*

According to my son, Mrs. Gaura is the best teacher ever! I am endlessly grateful to her for the love, respect, and care she shows to her students every day.

—Ksenia Kiseleva

*Ryan Golden, Teacher*

From the beginning Mr. Golden has looked at Leonardo as an individual, with his own shortcomings and potentials, not another name on his class list. He has gone beyond his role as a teacher to find resources to support Leo, letting him shine where he is strongest by helping him overcome where he is weakest. It has taken extra time, dedication and courage to challenge Leo beyond his self-image while not breaking his spirit. This is very hard to do and Mr. Golden has done it well, and the results are evident for anyone who has been paying attention to Leo's progress.

—Paulo Mendonca

*Amy Perry, Teacher*



Ms. Perry sparkles beyond our expectations, and according to my daughter Renee, there were giant shoes (one might even say an orthotic immobilizing boot sized) to fill for her 5th grade year. Many years ago, Renee attended the world of welcome at Brewster alongside her older sister Sadie. As a family, we made our way upstairs to the 5th grade wing of the building. Renee was only in 2nd grade at the time, and we were learning more about her disability and unique needs daily. As we located and walked into Sadie's assigned classroom and teacher, Ms. Perry, Renee's eyes became wide, and it wasn't with fear. Inside the classroom the warmest, kindest, and most approachable individual greeted us with a smile. And, even though we

were there for Sadie's orientation, Ms. Perry gave a thoughtful hello to Sadie, then made a point to turn and introduce herself saying "and you must be Renee, the little sister". For anyone who has met someone they thought they may never get to shake hands with, or think is just absolutely the best, or even possibly idolize, this was Ms. Perry for Renee... and she even knew her name!!! It was apparent Ms. Perry's interests were reflected in her classroom decor which consists mainly of stuffies! Large and small, Disney and Scooby, some that were given to her and others she had collected, stuffed animals. If you've ever met Renee, you would absolutely know her UNDYING love for anything stuffed. There is always a stuffie tucked under her arm and periodically getting its face squeezed. For the entirety of Sadie's 5th grade year Renee would find any excuse, big or small, to visit Ms. Perry's room. Each time she was greeted with the same thoughtful and warm welcome.

For the next few years at Brewster, as Sadie moved on to Middle School, Renee would continually ask and tell us that "Perry is going to be my teacher, right?!?". No matter the grade, or person who inquired, or who's class she was already in, she never wavered in her devotion to and hope for Ms. Perry. When Renee found out that Ms. Perry was a package deal, one that came with a furry gentle giant named Linus, it only made her even cooler, as if that was even possible. As 5th grade approached, I pleaded with her IEP team and Mrs. Dessy that I trusted the team and their decision for which teacher to place her with, however, I did add that "Renee may stage a full-on riot if she's unable to have Ms. Perry for 5th". Thankfully, the stars aligned, or the team did not want to test Renee's protesting skills, and she was assigned to the classroom of her Brewster dreams.

As we made our way to the world of welcome this year, Renee LITERALLY vibrated with excitement. Upon entering the classroom, she wandered in awe, commenting on which stuffies Ms. Perry had, and which were her own personal favorites. For anyone who's had Ms. Perry in the past you've have the pleasure of knowing her as well as hearing her personal and professional philosophies on 5th graders. She very much feels that children should still be allowed the opportunity to be children in elementary school. This philosophy is wonderful for all of her students and especially those like Renee. She thinks of everything that Renee might need in every given situation and is thoughtful in her interactions. She genuinely wants to include her in her classroom, embodying that Renee is a student first and foremost before all of the other aspects she encompasses.

At Renee's fall parent-teacher conference, Ms. Perry said, "I just love Renee, she is my buddy. She gets me, and I get her, and I'm so thankful for her every day." Don't get me wrong, we've been extremely fortunate at Brewster with the teachers Renee has had. However, this is one of the first years that the affection for one another feels mutual. I recently attended the field trip to the DIA with Renee's 5th-grade class. On the bus ride home from the DIA, Renee requested to sit next to Ms. Perry. They chatted the entire ride home, looking at pictures she had captured during the trip that day. We're so thankful for this wonderful individual.

Ms. Perry has provided Renee with the perfect last year at Brewster, in the full general education setting, and if we're honest, of her childhood experience. Renee will always hold a special place for Ms. Perry in her heart and will most likely keep every single stuffed animal given to her by Ms. Perry to think of her often. As March and April slide into the summer, Renee has many more opportunities with Miss Perry and her class to look forward to. Furthermore, because of how amazing she is, she's even already inquired about adaptive needs for Renee at fifth grade camp.

Since Renee began at Brewster, our main concern and desire yearly is that she is placed in a setting where she feels a sense of belonging, the adults and individuals that work with her enjoy and understand her complex needs, and that Renee wants to go to school daily. I can tell you without a doubt, these concerns and desires have not only been met but exceeded in Perryland!

—Laura Reinke

## [Brooklands Elementary](#)

### *Hannah Allevato, Student*

Hannah is truly deserving of a Sparkle Award for the kindness, compassion, and empathy she shows every day. She consistently goes out of her way to include and support a classmate with autism, choosing friendship, patience, and understanding in moments when it would be easier to walk away. Whether it's inviting her to play at recess, looking out for her during the school day, or simply showing up again with a smile even after challenging interactions, Hannah demonstrates a level of maturity and heart well beyond her years. Her actions reflect genuine character, reminding those around her what true friendship and acceptance look like. Hannah's kindness does not just brighten one student's day—it creates a ripple effect of positivity that makes our entire school community a better place.

—Kimberly Novak

*Monica Bell, Occupational Therapist*

Monica is an incredible occupational therapist who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is passionate about supporting students and families, and is a phenomenal source of knowledge for her colleagues as well. She goes above and beyond to support our team and families at Brooklands. We are so lucky to have Monica as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Laura Bewak, TK Paraeducator*

Laura helps our Brooklands students at school in the classroom, at lunch and on the playground. Laura provides academic support, encourages positive behavior, and creates a safe, inclusive environment where every child can learn and grow.

—Erica Davis-Hernandez

*Viktorija Burton, Special Education Paraeducator*

Viktorija is a wonderful special education Paraeducator who is enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She demonstrates patience, empathy, kindness and a genuine love for her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and team alike. We are so lucky to have Viktorija as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*\*Felicity Carl, Student*

At Brooklands Elementary, our core values are respectfulness, responsibility, kindness, and integrity. In addition to academics, much of early elementary learning focuses on building community, relationships, and friendships. Felicity Carl is a shining example of being open to others and leading with kindness. It is not what she does, it is who she is. I would like to nominate Felicity Carl for a Sparkle Award for her kindness and empathy going above and beyond to create and sustain a friendship with a peer receiving special education services. Two years ago, Felicity Carl was a student in my first grade class. First grade is a special year full of academic, social, and emotional growth for all students. Wren was also a student in the Brooklands SXI program who would join us for snack and story time. Felicity would prepare a spot prior to Wren's visits - creating a space for joining without feeling like an afterthought. She would greet Wren with a smile and a soft hello and offer more depending on what Wren wanted. Felicity spoke directly to Wren and was patient with whatever various responses she got. Felicity made it a point to greet Wren whenever they crossed paths in our building. Felicity included Wren when making cards or crafts during our class choice time or parties. She would visit Wren's classroom and look for opportunities to connect outside during recess. Each time the girls were together, Felicity would go out of her way to include Wren but also be respectful of Wren's wishes - never forcing her to sit or stay if she didn't want to, and often including other classmates. It was sweet to watch them together during their time in first grade. Often in elementary school, friendships shift with class assignments throughout the years. However, Felicity made it a point to continue her friendship with Wren. Last year, as a second

grader, Felicity continued to seek out ways to include Wren, even inviting Wren to her birthday party outside of school. I saw less of their interactions on a daily basis, but I continued to see them together around our school as both girls moved on in their learning. This year, as a third grader, I continue to see Felicity and Wren together on the playground together and around the building. Felicity is always willing to help and continues to find ways to connect with other SXI students as well as her friend Wren. I was delighted to see Felicity and Wren together on Wren's birthday this year. Felicity was making the day special for Wren by spending time together and celebrating the special day. Felicity is always looking for the good in others. Her friendship with Wren started with an open mind and loving heart, and the friendship has continued because of compassion, thoughtfulness, and an inclusive spirit.

—Debbie Anderson



Felicity you have made an extra effort to be a friend to Wren. Your smiling, quiet presence has been a comfort to her as she learns how to feel comfortable in a big classroom and around a group of kids. You are the first to reach out to Wren in the classroom, in the hallway and on the playground. You know how to sit quietly, be close and encourage gently. You are a good friend Felicity!

—Ms. Kristina and Ms. Cari

*Lauren Chance, Speech Pathologist*

Lauren is an incredible speech pathologist who demonstrates genuine love and compassion for all of her students and families. She is warm, supportive, and positive. She goes above and beyond to support her families and is an absolute shining star! We love Lauren!

— Anonymous

*Shobha Chhoker, Special Education Paraeducator*

Shobha is a wonderful special education Paraeducator who is enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She demonstrates patience, empathy, kindness and a genuine love for her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and team alike. We are so lucky to have Shobha as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Cari Dabrowski, SXI Teacher*

Cari is an incredible educator, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Erica Davis, Art Teacher*

Erica Davis is an exceptional art teacher at Brooklands Elementary. She has worked collaboratively with our SXI teachers and paras to create an immersive and enriching art experience for the students with unique and exceptional abilities in our SXI program. Erica continues to seek new and innovative ways to connect to and engage her students, and has formed supportive and collaborative relationships with the SXI team and families. We are so lucky to have Ms, Davis as part of our Brooklands Team!

— Anonymous

*Claire Gawel, Speech Pathologist*

Claire is an incredible speech pathologist who demonstrates genuine love and compassion for all of her students and families. She is warm, supportive, and positive. She goes above and beyond to support her families and is an absolute shining star! We love Claire!

— Anonymous

*Suann Hendrix, SXI Paraeducator*

Suann is an incredible Paraeducator who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is so enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She comes to work each day ready to work to support her students and team, and demonstrates a genuine love for her students. We are so lucky to have Suann as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Margaret Imerzel, Student Support Nurse*

Margaret is an incredible student support nurse, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Michelle Juengel, SXI Paraeducator*

Michelle is an incredible Paraeducator who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is so enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She comes to work each day ready to work to support her students and team, and demonstrates a genuine love for her students. We are so lucky to have Michelle as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Sarab Kamoo, Social Worker*

Sarab is an incredible social worker who demonstrates genuine love and compassion for all of her students and families. She is passionate about supporting students and families, and she is a tremendous team mate to all. She is a phenomenal source of knowledge for her colleagues as well. She goes above and beyond to support her families and is an absolute shining star! We

are so lucky to have Sarab as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Melanie King, Special Education Teacher*

Melanie is an incredible educator, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Sue Markaity, SXI Paraeducator*

Sue is an incredible Paraeducator who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is so enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She comes to work each day ready to work to support her students and team, and demonstrates a genuine love for her students. We are so lucky to have Sue as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Sarah McGinnis, Special Education Teacher*

Sarah is an incredible educator, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Tim Nadeau, Music Teacher*

Tim Nadeau is an exceptional music teacher at Brooklands Elementary. He has worked collaboratively with our SXI teachers and paras to create an immersive and enriching musical experience for the students with unique and exceptional abilities in our SXI program. Tim continues to seek new and innovative ways to connect to and engage his students, and has formed supportive and collaborative relationships with the SXI team and families. We are so lucky to have Mr. Nadeau as part of our Brooklands Team!

— Anonymous

*Kristina Nichols, SXI Teacher*

Kristina is an incredible educator, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Kim Novak, Special Education Paraeducator*

Kim is a wonderful special education Paraeducator who is enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She demonstrates patience, empathy, kindness and a genuine love for her students. She spends time outside of the school day connecting with and supporting her students and families. She is a tremendous resource for teachers and families alike, and she goes above and beyond every day! We are so lucky to have Kim as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Angela Olejniczak, Special Education Teacher*

Angela is an incredible educator, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Alex Panson, School Psychologist*

Alex is an incredible school psychologist who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. Students LOVE working with Alex! She is passionate about supporting students and families, and she is an amazing team mate to all. She is a phenomenal source of knowledge for her colleagues as well. She goes above and beyond to support our team and families at Brooklands. We are so lucky to have Alex as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Allan Reynolds, PE Teacher*

Allan Reynolds is an exceptional physical education teacher at Brooklands Elementary. He has worked collaboratively with our SXI teachers and paras to create an immersive and enriching physical education experience for the students with unique and exceptional abilities in our SXI program. Allan continues to seek new and innovative ways to connect to and engage his students, and has formed supportive and collaborative relationships with the SXI team and families. We are so lucky to have Mr. Reynolds as part of our Brooklands Team!

— Anonymous

*Lisa Ruiz, Physical Therapist*

Lisa is an incredible physical therapist who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is passionate about supporting students and families, and is a phenomenal source of knowledge for her colleagues as well. She goes above and beyond to support our team and families at Brooklands. We are so lucky to have Lisa as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Zali Sibley, Student*

Thank you Zali for being a friend to Wren. You are always quick to say hi and to offer your hand to her. She knows you and is happy to see you. You have made a big classroom with lots of kids more comfortable for Wren. You always work nearby and offer interesting things to Wren so she can be involved too. You choose to spend your free time with Wren in the classroom and on the playground. You are a good friend!

—Ms. Cari



*Allison Sikora, SXI Paraeducator*

Allison is an incredible Paraeducator who is a tremendous support to our Brooklands team. She is so enthusiastic and passionate about supporting students. She comes to work each day ready to work to support her students and team, and always has a smile for her colleagues. We are so lucky to have Allison as a part of the Brooklands team!

— Anonymous

*Pat Simmons, Student Support Nurse*

Pat is an incredible student support nurse, who creates a warm, supportive, and loving environment for all of her students. She goes above and beyond to support her students and families and advocates for their needs. She shows up for them every day, in every way! We are all so lucky to have her at Brooklands!

— Anonymous

*Karin Vassilakos, Media Teacher*

Karin Vassilakos is an exceptional media teacher at Brooklands Elementary. She has worked collaboratively with our SXI teachers and paras to create an immersive and enriching media experience for the students with unique and exceptional abilities in our SXI program. Karin continues to seek new and innovative ways to connect to and engage her students, and has formed supportive and collaborative relationships with the SXI team and families. We are so lucky to have Mrs. Vassilakos as part of our Brooklands Team!

— Anonymous

*5th grade Safeties: Emma Allevato, Shubhra Athalye, Gwen G., Liam Ging, Briella Grund, Gabriella H., Lucas Helberg, Nicholas K., Mia Kinaia, Logan Kubinski, Aiden Martin, Camilla Matuod, Sefora P., Owen Papke, Jacob R., Zoe Rose, Skylar S., Araceli W., Maeve Zirbel*

I am writing to enthusiastically recommend the Brooklands 5th grade safeties for The Sparkle Awards. As the Administrator of Brooklands, I have had the pleasure of watching these students in action as they have built meaningful connections to the students in our SXI program.

These students are remarkable individuals who have shown exceptional leadership qualities

and a genuine commitment to fostering positive relationships within our school community. This group of 5th grade students who serve as safeties and buddies, have played a pivotal role in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for students with unique needs and talents at Brooklands. These students have gone above and beyond to establish strong, supportive, and positive connections with their buddies. They approach their role with warmth, kindness, and compassion, making every effort to ensure that their buddies feel valued and included. I have witnessed firsthand how these 5th grade students embody the values of empathy, respect, and acceptance. Their consistent demonstration of these qualities not only enriches the experiences of their buddies but also sets a shining example for the entire school community. Their proactive approach to creating a sense of community and support among their peers is truly inspiring. I believe these students exemplify the spirit of positivity, connection, and friendship that the Sparkle Awards stand for.

—Sara Crowley

## Delta Kelly Elementary

### *Trevor Check, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Mr. Trevor Check for a Sparkle Award. Trevor is a second year teacher, but when stepping into his classroom he seems like a veteran teacher with all the empathy, patience and care for his students in the world. Mr. Check takes the time to create meaningful relationships with his students and truly get to know them. He relies on his amazing sense of humor to engage students, while continuing to hold his fifth graders to high standards, expecting the best from each and every one of them.

Mr. Check consistently brings well-prepared, data-driven contributions to team meetings and advocates for students with thoughtful detail. He speaks about even the quietest, shyest student as if they were the most important person in the world, which shows genuine empathy and careful observation. In only his second year of teaching, he demonstrates a natural ability to connect with people, build trusting relationships, and translate those connections into clear, actionable support for students.

This year is our special education team's first year getting to partner with and share students with Mr. Check. From the beginning, Mr. Check has asked what else he can do in order to support his students. He has always viewed them as his general education students before seeing them as students who receive special education support. He is a partner in problem solving and helps to share the load of supporting students who have more extensive needs. When asked to collect and provide data, he completes the extra paperwork willingly and cheerfully, demonstrating strong organizational dependability and a commitment to accurate record-keeping.

Additionally, this school year Mr. Check has been a partner when it comes to fostering and supporting parent relationships. He has eagerly joined conferences, parent meetings, IEPs, and team calls with outside therapists in order to do what is best for the students we share. When tricky situations arise, he is checking in on his teammates and working as a team member to navigate the event while doing what is best for the student.

Trevor Check is not only an amazing fifth grade teacher, who each and every student is so lucky to have, but he is a fabulous teammate who continues to support the team, while keeping students at the center of everything he does. Delta Kelly truly sparkles because of Mr. Check.

—Amanda Carpp

*Jeffrey Gehm, Teacher*

Mr. Gehm is an awesome teacher. He is patient with all of his students. He helps kids feel better when they are sad. Mr. Gehm is really funny, but knows how to get students to complete their work. He takes time to really teach the kids in my classroom. He doesn't do the work for them, but he teaches them how to do it for themselves.

—Matthew Kocher

*Bonnie Jackson, Teacher*

Bonnie Jackson consistently goes above and beyond in her support of students with differing abilities. This year, she warmly welcomed a student transitioning from an ASD classroom into her kindergarten classroom and ensured the student felt included, supported, and valued from day one. Bonnie took the initiative to collaborate closely with building team members, proactively coordinating supports and thoughtfully addressing the student's individual needs. Her dedication, flexibility, and teamwork exemplify best practices in inclusive education. Thank you, Bonnie, for your exemplary work and unwavering commitment to supporting all students and helping them thrive.

—Anonymous

*Colleen Monroe, 4th grade teacher*

I would love to nominate my son's 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Monroe at Delta Kelly Elementary, for the 2026 Sparkle Award. Over the years, Mrs. Monroe has gone above and beyond for both of my boys, Ryan and Sami, and the impact she has had on them is something our family will always be grateful for.

Mrs. Monroe has been a general education teacher for the past 28 years, but the way she runs her classroom truly reflects what inclusion should look like in every school district. Students love her energy, and she naturally creates a classroom where kindness, friendship, and teamwork are part of the everyday experience. She is also a wonderful role model when it comes to collaboration between general education and special education teachers — in other words, OUR kids, not "your kids" or "my kids."

Mrs. Monroe played a very important role in helping us understand Ryan's struggles with reading. As a mom, I had felt since first grade that something wasn't quite right, but I didn't know how to explain it. His IEP team, which was wonderful with all the other services Ryan received at the time, often reassured me that Ryan was a typical first- grade reader and that he would catch up while developing his speech. In 4th grade, Mrs. Monroe truly heard us. She helped us narrow things down, collect meaningful information, and find the right language to describe what Ryan was experiencing. Because of her attention and care, Ryan was able to

receive the additional support in reading and writing that he needed to truly thrive alongside his peers.

This year with my youngest son, Sami, Mrs. Monroe once again showed how attentive she is to her students. She noticed that Sami became overwhelmed during projects that involved cutting and thoughtfully shared that observation with his occupational therapist. It's those small but important moments that show how deeply she cares about her students and their needs. Sami now comes home every day with stories to share about school. He is proud of his wins and achievements—no matter how small—and most importantly, he truly feels that he belongs in his classroom community. I still remember the school refusal we experienced in kindergarten and the many phone calls about difficult days. Today, Sami walks to school with a strong sense of belonging and confidence, and it makes me smile every single day.

For both of my boys, their confidence grew tremendously in Mrs. Monroe's classroom. They were able to develop friendships with classmates that had been harder for them to build in previous years. In fact, my oldest son—now in middle school—still maintains many of the friendships he formed while in Mrs. Monroe's class.

Teachers like Mrs. Monroe make a lasting difference in the lives of students and families. Her belief in inclusion, her commitment to collaboration, and the care she shows for every student truly make a big difference in the lives of many of her students. She absolutely deserves a recognition award and she will always be special to our family.

—Heba Takouz

#### *Kristin Patrona, Principal*

Kristin is an exceptional advocate for all students and staff, seamlessly blending a data-driven approach with profound compassion. Her dedication is evident in her inclusive communication style, unwavering commitment to prioritizing individual student needs, and expert ability to guide conversations using relevant data. Beyond her professional skills, her genuine care shines through her everyday interactions, such as taking time to have lunch or breaks with students and fostering strong, collaborative partnerships with parents and staff to ensure the best possible outcomes for every child.

—Anonymous

#### *Maria Salas, RBT*

Maria is a kind, fun, and sweet addition to our classroom. Her patience and dedication to the student she works with have made a huge impact on his growth. She is also an incredible guide for our team, offering creative intervention ideas and helping us try new strategies. Maria's presence brings so much joy to the room, and we are truly lucky to have her support!!

—Dana Santilli

## Hamlin Elementary

*Melissa Benham, Teacher*



There are truly no words big enough to express what these last three years have meant to our family. You have been so much more than a teacher to our daughter — you have been a steady, loving presence, a constant encourager, and someone who has always seen her for exactly who she is and who she can become. You believed in her on the hard days, celebrated her on the good days, and somehow even managed to stay strong and smiling on the days Savannah showed up as her full, bold, and slightly sassy self (and we know those were not always easy 😊). Because of you, she has grown in ways we once only hoped and prayed for — not just academically, but in her confidence, her independence, and her joy. Watching her walk into your classroom feeling safe, loved, and excited to learn has been one of the greatest gifts to us as parents. Thank you for pouring your heart into her, for loving her the way you do, and for leaving a mark on her life that will last forever. We will always be grateful for you.

—Angela Sisovsky

*Laura Combs, Music Teacher*

Laura Combs understands that for a student with special needs, music is more than just notes on a page—it is a bridge to communication and confidence. Laura goes above and beyond by composing personalized songs for her students, turning the fundamental task of learning to spell their names into a joyful, melodic milestone. By meeting students exactly where they are, she ensures that every child, regardless of their learning style, finds their own unique voice. One of Laura's greatest strengths is her sophisticated approach to classroom management and sensory integration. She masterfully teaches the delicate balance of self-control and exploration. Under her guidance, students learn the discipline of handling instruments with care while simultaneously discovering how to use those same tools for meaningful, creative expression. This balance doesn't just teach music; it teaches essential life skills in a way that feels like play.

Laura's classroom is a sanctuary defined by her unwavering patience and welcoming spirit. She approaches every challenge with a "can-do" attitude and a kind heart, ensuring that no student ever feels overwhelmed or left behind. Her ability to remain steady and encouraging allows her students to take risks, build self-esteem, and develop a genuine, lifelong love for music.

Laura Combs is more than a music teacher; she is an advocate for the potential within every child. Through her specialized techniques and her compassionate heart, she has transformed the music room into a place where every student is a star. She embodies the spirit of dedication that makes our school thrive.

—Anonymous

*Ryan Fila, School Psychologist*

I am proud to nominate Ryan Fila for a Sparkle Award. She is an exceptional school psych, bringing deep knowledge and thoughtful insight to each student she serves. She approaches evaluations, meetings, and student support with professionalism and compassion, always keeping what is best for children at the center of her work. Beyond her expertise, she is a team player—collaborative, supportive, fun, and always willing to step in to problem-solve alongside teachers, specialists, and families. She is someone I stand proud to work alongside.

—Sonali Arora-Mata

We have had the pleasure of knowing Ms. Fila for the past four years. When my son transferred to Hamlin, he struggled quite a bit and immediately formed a bond with Ms. Fila. She was the one person he always felt safe with. Over those four years, Ms. Fila was there through all the highs and all the lows. During that time, we witnessed an incredible transformation in my son. From struggling to regulate his emotions to learning how to cope successfully in the classroom, Ms. Fila played an essential role in every step of that journey.

As this chapter at Hamlin comes to a close, I can't help but feel overwhelming gratitude for the entire Hamlin team, especially Ms. Fila. While I have bittersweet feelings about my son moving on to middle school, I am confident that Ms. Fila played a major role in preparing him for this next step. Ms. Fila, thank you for loving my son every day. Thank you for being his safe person. Thank you for the time, patience, and dedication you gave to helping Cody grow. Your support has never gone unnoticed, and this award is long overdue. Thank you for everything. We will miss you terribly.

—Kira Duncan-Cody

*Julia Gold, Resource Room Teacher*

Mrs. Gold has been my son's resource room teacher for the past four years, and she has been such an important part of his journey. Those early challenges were not easy, and her patience, dedication, and care helped him grow in ways we will never forget. We are deeply grateful for his entire team and all they've done to prepare him for middle school. We will miss Mrs. Gold and the team tremendously. Thank you for everything.

—Kira

*Kimberly Kutschman, P.E. Teacher*

Kim Kutschman operates under a powerful, simple conviction: every student, regardless of their physical or cognitive abilities, belongs on the field, on the court, and in the game. Kim understands that for students with special needs, Physical Education is not just an "extra" class—it is a critical foundation for health, motor development, and social confidence. She refuses to let a diagnosis dictate a student's potential, ensuring that fun and fundamental skill-building go hand-in-hand.

What many describe as "magical" is actually Kim's deep pedagogical expertise in action. Her ability to modify and accommodate every learner within her gym is unparalleled. Whether it's adjusting equipment, altering game rules, or creating custom visual cues, Kim ensures that the

environment adapts to the child, rather than forcing the child to struggle against the environment. This intentionality allows students to master skills they might have once thought impossible.

Kim strikes the perfect, often difficult, balance between structure and spontaneity. She recognizes that for many of her students, consistency is the key to feeling safe enough to take physical risks. By providing a highly structured routine, she creates the "emotional safety net" that allows for the high-energy fun and games her students love. In Kim's gym, boundaries provide the freedom to play.

Kim is a fierce advocate for the idea that "ability" is a spectrum, not a limit. Her passion for inclusive play serves as a model for the entire school district. She doesn't just teach PE; she teaches her students that they are capable, strong, and deserving of the joy that comes with movement.

—Anonymous

#### *Megan Oliver, Occupational Therapist*

Ms Oliver is genuinely concerned about the progress and wellbeing of the children and consistently develops new ideas and approaches on how to make things happen. She approaches her work in an extremely professional, positive and dedicated manner. Her contribution to our son's development is invaluable.

—Katja

#### *Sabrina Olson, School Social Worker*

I am honored to nominate my dear friend, Sabrina Olson, for a Sparkle Award. She is a steady, compassionate presence in her building, always putting students' emotional well-being first and creating a safe space where they feel heard, supported, and empowered. Whether she is leading small groups, checking in with a student in need, or partnering with families, she brings empathy, patience, and genuine care to every interaction. She goes where she is needed - making her such a gift to her school community. She's also a safe and trusted friend at work—someone we can always count on. I feel incredibly fortunate to have worked alongside her.

—Sonali Arora-Mata

For the past two years, Ms. Olson has been my son's resource room teacher, and she has been such an important part of his team. She formed a bond with him so quickly and supported him through both challenges and growth. We are incredibly grateful for her and for his whole team, and for all the work they've done to prepare him for middle school. We will miss Ms. Olson and his team so much. Thank you for everything!

—Kira

Sabrina provides George with a "soft start" to his day by having breakfast with him in her office. She is deeply invested in him, helping him finish projects and even helping him prepare his talent show act. She has been instrumental in making his elementary school experience a positive one. I am also incredibly thankful for you, Lila, and the whole tribe at Hamlin. You and

Norris have reshaped George's educational trajectory, and I am so grateful for the supportive network you have created.

—Anonymous

*Lila Scheckelhoff, Teacher*



This year, you gave Savannah something so special — a classroom where she truly belonged. From the very beginning, you welcomed her with open arms, an open heart, and a genuine desire to understand who she is. You created a space where she felt safe, included, and valued, and because of that, she walked into school each day more confident, more comfortable, and more excited to learn. Your kindness, patience, and constant encouragement helped her grow not only academically, but socially and emotionally as well. As a parent, there is nothing more reassuring than knowing your child is loved and accepted when they are not with you, and that is exactly what you gave Savannah. Thank you for seeing her, supporting her, and embracing her so fully. We will always

be grateful for the way you welcomed our girl and made this year so meaningful for her.

—Angela Sisovsky

Lila Scheckelhoff doesn't just manage a classroom; she builds a community. From the moment a student crosses her threshold, they are met with an environment designed for safety, warmth, and belonging. Lila has an uncanny ability to see the "uniqueness" in every child, transforming what others might see as challenges into celebrated strengths. In her room, effort is the highest currency, and every student—regardless of their starting point—is cherished for the hard work they pour into their growth day in and day out.

Lila's commitment to inclusivity goes far beyond the standard curriculum. She is a living embodiment of the Rochester Community Schools mission to support all learners, no matter their abilities. She possesses the rare gift of tailoring her approach to meet diverse needs while ensuring that no student feels "different" or sidelined. Because of Lila, students who once felt invisible now stand tall, knowing they are vital members of the hive.

What truly sets Lila apart is how she extends her welcoming attitude beyond the classroom door. She serves as a North Star for her colleagues, modeling what it looks like to lead with empathy and radical acceptance. Whether she is collaborating on a student's IEP or simply sharing a kind word in the hallway, her influence ripples throughout the school building. She doesn't just teach inclusion; she inspires it in everyone around her.

To be in Lila Scheckelhoff's orbit is to understand what it truly means to create belonging. She is a role model for students and staff alike, proving every day that when we lead with heart, every learner can thrive. It is an honor to nominate Lila for this recognition, as she represents the very best of our educational community.

—Melissa Benham

### *Cody Tredwell, Student*

Cody is a fifth-grade safety who supports a student in our classroom with Cognitive Impairments. While his assigned responsibility was to assist with arrival and dismissal procedures, Cody has gone far beyond these expectations in ways that are truly inspiring. Each morning, Cody takes the time to help our student unpack and settle in for the day. He thoughtfully escorts him to his seat and works alongside him during morning activities, offering both guidance and companionship. At the end of the day, Cody makes a point to join us outside during recess, where he actively includes our student in play and ensures he feels welcomed and valued. The joy and confidence this has brought to our student has been one of the most rewarding things to witness as a teacher.

Cody's caring, patient demeanor has transformed his role from that of a "safety" into that of a mentor and friend. As the Cognitive Impairment program is new to Hamlin this year, our students have had to navigate many changes, including new staff and peers. I am incredibly grateful that Cody has become a trusted, positive presence—someone our student feels safe with and genuinely enjoys spending time alongside. I am so proud of you, Cody, and deeply thankful for the compassion and leadership you show each day. Thank you for being the friend these students deserve and the role model that Hamlin is fortunate to have!

—Brittany Dunford

### Hugger Elementary

#### *Suzanne Abrams, Paraeducator*

It is with deep appreciation that I nominate Ms. Abrams of Hugger Elementary for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Ms. Abrams has served as my son Dominic's paraeducator again this year during second grade, and our family feels incredibly grateful that he had the opportunity to work with her for a second year.

Returning to the classroom together allowed Ms. Abrams to build on the strong relationship she and Dominic had already developed. She understands him in a way that only comes from time, patience, and genuine care. Because she knows him so well, she is able to support him in ways that feel natural, respectful, and attuned to who he is.

The continuity she has provided has meant so much for our family. Ms. Abrams consistently supports Dominic in feeling safe, supported, and valued at school. Knowing he begins his day with someone who truly understands him brings a sense of comfort and reassurance that is hard to put into words. Throughout the school day, she serves as an important bridge for Dominic across many settings. She approaches him with warmth, connection, and joy, and because she knows him so well, she is able to anticipate when he may need additional support and respond in thoughtful and proactive ways.

Dominic has grown tremendously this year, and Ms. Abrams has played an important role in that growth. Her patience, steadiness, and commitment help create the conditions where he can continue building confidence and skills.

Paraeducators often work quietly behind the scenes, but their impact is immeasurable. Ms. Abrams brings kindness, dedication, and heart to her role every single day. She truly represents the very best of what it means to support students with care and dignity. Ms. Abrams is an

absolute gem in the RCS community, and our family will always be grateful for the difference she has made in Dominic's life. She is incredibly special to our family and to Dominic.

—Stefanie Maiuri

*Marisa Auernhamer, Speech and Language Pathologist*

— Anonymous

*Marnie Barker, Principal*

Mrs. Barker has been a shoulder to lean on in the special education journey my son has taken. She has spent countless hours helping him when he's been struggling. She has carved out so much time to speak to me and my husband to communicate concerns and brainstorm solutions. We have laughed together, and we have cried together- she's been there through it all. With all the many hats she wears as a principal, I was impressed with the amount of time and energy she has dedicated to my son and our family to ensure he was valued, learning, and loved. She personally worked with him, and made space for him in the office when he was struggling. I don't know how she had time for it all!

— Anonymous

*Brooke Bartlett, Resource Teacher*

— Anonymous



I am so happy to nominate Brooke Bartlett for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Brooke has been my son Dominic's second grade resource teacher this year, and she has made an incredible difference in his school experience. Even though this was Brooke's first year in Rochester Community Schools, she jumped right in with care, dedication, and a genuine commitment to her students. From the start, she connected with Dominic in such a natural and meaningful way, helping him transition into second grade feeling comfortable and supported.

What makes Brooke so special is the way she truly sees her students. She recognized Dominic's strengths, presumed competence, and consistently believed in his potential. She also took the time to really learn who Dominic is — his sense of humor, the routines that help him feel grounded, and the things he genuinely enjoys. She built on those connections in thoughtful ways that helped him stay engaged and continue growing. That approach made a huge difference in his progress this year. Brooke also worked incredibly hard to help Dominic access learning in the general education classroom and build connections with his peers. She helped create systems and supports that allowed him to participate more fully and feel included. That was something our family and Dominic himself had really been hoping for this year.

She has also been an amazing partner to me as a parent. Brooke goes above and beyond to communicate and collaborate. She genuinely listened to me and thoughtfully responded to my

perspectives and concerns, which made it truly feel like we were working together as a team. She shares insights, celebrates Dominic's successes, and approaches challenges with curiosity and care. She also shared in the joy of his wins in such a genuine way. I could feel how proud she was of him, and that meant so much to our family. Just as importantly, Brooke approaches her work in a way that aligns with our family's neurodiversity-affirming values. She meets Dominic with kindness, patience, and respect, supporting him in ways that honor who he is while helping him continue to grow. This year brought many important milestones for Dominic, and we are so proud of all he has accomplished. Brooke played a huge role in that journey. Her dedication, belief in him, and the relationships she built made such a meaningful difference. Simply put, Brooke has been a wonderful bridge between Dominic, his teachers, and our family. We feel incredibly lucky that he had her in his corner this year. She is truly a special teacher and human.

—Stefanie Maiuri

*Megan Cash, School Psychologist*

— Anonymous

*Lauren Daley, Speech and Language Pathologist*

— Anonymous

*Shelby DesJardins, Second Grade Teacher*

When I grow up, I and several others I know, would love to be just like Shelby! There are people in this world who shine just a bit brighter and sparkle more than the average bear, she is that person. She is ALWAYS teaching with every tool in her box to enrich her students. She is calm and patient with every situation. She adjusts quickly and adapt easily to surprises in her day. She treats all students with "respect and dignity". Her coworkers admire her unending gifts as a teacher. Thank you for being the example we all wish to follow!

—Tamera Conner

I am so happy to nominate Shelby DesJardins for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Shelby has been my son Dominic's second grade classroom teacher this year, and she has made an incredible impact on his experience. From the very beginning, she embraced Dominic as part of her classroom family. It was clear right away that he was her student, and that mindset set the tone for a classroom culture rooted in inclusion, acceptance, and belonging. Her approach and intentional planning has meant everything to our family. We felt welcomed into the classroom. Dominic felt like a priority. He felt like he mattered. Shelby took the time to learn about him, think about him proactively, and truly consider what he needed to succeed. That mindset also set the tone for his peers. The way she embraced Dominic naturally taught the other students to do the same.



His class has truly become like a little family to him. Dominic knows his classmates see him, care about him, and accept him. As a parent, I cannot fully express how meaningful that has been. It has had a profound impact on Dominic's confidence this year. He connected with Mrs. DesJardins and his classmates very quickly. In fact, pushing Dominic on the swing became something the kids would compete to do at recess. And this year, Dominic hand-wrote all of his classroom valentines — something that is actually quite laborious for him — but he persevered because he genuinely loves these kids.

Shelby also created thoughtful systems that strengthened the connection between school and home. She made a class composite so Dominic could identify his peers, and she created a Google Photo Album that became a meaningful window into his day. It even allowed us to share moments from home as well. Those small glimpses meant so much to our family.

Throughout the year, Shelby has consistently problem-solved and collaborated with Dominic's team to support his access to learning and participation. Dominic is a complex learner, but she has embraced that challenge with care, persistence, and creativity. She has truly gone above and beyond for him this year.

Mrs. DesJardins embodies what it means to believe that all children belong. She doesn't just say it — she models it, she builds it, and she teaches it. And the children follow her lead. We are incredibly grateful for the year Dominic has had in her classroom and for the confidence and joy it has given him. Second grade will always be a special chapter for Dominic on his school journey.

—Stefanie Maiuri

### *Rachel Dolecki, Building Substitute Teacher and Paraeducator*

Where do I begin in explaining why Mrs. Dolecki is so deserving of a Sparkle Award? Mrs. Dolecki has shown our son such compassion and love these last several years. She has held a very special place in our son's heart. This is a very high honor as very few people are "his people", and Mrs. Dolecki is one of the rare few that is our son's "people". I can't even describe how she has shown our son such compassion and love. She talked with him endlessly about his special interests and harnessed his special interest powers for good- helping him regulate when things got tough. She would often bring in Legos from home for him to build when he needed to regulate, and she made sure he always had access to learning tools that were his safe color- blue. She went out of her way to ensure he always had access to blue crayons, pencils, folders, notebooks, pencil cases, etc. And always making sure he had access to whiteout, erasers, etc. to prevent his perfectionism meltdowns. Both of these things helped keep him regulated and learning and growing.

She doesn't just hold a special place in our son's heart, but our whole family. After one particularly tough day that our son had, she found me and spoke words of encouragement and affirmation. She embraced me in a hug, acknowledged how hard parenting is, but especially how hard the journey is parenting a special education student must be. She reassured me that I was in a season, a tough season, but seasons change, and my son IS learning, he IS growing, and he WILL continue to grow and learn coping skills. The path of a special needs parent is full of seasons and cycles. There are tough days, but there are good days too. Some seasons are HARD, but some seasons feel lighter and easier. There will be easier seasons, and there will be

hard seasons that come even after a lighter season, but know that you are seen, you are heard, and you are doing amazing, and there will be easier days.

For these reasons and so many more, Mrs. Dolecki is so deserving of a Sparkle Award. In fact, our son has since changed to a different program/school within Rochester Schools better suited to his needs this year, but we were apprehensive of this change because it meant our beloved Mrs. Dolecki wouldn't be there to cheer our son on, but because of her work with him these last several years, we had the courage to try something new and enter a new season.

— Anonymous

*Sarah Folkerts, 2nd Grade Teacher*

Sarah is such a wonderful individual! She has a fun and fabulous way about her and her classroom. She will always listen to each student and treats them fairly. She understands each student's unique way of learning and their individual gifts. She truly sees and hears them. She meets them where they are at and celebrates their victories, no matter how small or large. She is a gracious and I am so pleased to be able to be in her classroom. She shows dignity and respect for all, each and every day! She most definitely sparkles!!!

—Tamera Conner

*Paraeducator Team at Hugger Elementary*

Unless you run a mile in a paraeducator's shoes, you can not imagine the hats that they all wear each and everyday. I admire the incredible women who work at Hugger Elementary. They are the most loving, kind, accepting and patient group of ladies. They are some of the best women I have ever come across. They provide Instructional support, one-on-one and in groups. They are essential in aiding students. They are diverse in all they do. They are flexible everyday, all day. Whether they are preparing materials, assisting one or more students, they do it all with a smile and beautiful attitude. They believe a student can do amazing things and are glad to assist them as they reach those goals. They provide emotional support to their students and each other. They approach each student with respect and acknowledge their strengths. They truly listen and hear their students. Paraeducators are unsung heroes believing in the students every step of the way. They are the heart of the classroom. Thank you to all 14 Hugger Paraeducators! You shine bright!

—Tamera

*Natalie Kinczkowski, Parent, PTA*

I would like to nominate Natalie Kinczkowski for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the extraordinary care, creativity, and dedication she brought to planning this spring's Aurora Borealis Ball at Hugger. Natalie is not only a deeply committed PTA leader, but also a devoted mom who consistently goes above and beyond to create meaningful experiences for our school community. In planning this year's dance, she thoughtfully prioritized inclusion so that every student could feel comfortable and welcome.

Natalie intentionally designed a sensory-friendly experience, including offering a designated sensory-friendly time and investing in materials that will support students with a wide range of

needs. Through her efforts, the PTA purchased items such as sensory tiles, a sensory tent, fidgets, headphones, and calming crafts. These resources will not only support students during this event, but will continue to benefit future Hugger PTA events.

What stands out most about Natalie's work is the intentionality behind it. She took the time to think creatively about how to ensure all children could participate in ways that felt safe, joyful, and accessible. Her leadership sets a powerful example for how school events can be designed with inclusion at the forefront.

Natalie's work will have a lasting impact—not only at Hugger, but across the district as other schools look to this event as a model for creating more inclusive celebrations. I am incredibly proud to see this level of care and leadership brought to our community. Natalie's commitment to making every child feel they belong truly embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award.

—Stefanie Maiuri

*Jillian Knapp, School Psychologist*

— Anonymous

*Kim Kowalewicz, Resource Room Teacher*

Mrs. K has had a tremendous impact on our son over these last several years. She has showed tremendous grace and patience when working with our son. She has found creative solutions to problem solving some of the issues our son has experienced at school. She sees his "glimmers" in the hard times and has shown love and compassion even when it's been hard to. Mrs. K has a special place in her heart for our special education students. She takes time to get to know them beyond their challenges and meets them where they are at.

— Anonymous

— Anonymous

Where to begin telling you how thankful our team is for Kim. She has such a calming presence in all times, whether a calmer day or a stretch and grow day, her gentle spirit brings a sense of peace. She brings the stress level down to make it manageable for all, both staff and students. It is such a joy when she expresses her thrill when a student reaches a new goal no matter how large or small, she celebrates the victory! We light up just as much as the students do when she walks into the room. She sparkles each and every day in her special way. Thank you, Kim! Hugger staff and students are richer because of you!

—Tamera Conner

*Andrea Kurth, Elementary Behavioral Consultant*

— Anonymous

*Christina Nardone, Social Worker*

Mrs. Nardone has gone above and beyond to help our student. She has communicated with his outside therapists on numerous occasions to help bridge the gap between home and school

and to try to have cohesiveness in verbiage and behavior plans. She has showed tremendous patience and grace when working with our student. And, per our advocate, "Mrs. Nardone had the most thorough Functional Behavior Assessment I have ever seen in my career. It was extremely well done with lots of data." This is just one example of Mrs. Nardone's commitment to our special education students and extra attention and care she takes for our students who need it!

— Anonymous

— Anonymous

Christina has such a kind gentle spirit and uses that gift in reaching students where they are at emotionally. So many ups and downs occur in the student's day. Christina is often requested to assist during a student's daily journey. She has a gift of bringing a safe and a calm place for the student to regulate, and help take a frown and turn it upside down. She always gives a para, a teacher, a student tools to assist in long term positive results. I know I am grateful for her and many others are as well. Thank you for listening and hearing all of us at Hugger. Thank you for sparkling so bright!

—Tamera Conner

#### *Ghania Ourlissene, ASD Paraeducator*

Ghania is an incredible team member who gives her all every single day. She learns quickly, anticipates exactly what the students need, and approaches every task with a strong work ethic. Her sense of humor and energy bring so much light to the classroom, and her dedication has a real impact on both the students and our team. So many students have made meaningful growth because of her dedication! The classroom runs more smoothly and happily because of her. I am so lucky to work alongside her every day!!!

—Dana Santilli

#### *Jill Pesci, Teacher Consultant*

— Anonymous

#### *Autumn Pyne, ASD Paraeducator*

Autumn is simply amazing, she just gets it. Her positive attitude, sense of humor, and calm presence make even the toughest days feel lighter. She is incredibly supportive of both the students and me, always advocating for what's best for them and helping us all succeed. The students clearly adore her, and her impact on their growth and happiness is undeniable. Autumn is truly an essential part of our classroom, and I feel so lucky to work alongside her every day!!!!

—Dana Santilli

*Maria Salas, Behavior Technician*

Ms. Maria has a quiet but profoundly meaningful presence, which allows her to form special, authentic bonds with the students she supports. She approaches every interaction with deep compassion, understanding, and an exceptional ability to meet each student exactly where they are emotionally and behaviorally. Ms. Maria is continually developing personalized, strength-based, and neuro-affirming supports that genuinely respect and honor each child. Her commitment to finding effective opportunities for inclusion and learning is unwavering, as she consistently goes above and beyond to ensure her students have equitable access. She collaborates seamlessly with all members of the team and always keeps her students' needs at the forefront of every decision.

—Anonymous

*Dana Santilli, ASD Teacher*

— Anonymous

Starting kindergarten was a time filled with many apprehensions for our family. We were unsure how our child would adjust to a new environment, new routines, and the many transitions that come with school. From the very first day, Ms. Santilli made all the difference. She welcomed our son with patience, kindness, and genuine understanding. She met him at his level, connected with him, and ensured that he always felt safe and supported. Through thoughtful strategies like social stories for different situations, she helped him navigate transitions, overcome fears, and participate more confidently in class activities.

What stands out most is the way Ms. Santilli celebrates and encourages every small step. During the Hugger Fun Run, even though our son wasn't feeling his best that day, she stayed right beside him, cheering him on and holding his hand so he could complete the run with his peers. Even small moments, like when he lost his tooth at school, were turned into positive experiences, she made him feel proud and brave. Her creativity and warmth shine through in the way she teaches as well; through songs and engaging activities, she has helped him learn and grow tremendously this year.

Because of Ms. Santilli, school has transformed from something we once worried about into a place our child looks forward to every single day. Her compassion, dedication, and unwavering support have made a lasting difference not only in his learning but also in his confidence and happiness. Her compassion and dedication mean so much to families like ours, and she truly deserves to be recognized.

—Anonymous

*Charlotte Stahl, Student*

Charlotte is an amazing friend who shows inclusion and kindness every day at Hugger. As a social worker who has had the privilege of seeing her in action during social groups and lunch bunches, I can confidently say that Charlotte embodies the true spirit of the Sparkle Award. She has built strong, genuine, and meaningful friendships with neurodivergent students and consistently goes out of her way to make sure everyone feels seen, valued, and included.

Charlotte actively seeks out opportunities to attend social groups for special education students, join lunch bunches, and spend meaningful time connecting with her peers. Charlotte's helpfulness, empathy, and natural leadership has had a powerful impact on the students around her. Her positive influence extends beyond structured groups and into everyday moments at school.

—Christina Nardone

*Shubh Sushmita, ASD Paraeducator*

Shubh is an amazing para whose kindness and patience make her a calming and supportive presence in the classroom. She works hard and picks up new things quickly, always knowing how to meet the students' needs. Her dedication has helped the students make incredible growth, and her positive attitude and gentle approach make the classroom a welcoming and encouraging place for everyone. I feel so lucky to work alongside her every day!!

—Dana Santilli

Mrs. S, as our son fondly calls Mrs. Sushmita, has been a constant source of support for him since the very first day of school. Her warm and reassuring presence throughout the day helps him feel safe, understood, and confident knowing someone is always there for him. She patiently guides and encourages him, making sure he participates in activities and feels included. From helping him during transitions to being by his side on his field trip, sharing in his excitement and making sure he had a joyful experience, she brings kindness and dedication to everything she does. We are truly grateful for the care, patience, and encouragement she gives our son each day, and the difference she makes in his school experience means so much to our family.

—Anonymous

*Michelle Thompson, Occupational Therapist*

— Anonymous

I am so happy to nominate Michelle Thompson for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Michelle stepped in mid-year as Dominic's occupational therapist this school year at Hugger, and she quickly became an essential part of his team.

From the beginning, Michelle connected with Dominic right away. She saw his strengths, believed in his potential, and thoughtfully built upon what motivates and engages him. She approaches her work with creativity and curiosity, always looking at Dominic through a strengths-based lens and thinking about how to help him access learning in meaningful ways. One example that made a tremendous difference was her introduction of SnapType as a tool to support Dominic's engagement with grade-level work. This was truly profound for him. It opened the door for Dominic to participate more fully in classroom activities and demonstrate his learning in ways that were previously difficult to access. As a parent, moments like this feel incredibly meaningful, and we are so grateful for Michelle's insight and initiative.

Michelle has also been an important bridge for Dominic within the school environment. She collaborates closely with his teachers and other providers, sharing ideas and strategies that support his participation and growth. Her presence on his team has been invaluable.

We are so thankful that Michelle became part of Team Dominic this year. Her creativity, care, and commitment have made a meaningful difference in his experience in second grade.

—Stefanie Maiuri

*Kathy Vitale, Paraeducator*

It is with great admiration and gratitude that I nominate Ms. Vitale of Hugger Elementary for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Ms. Vitale has served as my son Dominic's paraeducator again this year during second grade, and we feel incredibly fortunate to have had her support for a second year. She jumped right back in, building on the relationship they had already formed and continuing to support Dominic through his strengths. She knows him extremely well, and that deep understanding has made such a meaningful difference in his day-to-day experience at school.

The continuity she has provided has meant everything for our family. Knowing that Dominic is cared for and safe with Ms. Vitale gives us tremendous peace of mind. She is an incredible human being, and Dominic feels a deep sense of trust and safety with her. She truly sees his strengths, builds upon them, and connects with him in a way that helps him feel understood and supported. She has served as a bridge for Dominic across many settings, always grounding her support in connection and joy. Because she knows him so well, she is able to be proactive and step in when he needs support most. Dominic has grown tremendously this year, and Ms. Vitale has played a big part in that progress.

Ms. Vitale brings patience, kindness, and dedication to her role every single day. The work of paraeducators is often behind the scenes, but the impact is enormous. Through her commitment and care, she has continued to raise the bar for what it means to be an exceptional paraeducator. Ms. Vitale is truly a treasure in the RCS community, and our family will always be grateful for the impact she has had on Dominic's life. She is incredibly special to our family and Dominic.

—Stefanie Maiuri

## Long Meadow Elementary

*Stephanie Baker, Speech Therapist*



I am writing to enthusiastically nominate Mrs. Stephanie Baker for the Sparkle Award. From the very beginning, she has demonstrated an exceptional level of positivity, dedication, and genuine care for the children and families she works with.

Mrs. Baker brings such a happy and encouraging presence to every session. Her positive attitude creates a safe, motivating environment where my son feels confident, supported, and eager to learn. She is always patient, enthusiastic, and willing to go the extra mile to ensure progress, no matter the challenge.

What truly sets her apart is her eagerness to help and her deep dedication to her work. She consistently adapts her approach to meet my son's needs, celebrates even small victories, and communicates with kindness and clarity. It is clear that she truly loves what she does, and that passion has made a meaningful difference in my son's development.

We are incredibly grateful for her commitment, professionalism, and compassion. She has had a lasting positive impact on our family, and I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this nomination. Thank you, Mrs. Baker!

—Triston Ekleberry

*Gina Belcastro, EI Teacher*

We haven't known Mrs. Belcastro long, but I felt compelled to nominate her because in the few short weeks we have known her since my son switched into her class, she has been Sparkle Award worthy! She made space for my son in her classroom and in her heart to make the transition seamless. She had his cubby, mailbox, and desk labeled prior to his tour of his new classroom- immediately making him feel welcome, like he belonged- that her room was his new home. And he felt right at home! She made placemat posters with pictures of his new classmates, so he felt like he had new friends even before he started in her class! She has been amazing communicating any needs, concerns, or successes throughout the day. My son is actually excited to go to her class! He said after this most recent break, "I can't wait to go back to school!" If you have a special education student, you know that is high praise! She has made her classroom an environment where students can learn because they feel safe and loved.

— Anonymous

*Kelly Craft, Learning Consultant*

I would like to recognize Mrs. Kelly Craft for the truly exemplary, above-and-beyond work she does every single day. She comes in each morning with a fresh outlook—yesterday was yesterday and today is a new day. There is never a complaint or a negative comment, only positivity, resilience, and a steady focus on what matters most.

Mrs. Craft consistently does what is right for families and students, often taking time out of her own day—and night—to ensure their well-being. She goes far beyond what would ever be expected of any team member, not because she genuinely cares.

The connections she builds with students comes straight from the heart. You can feel how important she is to them, and how deeply invested she is in their success and happiness. She also takes great pride in making sure that the school is taken care of, creating a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment for everyone.

On a personal level, Mrs. Craft makes my life better, happier, and brighter simply by being here at Long Meadow. We are incredibly fortunate to have her, and her impact on our students, families, and school community cannot be overstated.

—Stephanie Baker

From the moment I met Mrs. Craft, I knew she was going to be one of my son's "people". He has very few people that truly "get" him and love him despite his challenges. You can tell that Mrs. Craft loves my son, and he loves her. He feels safe and supported when he's around her. He recently shared that he's happy to be at Long Meadow now because " they get me here." Mrs. Craft "gets" my son. She has shown him love and compassion that allow him to grow, thrive, and learn.

— Anonymous

#### *Julie Harris, Paraeducator*

Julie Harris is genuinely one of a kind. As a para-professional in our emotionally impaired program, she goes above and beyond in everything she does. Her ability to connect with students is remarkable; she not only helps them calm down but also teaches them the skills they need to manage their emotions independently.

Julie has an incredible intuition for recognizing when staff need support, and she constantly checks in and offers her assistance. Her dedication makes a significant difference in our program, and it's clear that both the students and the program's overall success are mainly due to her unwavering commitment and support. We're so grateful to have her on our team!

—Anonymous

I am pleased to nominate Julie for the Sparkle Award in recognition of the steady and professional presence she brings to Long Meadow Elementary each and every day.

Julie exemplifies professionalism in all that she does. She serves our students with consistency, integrity, and care, always maintaining high — yet manageable — expectations for those she supports. Her ability to challenge students while ensuring they feel supported and capable reflects both her skill and her deep understanding of their needs.

One of Julie's greatest strengths is her calm and steady demeanor. No matter what the day brings, she approaches each situation with patience and composure. She treats every day as a new beginning, offering students a fresh start and the opportunity to grow. That mindset not only benefits her students academically and socially, but also contributes to a positive and encouraging learning environment within our building.

Julie's reliability, professionalism, and unwavering commitment to students make her an invaluable member of the Long Meadow Elementary community.

—Stephanie Baker

*Heather Maurer, 1st Grade General Education Teacher*

I would like to proudly nominate Heather Maurer for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her extraordinary kindness, patience, and unwavering dedication to her students. Throughout the entire school year, she has shown consistent and unwavering support for all of her students but in particular, a special education student in her classroom. She has taken the time to encourage him, guide him, and believe in him every single day. Her steady presence has helped him grow not only academically, but also in confidence.

During a recent first grade performance, when he was feeling nervous and unsure, she once again stood right by his side. She gently held his hand and encouraged him throughout the entire performance. He looked for her for reassurance and her calm nature gave him the courage he needed to remain on stage and see it through. Because of her compassion and dedication, he was able to successfully complete his performance. What could have been overwhelming became a joyful success, all thanks to her guidance and kindness.

Heather Maurer truly embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award. She doesn't just teach lessons — she builds confidence, nurtures growth, and helps her students believe in themselves. Her impact shines brightly and makes a lasting difference.

—Stephanie Baker

*Bethany Oswald, EI Social Worker*

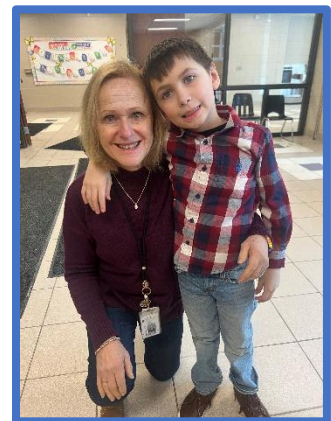
Ms. Oswald has been an amazing addition to my son's team. She has been great about communicating successes, challenges, and concerns throughout the day. She has made me feel seen and heard as a special education parent, and she has made me feel supported as she supports my son. I haven't known her long, but I know she's Sparkle Award worthy!

— Anonymous

*Lorraine Prus, Paraeducator*

I am honored to nominate Lorry Prus for the Sparkle Award. Lorry consistently goes above and beyond to bring kindness, positivity, and genuine care to everything she does. She works closely with emotionally impaired students and always remains calm, patient, and supportive in situations where students need extra care. Her steady presence helps students feel safe, understood, and successful, even during challenging moments.

Lorry makes a meaningful effort to build strong, trusting relationships with her students, ensuring they feel seen, supported, and valued every day. She also provides incredible support to the teachers she works alongside by conveying important information from the



classroom to the locations students are visiting, helping transitions run smoothly and ensuring consistency for both students and staff.

What truly sets Lorry apart is her dedication and heart. She regularly arrives early and stays late to support teachers and students, never hesitating to give extra time when it's needed. She fosters relationships with students beyond the classroom by attending after-school events and cheering them on in their activities. The trust and connection she builds are evident—one student even proudly calls her his “bestie,” a true testament to the safe, supportive bond she creates. Lorry truly embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award. Her compassion, professionalism, and unwavering commitment to students and staff bring light to our school community every single day.

—Whitney Theisen

#### *Mark Scoles, Teacher*

Mr. Scoles truly exemplifies the qualities we all hope to find in a teacher, colleague, and friend. His calm demeanor and genuine care for others make him a standout figure in our community. In his second year with the EI Program, his positive impact on students, families, and the entire school community is undeniable. Through his strong relationships and his commitment to putting others first, he has created a safe and nurturing environment for his students to thrive. Thanks to his hard work and dedication, we have witnessed remarkable growth in his students across all aspects of their lives. Long Meadow is indeed a better place because of Mr. Scoles, and we are all grateful for his contributions.

—Anonymous

I am honored to nominate Mark for the Sparkle Award in recognition of the incredible impact he has made at Long Meadow. Since joining the Long Meadow family, Mark has been a truly wonderful addition to our community. Each day, he arrives with a positive attitude and a calm demeanor that immediately sets the tone for those around him. His steady presence has a remarkable way of calming both the room and the situation, especially during challenging moments.

Mark consistently meets his students where they are and approaches each interaction with empathy and respect. He understands that every student's experience is unique, and he demonstrates genuine care in supporting their individual needs. His ability to step into difficult situations and de-escalate with ease speaks not only to his skill, but to his patience, professionalism, and deep commitment to student well-being.

Beyond his work with students, Mark is a humble, kind, and dependable team member. He collaborates effortlessly with colleagues, always willing to lend support and contribute positively to our school environment. Mark truly embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award. I am grateful for the light he brings to our school each day.

—Stephanie Baker

#### *Rebecca Werder, Paraeducator*

I recently learned that during lunch, Rebecca makes a special effort to connect with one of our students with autism, who chooses to sit at a table alone. Every day, Rebecca approaches him

with a riddle to solve. What may seem like a small gesture is, in reality, a deeply intentional act of inclusion and kindness.

Through something as simple and joyful as a daily riddle, Rebecca provides consistency, engagement, and a moment of genuine connection in what can otherwise be an overwhelming environment. This student looks forward to it. He lights up. And even though he may not seek out social interaction in traditional ways, Rebecca has found a way to bring social connection to him in a way that feels safe and affirming.

This is what Rebecca's sparkle looks like: quiet dedication, thoughtful inclusion, and the ability to bring warmth and joy into a student's day without needing recognition.

Our students are lucky to have her. Thank you, Rebecca!

—Anonymous

### *Jonathan Ziaja, Principal*

I would like to recognize Mr. Ziaja for the exceptional leadership and unwavering support he provides to Long Meadow every day. He truly leads by example. His phone is always on, and he is consistently available to staff and families alike. When a situation needs attention, Mr. Ziaja doesn't wait for someone else to step in—he is often the very first one to respond, take action, and ensure the situation is handled.

What is especially impressive is how reliably he shows up to support his staff and students. Whether it's answering walkie calls, stepping into situations that need immediate assistance, or being present wherever help is needed most, Mr. Ziaja is always among the first to offer support. His willingness to jump in without hesitation sends a clear message: no one is alone, and no task is beneath leadership.

Equally impactful is his commitment to building meaningful relationships throughout the school. He greets students and staff by name, asks thoughtful questions about their lives, remembers past conversations, and takes the time to connect in ways that feel genuine. You won't find Mr. Ziaja behind a closed office door, because his presence is continually felt throughout the building—supporting students, visiting classrooms, and ensuring the school runs smoothly.

Mr. Ziaja's visibility, responsiveness, and hands-on leadership make Long Meadow a place where people feel supported, valued, and confident knowing help is always close by. His dedication to being present and proactive is truly impressive, and our school community is better because of it.

—Stephanie Baker

We haven't known Mr. Ziaja long, but he has been instrumental in making my son's transition to Long Meadow seamless. He was a huge part in making us feel comfortable with switching our son to Long Meadow's Special Education Program from his home school. He has personally called me to discuss issues proactively before they even become issues. He has been helpful, friendly, and supportive. My son feels loved and supported at Long Meadow under Mr. Ziaja's leadership.

— Anonymous

## McGregor Elementary

### *Sofia Artea Diaz, Student*

Sofia is a wonderful friend to Mia, a student who is a part of both our classroom and the Level 4 Program. Sofia treats Mia with the same respect and warmth she shows everyone else. She never focuses on their differences, but instead sees Mia for who she is—a fun, capable, and valued classmate. Sofia makes sure Mia is always included, whether it's inviting her to sit together at lunch, play during recess, or checking in to see if she needs help in the classroom. Through her support, patience, and genuine friendship, Sofia helps Mia feel confident, accepted, and like she truly belongs.

—Lauren Sutherland

### *Kate Koehler, Student*



Kate is a responsible, kind, and warmhearted student who comes to our Level 4/ASD classroom each day with a smile and genuine enthusiasm to help. She is a model student who consistently sets a positive example for others. Kate works with our ASD students daily, supporting them with reading and math assignments while building meaningful connections with her peers with autism. Through her dedication and compassion, she plays an important role in fostering a welcoming and inclusive classroom community. I am incredibly proud of Kate and grateful for the kindness and positive energy she brings to our Level 4/ASD classroom each day.

—Eleonora Richardson

### *Rosalie Paholsky, Student*

Rosalie is a wonderful friend to Mia, a student who is a part of both our classroom and the Level 4 Program. Rosalie treats Mia with the same respect and warmth she shows everyone else. She never focuses on their differences, but instead sees Mia for who she is—a fun, capable, and valued classmate. Rosalie makes sure Mia is always included, whether it's inviting her to sit together at lunch, play during recess, or checking in to see if she needs help in the classroom. Through her support, patience, and genuine friendship, Rosalie helps Mia feel confident, accepted, and like she truly belongs.

—Lauren Sutherland

### *\*Donna Putnam, Paraeducator*

I am nominating an extraordinary and valuable team member that I have the pleasure of working with. Donna Putnam is a para educator in our special education resource room. From the day I met her, I have seen how she consistently goes above and beyond in her service to students, families, and colleagues. Her dedication, compassion, and tireless commitment make her an invaluable member of our school community. Donna has an ability to truly know her students. She understands each child's strengths and weaknesses, their learning styles, and

backgrounds. She does not simply assist; she invests in every child's success with intention and heart.

What sets her apart is what she does beyond her assigned responsibilities. During her limited downtime, she voluntarily pulls students who need additional reading support and has even created a book club to work on literacy skills and a love of reading. By doing this, she has provided struggling readers with a safe, encouraging space to build confidence and make measurable progress. For years, she has also dedicated her Wednesday evenings to volunteering in the neighborhood near our school, tutoring students who need extra academic support. She continuously seeks out materials and develops individualized resources aligned with students' areas of need and IEP goals to ensure that her tutoring sessions are purposeful and effective. Her commitment extends far beyond the school day.

In the classroom, she has mastered how to balance structure with warmth. She knows how to be firm and consistent while remaining loving and supportive. Students respect her, trust her, and genuinely love working with her. She builds relationships with academic expectations, encouragement, and care.

As a colleague, she is equally exceptional. She is a dependable, collaborative team member who is always willing to step in wherever help is needed. Her positive attitude, problem-solving mindset, and student-centered focus strengthen our entire program. There is no doubt that Donna embodies the very best qualities of an educator. Her dedication to students, her willingness to serve beyond expectations, and her compassionate leadership make her profoundly deserving of this nomination. I wholeheartedly and without reservation nominate Donna for the district's Sparkle Award.

— Anonymous

#### *Kendra VanRobays, Speech and Language Pathologist*

I am honored to nominate my son's speech therapist for recognition of her extraordinary dedication, advocacy, and impact on students and families. She has worked with my son, Jack, since he was in Kindergarten and has been a constant, steady presence throughout his special education journey. From the very beginning, she recognized Jack's strengths and challenges and approached her work with both expertise and genuine care. Over the years, she has played a critical role not only in supporting Jack's speech and communication development, but also in helping him build confidence, resilience, and self-advocacy skills.

What truly sets her apart is her unwavering advocacy for Jack. She consistently ensures that his needs are understood and addressed, and she has been a trusted voice during IEP meetings and throughout complex decision-making processes. As parents, the special education system can feel overwhelming at times, but she has gone above and beyond to help us understand the processes, options, and next steps—always with patience, clarity, and compassion.

Her commitment extends far beyond her job description. She treats Jack as an individual, celebrates his progress, and never stops pushing for what will best support his growth. Because of her, Jack has not only made meaningful progress in his speech goals, but he has also felt seen, supported, and believed in. We are deeply grateful for her years of dedication and the profound difference she has made in Jack's life and in our family's

experience navigating special education. She is an exceptional speech therapist and an invaluable advocate for her students, and she is truly deserving of this nomination.

— Anonymous

Since meeting Kendra, I have seen her consistently go above and beyond the expectations of her role, serving as a fierce advocate for all special education students in our building—not just those on her caseload. She is deeply committed to making sure every student receives the support, understanding, and opportunities they deserve. Her involvement extends far beyond her role, as she collaborates with staff, problem-solves challenges, and supports students across programs. Because of her dedication and willingness to be involved wherever she is needed, she has developed a wealth of knowledge about our students and special education services, making her a highly respected resource among her peers. What makes Kendra stand out is the genuine care she shows for all students. She knows each and every student in all programs and in our building, taking the time to build authentic connections that help students feel seen, heard, and valued. She is always quick to respond when students need support, stepping in wherever she is needed— in classrooms, hallway meltdowns, or our self-contained classroom. Her compassion, expertise, and advocacy make a meaningful difference in the lives of our students and strengthen our entire school community. She is the glue that keeps our school community connected and supported, and I am grateful to work with a colleague who brings such passion, dedication, and heart to everything she does.

— Anonymous

*Matthew Christ, Quinton Fairley, Nicolas Kukulka, Wyatt McClelland, Drew Morin, Student/Peer Mentors*

These 5th-grade peer mentors are enthusiastic and warmhearted students who bring tremendous joy to our McGregor Elementary Level 4/ASD classroom. They show up each day with smiles and excitement, ready to



help and support their peers with autism. Every morning during work time, and again after recess for book reading and social studies, they join us with positive attitudes and a genuine willingness to help. They support their classmates with ASD in completing academic tasks, building social skills, and developing meaningful friendships. They also assist with daily living skills, consistently demonstrating patience, kindness, and leadership. These students are motivated, and reliable role models who set a wonderful example for others. Through their daily commitment and compassion, they help create a welcoming and supportive environment and provide a meaningful way to strengthen our inclusive school community.



—Eleonora Richardson

*Henry Buckman, Adelina Dunkel, Yuna Shin, Student/Peer Mentors*



These 5th-grade peer mentors are enthusiastic, warmhearted students who brighten our McGregor Elementary Level 4/ASD classroom each day. They consistently arrive with smiles, excitement, and a readiness to help their peers with autism succeed. Their compassion, positivity, and dedication help create a supportive and joyful learning environment



for everyone. —Eleonora Richardson

*Mila Lieber-LaFata, Kaya Salvaggio, Jaden Young, Student/Peer Mentors*



These 5th-grade peer mentors are enthusiastic and compassionate students who bring tremendous joy to our McGregor Elementary Level 4/ASD classroom. They arrive each day with smiles and excitement, eager to support and encourage their peers with autism. Their kindness, patience, and genuine care help create a welcoming and inclusive environment where every student feels valued, supported, and part of the classroom community.



—Eleonora Richardson

*Amelia Benedict, Haruka Iwadate, Kate Koehler, Hailey Straughen, Student/Peer Mentors*

These 5th-grade peer mentors are enthusiastic and warmhearted students who bring tremendous joy to our McGregor Elementary Level 4/ASD classroom. Each day they arrive with smiles and excitement, ready to help, encourage, and support their peers with autism. They model positive social interactions, read alongside their classmates during literacy time, and help guide peers through academic tasks by offering encouragement and gentle reminders to stay engaged. Their support helps students with ASD build confidence, practice communication skills, and feel more comfortable participating in classroom activities. Their kindness, positivity, and willingness to serve make a meaningful difference in our classroom community and help create a truly inclusive environment where every student feels valued and supported.

—Eleonora Richardson



## Meadow Brook Elementary

### *Alysia Beier, Second Grade Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Mrs. Beier for a Sparkle Award! Mrs. Beier is an exceptional partner and consistently welcomes our students with special needs into her classroom with openness and enthusiasm. She is intentional about ensuring they feel included, valued, and fully integrated within the general education environment.

Mrs. Beier greets our students with Autism with a warm smile and genuine kindness each day. She not only models acceptance and compassion, but also fosters it within her classroom community. She thoughtfully encourages her students to interact with, support, and build meaningful connections with their peers who have special needs. It is truly heartwarming to see how eager her students are to help and collaborate.

Mrs. Beier has created a classroom environment rooted in love, understanding, and inclusion. Both our students and staff are incredibly fortunate to have her as such a strong advocate and partner in supporting our special needs community.

Thank you, Mrs. Beier, for the difference you make every day!

—Candace Cohen

### *Seth Berg, Principal*

Seth is an engaged administrator who is always there to support and encourage staff and students alike. Seth takes the time to get to know each student and is attentive to their unique strengths and needs. He works with team members to ensure every student has what they need, to be comfortable, valued, loved, and successful. We so appreciate having such a supportive administrator.

—Laura Nazione

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Seth Berg for a Sparkle Award. Mr. Berg has been an outstanding administrator for our Meadow Brook community for many years. He is not only a strong and steady leader, but also a passionate advocate for our students with special needs. Mr. Berg consistently goes above and beyond to support both our special education staff and students as they navigate the demands of each day.

What truly sets Mr. Berg apart is his willingness to step in and help whenever needed. He often responds to support calls personally, entering situations with a calm, solution-focused mindset and working collaboratively to problem-solve. His hands-on approach demonstrates his deep commitment to ensuring that every student is supported and successful.

Our special education team is incredibly fortunate to have Mr. Berg as both a leader and a voice for our students with special needs. His dedication, compassion, and leadership truly make a difference in our school community.

Thank you, Mr. Berg, for all that you do!

—Candace Cohen

*Anna Beylerian, ASD Paraeducator*

Anna is a key team member. Her loving and kind nature makes such a difference, and it's clear how much she cares for each student. She is engaging and energetic when interacting with our students. She is clever and creative and knows how to support student regulation, when needed. Anna is a true team player who makes our work together so much better. We are so lucky to have you on the team.

—Laura Nazione

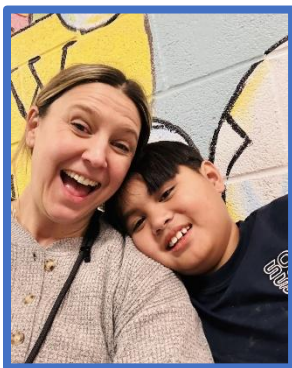
It is with great pleasure that I nominate Anna Beylerian for a well-deserved Sparkle Award! Our Meadow Brook ASD team is incredibly lucky to have Mrs. B as part of our special education team. She brightens the lives of our students with her endless enthusiasm and positivity. Anna brings incredible energy to everything she does and approaches every situation with persistence and determination. She is caring, compassionate, and always willing to try new ideas to support our students. Mrs. B has helped many of our students explore and engage in new activities—something that can be especially challenging for students with ASD. By introducing these opportunities, she is helping them build important life skills in a supportive and encouraging way. Anna consistently goes above and beyond to create meaningful experiences for our students and is deeply dedicated to the success and well-being of our ASD learners. Her commitment to building strong routines and positive learning opportunities makes a difference in our classroom every day. Thank you for all that you do, Anna!

—Candace Cohen

*Candace Cohen, ASD Teacher*

Candace always goes above and beyond for her students. She gives unconditional love and patience to her students. She even takes time to FaceTime or send videos if my son has been struggling at home. Her kindness has helped our son grow and become more confident in himself. She's the greatest!!!!

— Anonymous



As a parent of a child with autism, trusting someone with your child means everything. For the past two years, Kayden's teacher has shown incredible patience, compassion, and dedication. She is calm, patient, and incredibly kind. She goes above and beyond for her students, always keeping us updated and supported as parents.

Most importantly, she truly cares for my son, and that love shows in the way she teaches and encourages him. Knowing Kayden is in her classroom gives me peace of mind every day. She truly deserves this recognition.

—Kristine Ellao

Candace pours her heart and soul into her students. She is a calm presence and brings thoughtful and considerate ideas to our team. Candace is so patient with each student and knows them all so well. Candace is very clever and creative and knows just how to engage each

student, at their own level and while supporting their individual needs. She knows exactly how to help students regulate and will co-regulate with them, as needed. As a team member, Candace is always ready and willing to help. She gives of herself and her time and talents, freely. She is always there to support, lend a laugh, and help problem solve, whenever needed. She is an advocate, mentor, and above all a friend.

—Laura Nazione



Candace has gone above and beyond this year for my son, Rylan. She has a calm presence that attracts Rylan to her. He loves going to school daily and spending time with her in her classroom. She has worked hard with him on his many struggles and is always a positive light, saying things like "we will keep trying!" When a serious issue arises with Rylan at school, she is the person who calls me directly to tell me what is going on. She attends all of the school events to be there for her students to see a familiar face. Candace is an extraordinary special educator and loves her students as if they were her own children. We love Mrs. Cohen!!

—Meghan Madigan Wagner

#### *Camila DeAndrade, ASD Paraeducator*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Camila Andrade for a Sparkle Award!

Since joining our ASD team, Camila has brought an incredible sense of warmth, positivity, and joy to our special needs environment. She is genuinely loving with our students and approaches every interaction with enthusiasm and care. Camila arrives at school each day with a bright, positive attitude, ready to meet whatever challenges come her way.

She is always willing to step in and support teachers in any way needed, demonstrating remarkable flexibility—even adjusting her routine at a moment's notice to best serve our students. Her "whatever it takes" mindset, combined with her grace and professionalism, makes a meaningful difference in the lives of our students and the entire team.

The Special Education team at Meadow Brook is truly fortunate to have Camila as part of our family. Thank you, Camila, for all that you do to create a positive, nurturing, and inclusive environment for our students!

—Candace Cohen

Camila is a vital member of our team. She brings energy and compassion, every day. Her presence has a positive impact on both our students and our staff. Camila is flexible and willing to work with all students. She knows each student and understands their unique needs. She demonstrates attentive care to every student she works with. Camila is a wonderful team player and we are lucky to have her on our team!

—Laura Nazione

*Alyssa Diskin, ASD Teacher*

Alyssa stepped in as a new teacher and team member this year, ready to teach and love her students. She has made connections with each of her students, learning about all of their preferred and enjoyed interests and going out of her way to bring in favorite toys, books, and sensory items for them. Alyssa is a willing and helpful team member. She contributes thoughtful ideas and is ready to support whenever needed.

—Laura Nazione

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Mrs. Diskin for a Sparkle Award. Mrs. Diskin began the school year ready to make a difference, showing a strong commitment to helping her students learn how to manage their behaviors and develop effective self-regulation skills. She consistently demonstrates courage and professionalism, never hesitating to step into challenging or high-stress situations to support students and staff.

Throughout the year, Mrs. Diskin has navigated difficult moments with resilience, patience, and a positive attitude. She provides students who struggle with dysregulation meaningful opportunities to express themselves in a safe, structured, and supportive environment. Her calm presence and steady leadership make a significant impact during some of the most demanding situations.

Mrs. Diskin's strength, and dedication to her students are truly commendable. She should be incredibly proud of the difference she makes each day.

—Candace Cohen

*Holly Dulimba, Paraeducator*

Holly is a wonderful team member. She is always thinking of the students and finding little things that she knows would make them happy (stickers, headbands, fun fidgets, snacks, etc). Holly is helpful and kind and is always willing to help our students and staff. She is energetic and happy. Her festive clothes always brighten the mood, and her supportive, engaging presence helps create an environment where students feel excited to learn. We are so happy to have her on our team.

—Laura Nazione

*Robert Ebole, Physical Education Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Robert Ebole for a Sparkle Award. Mr. E always greets our students with special needs with excitement and energy, making every physical education activity engaging and fun. Our students look forward to gym, and he thoughtfully brings out the equipment and activities that he knows will inspire participation and enjoyment.

Through his encouragement and guidance, he has helped build confidence in many students—so much so that parents have shared moments of surprise and pride, saying things like, “I didn’t realize he could ride a bike!”

Mr. E is not only kind and patient with students, but he is also a collaborative and supportive member of our team, often stopping in the hallways to help problem-solve challenging situations. His fun-loving approach and dedication create meaningful opportunities for our

students with Autism to grow, explore, and succeed. We are truly fortunate to have such a passionate and inspiring teacher on our team. Thank you, Mr. E, for all that you do!

—Candace Cohen

*Leticia Fonseca, ASD Paraeducator*

Leticia pours her whole heart into her job and brings an incredible amount of energy and dedication to everything she does. She is always willing to do whatever it takes to create a loving, safe, and supportive environment for our students with Autism.

Leticia has a natural ability to help students regulate and stay motivated, especially those who may be struggling. She is a wonderful collaborator and works closely with the teacher to carry out activities throughout the day that support students academically, socially, and behaviorally. Her willingness to try new strategies and approaches makes her an invaluable part of our team.

Leticia is consistently supportive of our teaching team and approaches every task with a positive attitude. She also has a strong and intuitive understanding of student behavior and knows how to guide students back to a calm, regulated state when they need extra support.

We are so lucky to have you, Leticia. Thank you for the care, compassion, and dedication you bring to our students every day!

—Candace Cohen

Laura is a core member of our team. She is energetic, playful, and loving and she puts her heart and soul into our students. She has a very thoughtful approach when working with each student, individually, and is attentive to their unique needs. She has formed true bonds with our students which is evident in the way the students clearly love her and feel safe in her care. Laura's dedication and hard work make her a superstar member of our team. We are so incredibly lucky to have her.

—Laura Nazione

*Bonnie Ganan, First Grade Teacher*

Miss Ganan has been an incredibly welcoming general education teacher for one of our students with Autism. She has warmly opened her classroom and has worked closely with both the parents and the special education team to ensure the student feels supported and included. Miss Ganan maintains consistent communication and is always eager to collaborate in ways that help the student be successful.

She greets the student with genuine excitement each day and her positive attitude and willingness to work as part of a team have made a meaningful difference. Inclusive practices are so important for our students with special needs, and Miss Ganan truly models what that looks like in action. We are very grateful for her kindness, flexibility, and dedication to creating a supportive classroom environment for all students. Thank you, Miss Ganan!

—Candace Cohen

*Tracie Guilmet-Hickner, ASD Paraeducator*



Mrs. Hickner is truly an sparkling star. For the past 5 plus years, at Meadowbrook she has been incredible influence on Leila and us as family. Mrs. Hickner consistently provided encouragement, comfort, safety and happiness for Leila and us, we know that Leila enjoyed every field trip. It has been a blessing to have Mrs. Hickner in our lives.

—Seada and Nedim Lejlic

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Tracie Hickner for a Sparkle Award! Tracie brings such a depth of experience and heart to the field of special education. She is truly a wealth of knowledge and is always ready to share thoughtful ideas and strategies to help meet the unique needs of our students with Autism. Her insight and understanding make her an invaluable member of our team.

Tracie is a wonderful collaborator who is always willing to listen, support others, and help our ASD team thoughtfully problem-solve through challenges. She approaches her work with kindness, patience, and genuine care for both students and colleagues.

She also builds meaningful, trusting relationships with our students, helping them feel supported and understood. Tracie puts so much care into organizing schedules, creating thoughtful plans, and developing engaging projects that open doors for our students to experience success. Because of her dedication, compassion, and commitment, our classroom is truly a better place. We are so fortunate to have Mrs. Hickner as part of our team. Thank you for all that you do, Tracie!

—Candace Cohen

Tracie is a a veteran para educator who brings so much knowledge to our team. She is thorough and thoughtful when working with students and has formed true bonds with many of our students, as evidenced by their love for her. Tracie has been a dedicated leader in the para educator community and is committed to helping make a difference. She is a valued member of our team and we appreciate all that she does to support our students.

—Laura Nazione

*Lilian Hessian, Special Education Teacher*

Lilian stepped in as a new teacher and team member, this year. She was ready and willing to support her students and our team in any way needed. Lilian has been very thoughtful in preparing lessons and materials for her students, considering their individual needs and preferred interests. Lilian puts so much time into making connections with her students. She is a wonderful team member and always ready to lend a hug, a laugh, and a supportive hand.

—Laura Nazione

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Mrs. Hessian for a Sparkle Award. Mrs. Hessian stepped into her new teaching role this year with enthusiasm, positivity, and a true passion for her

students. From day one, she has welcomed her class with open arms, creating a nurturing environment where every child feels valued, supported, and encouraged to grow.

Through her dedication and strong collaboration with the team, one of her students with Autism is now successfully integrated into his kindergarten classroom for nearly the entire school day — an incredible accomplishment.

Mrs. Hessian is not only a caring and effective educator, but also a thoughtful and proactive collaborator with her special education team. While some challenges this year have not been easy, she has handled each situation with grace, resilience, and a consistently positive attitude. Thank you, Mrs. Hessian, for your hard work, heart, and commitment to your students each and every day.

—Candace Cohen

*Tiffany Keith, TK Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Tiffany Keith for a Sparkle Award.

Tiffany brings a warm, loving, and genuine kindness to her work, creating a welcoming and supportive environment for our students with special needs. With her extensive experience teaching younger students, she understands the challenges many face as they learn to navigate school while also managing sensory and behavioral needs.

Tiffany is an exceptional partner to our special education team, always willing to collaborate and find the best strategies and opportunities to support our students' growth and success. Her dedication and care make a meaningful difference in the lives of students, both past and present. Thank you, Tiffany, for your ongoing support, compassion, and commitment to our special education community.

—Candace Cohen

*Kelly Kubik, Kindergarten Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Mrs. Kelly Kubik for a Sparkle Award. This year, Mrs. Kubik has created a safe, welcoming, and compassionate environment in her general education classroom for a student with special needs. She has demonstrated patience, understanding, and a genuine commitment to helping this student feel included and successful.

Mrs. Kubik has built a strong partnership with the classroom paraeducator, and together they have supported this student's growth in the general education setting. Through their collaboration, they have been able to provide the structure, encouragement, and support needed for the student to thrive. It has been truly inspiring to watch this student transition to spending the majority of his day in her classroom. During this time, he has gained valuable social opportunities, increased his confidence, and begun developing meaningful friendships with his peers.

Mrs. Kubik's willingness to embrace inclusion and meet the individual needs of her students makes a lasting difference. Thank you, Mrs. Kubik, for creating such a supportive and welcoming environment for students with special needs.

—Candace Cohen

*Parker Lalain, Social Worker*

Parker stepped in as a new school social worker and team member this year. She stepped into the role as if she has been here for years. She has developed strong relationships with her students. Parker creates lessons that are applicable and functional for her students. She goes above and beyond to accommodate student needs and to build relationships with them, such as lunch bunch groups and individual check ins as needed. Parker is helpful and supportive as a team member. She contributes great ideas to our team and she is always ready and willing to support. Parker is a key member to our team and we are so happy to have her.

—Laura Nazione

It is my pleasure to nominate Parker Lalain for a Sparkle Award! Parker has been a wonderful addition to the special education team at Meadow Brook. She has done an excellent job supporting our students as they learn to identify and understand the Zones of Regulation, while also giving them the time and space they need to regulate and be ready to move forward. Parker has a very calm and reassuring demeanor, which allows her to remain steady and supportive during challenging situations. Her ability to stay composed helps our students feel safe and supported as they work through their emotions.

Parker has truly become someone our ASD team can rely on, and we are grateful for the care and dedication she brings to our students every day. Thank you, Parker!

—Candace Cohen

*\*Amy Larson, Food Service Lead*

It is our pleasure to nominate Amy Larson for a Sparkle Award. As the head person in our kitchen, Amy consistently shows kindness, patience, and understanding toward our students with special needs. She always makes sure they feel supported when they come through the lunch line. Amy has been wonderful about working with our team to create systems that help students become more independent when getting their lunch items, which has helped build both their confidence and life skills.

Amy has also collaborated with us to create a special cafeteria job for one of our ASD students. This opportunity has allowed the student to take pride in having a meaningful responsibility. Amy has been incredibly flexible and thoughtful in helping make this possible.

We truly appreciate Amy's compassion, patience, and willingness to problem-solve with our team. Her positive attitude and dedication help create a welcoming environment for all students, and she truly makes a difference every day!

—Candace Cohen

*Vita Mendez, Behavior Technician*

Vita is a true ray of sunshine to the students she works with and fosters a sense of belonging and support for everyone. She works with students that have some of the highest behavioral needs and wraps each of them with compassion and understanding. Vita has an incredible ability to meet students exactly where they are, providing the right level of support for their emotional and behavioral needs at any given moment. Her compassionate approach allows her

to connect with each student on a deep level, building trust and fostering a safe and supportive environment. Vita is always thinking outside the box and 12 steps ahead. She creates unique learning opportunities tailored to the needs of each student, ensuring they have the chance to thrive academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. She's a tireless advocate for her students and uses her ingenuity to find solutions that work for each child in a neuro-affirming and supportive way.

—Anonymous

### *Erin Moser, ASD Paraeducator*

Erin has a natural ability to nurture and support students, every day. Her gentle and caring demeanor is evident in all that she does. Erin is attentive to student strengths and needs. She is a strong team player and is flexible in her ability to support all learners. We are so grateful to have Erin on our team.

—Laura Nazione

It is an honor to nominate Erin Moser for the Sparkle Award in recognition of her exemplary work with our youngest special needs students. The impact of her dedication and compassion has been nothing short of remarkable.

Each day, Erin pours her heart into supporting our youngest learners with ASD, including one kindergartener in particular. She has made it her top priority to build a meaningful and trusting relationship with this student, ensuring he experiences success each day. Erin thoughtfully considers his strengths and challenges, adapting her approach to match his unique learning style and creating opportunities for him to thrive throughout the school day. Now more than 100 days into the school year, Erin continues to provide consistent encouragement and positive learning experiences that help this student grow and gain confidence.

Erin has a natural gift for communicating with young children. She takes the time to talk with them, listen to them, and show genuine interest in who they are as individuals. When children work with Erin, they feel safe, valued, and cared for. Because of this, they are willing to take risks in their learning, knowing that Mrs. Moser believes in them and supports them every step of the way.

As a kindergarten teacher who has the privilege of watching Erin work with these special children every day, I am continually amazed by the small miracles that happen in our classroom. The students who spend their days with Erin truly feel that they are the most important child in her eyes and in her heart.

Thank you, Erin Moser, for the positive impact you make on our youngest learners each and every day. The time, energy, planning, and love you invest in your work makes a meaningful difference in the lives of the children you serve. It is with great enthusiasm that I nominate this extraordinary Paraeducator for the Sparkle Award. Erin's dedication to children and her deep desire to help them succeed are what make the everyday miracles happen in our classrooms at Meadow Brook.

—Kelly Kubik

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Erin Moser for a well-deserved Sparkle Award. Erin goes above and beyond every single day for our students with special needs. She is an exceptionally hard worker, always willing to do whatever it takes to improve a situation or support a student. Erin has a remarkable ability to notice opportunities to help or positively influence others, often in ways that go unseen, and she does so quietly and selflessly because she knows it will make a difference.

Erin is kind, compassionate, and truly dedicated to our ASD community. This year in particular, she has been instrumental in supporting a student with ASD who has successfully transitioned to spending the majority of his day in a general education classroom. Erin has built a strong partnership with the general education teacher, creating a pathway for the student to become more independent and fully engaged with his same-aged peers. Through her efforts, she has fostered meaningful social connections and opportunities for the student to thrive.

Beyond her work with students, Erin consistently goes the extra mile for both teachers and peers, often using her own breaks or lunchtime to help without ever seeking recognition. She is fully committed—heart and soul—to her job and to the students she serves.

We are incredibly fortunate to have Erin as part of our team. Thank you, Erin, for your unwavering dedication, compassion, and all that you do to make a difference every day!

—Candace Cohen

#### *Laura Nazione, Speech and Language Pathologist*

It is my pleasure to nominate Laura Nazione for a Sparkle Award! Laura is a strong and valued member of our ASD team. She not only supports her students in learning the best ways to communicate, but she is also an incredibly reliable and supportive team member.

Laura is always willing to step in and help when support is needed in our classrooms. Her expertise is invaluable when we are problem-solving around the complex needs of our students. She consistently models effective strategies for teachers in the classroom and provides thoughtful feedback that helps us grow as educators.

Laura's knowledge, dedication, and collaborative spirit make her such an important part of our team. We are truly fortunate to work alongside her. Thank you, Laura, for all that you do for the students and staff at Meadow Brook!

—Candace Cohen

#### *Karen Palmieri, ASD Paraeducator*

Karen is dedicated to supporting students in our program classrooms. She has used her knowledge of ASL to support specific student needs and allows our student to feel connected and included throughout the school day, through ASL communication. Karen cares about the students and is supportive of their unique needs. She is kind and considerate and willing to lend a helping hand. We so appreciate having Karen on our team.

—Laura Nazione

It is my pleasure to nominate Karen Palmieri for a Sparkle Award! Karen has made a wonderful impact on one of our students with hearing loss. She goes above and beyond her role as an ASD para by also providing signing support for a student learning ASL. Through her patience,

warmth, and care, Karen has built a strong, trusting connection that makes a meaningful difference in this student's day-to-day experience.

Karen's kindness extends to all of our students with Autism, and she is always ready to lend a helping hand. She also takes initiative in keeping our classroom organized and ensures that end-of-day routines run smoothly, creating a welcoming and structured environment for everyone.

Thank you, Karen, for your dedication!

—Candace Cohen

### *Trisha Peck, ASD Paraeducator*

Trish has been part of our team for many years. She builds relationships with the students and knows their unique interests. She is dedicated to helping make materials that support student learning in fun and visually supported ways. She is flexible and works with all of our students in individually supportive ways. Trish is a team player and a wonderful member of our team.

—Laura Nazione

I am delighted to nominate Patricia Peck for a Sparkle Award. Trisha demonstrates genuine care and dedication to our students with Autism and to the entire special education team at Meadow Brook. With her wealth of experience, she consistently supports teachers in implementing their plans for our students, making sure they are engaging for them. Trisha is so supportive with preparing materials, planning creative opportunities, and finding ways to make learning both fun and accessible.

Her efforts have also been instrumental in helping our ASD students participate successfully in the general education classroom, fostering independence and confidence in a more inclusive setting. Thank you, Trisha, for your unwavering commitment, creativity, and support. Our special education community is incredibly fortunate to have you!

—Candace Cohen

### *Karolina Pelc, Building Sub*

It is my pleasure to nominate Karolina Pelc for a Sparkle Award. Karolina serves as our building substitute and consistently steps in wherever she is needed. Whenever she is assigned to one of our three ASD classrooms, she arrives with a calm presence and a warm, positive attitude. Karolina is always willing to help in any way we ask and is genuinely happy to work with our students.

Even when she is not assigned to our classrooms, Karolina often checks in to see if we need any support. Her willingness to help and her proactive approach make a big difference. She is always ready to jump into any situation that may arise and handles challenges with patience and strong problem-solving skills.

Karolina has become a valued part of our team, and we are incredibly grateful for the care, flexibility, and support she brings to our students and staff. We truly appreciate everything she does and are thankful to have her as part of our school community.

—Candace Cohen

*Eve Putrus, Paraeducator*

Eve is truly the heartbeat of our building. She fully embodies the term "team player" every single day. Whether a student is officially on her "caseload" or not, she never hesitates to jump in, lend a hand, or provide the exact support needed. She is flexible and ready to step into any situation with a warm smile and a steady hand which makes everyone around her feel supported. Eve is a person we can always count on. She makes our school a better, kinder place for every student and staff member. Eve is not only a team member and colleague but a true friend. We are so grateful to have her on our team.

—Laura Nazione

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Eve Putrus for a Sparkle Award. Eve is truly an incredible support for our students with special needs, but her impact reaches far beyond that. She is also a wonderful partner and collaborator with the entire special education team at Meadow Brook. Eve is the kind of person who is always willing to step in and help wherever she is needed. She consistently goes above and beyond what would normally be expected in her role as a school employee.

Eve has helped problem-solve challenging situations, provided guidance and instruction, responded to countless calls for support, and even acted like a "school mom" to many of our teachers when they need encouragement or advice. She brings kindness, compassion, and patience to everything she does, while also knowing when to be firm and direct to help move situations forward.

Our team is incredibly fortunate to have Eve as part of the Meadow Brook Special Education staff. Her dedication, positivity, and willingness to help others truly make a difference in our school community. Thank you, Eve, for everything you do!

—Candace Cohen

*Domonique Rose, Music Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Niki Rose for a Sparkle Award. Niki is an extraordinary teacher who inspires our students with special needs to explore and develop a love for music. She consistently creates engaging opportunities for every student to participate and celebrate music, thoughtfully bringing out their favorite instruments and teaching them about rhythm while incorporating meaningful sensory experiences.

Her ASD music classes are structured and predictable, providing students with the routine and support they need to feel confident and prepared. Niki also goes above and beyond by creating social stories that help students navigate music-related assemblies and field trips, ensuring they can participate fully and successfully.

Niki is a true partner to our special education team, always collaborating to enhance the learning experience for our students. Thank you, Niki, for your dedication, creativity, and the joy you bring to our students every day!

—Candace Cohen

*Katie Stephens, Art Teacher*

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Katie Stephens for a Sparkle Award.

Katie consistently provides engaging and creative artistic opportunities for our students with Autism. She greets each student with positivity and enthusiasm, setting the tone for a fun and inspiring learning experience. While she often has a project planned, Katie is flexible and skillfully adapts activities on the spot to meet students where they are, ensuring everyone can participate and succeed.

Through her thoughtful approach, she has introduced students to a wide variety of creative experiences while also incorporating meaningful sensory input. Katie's energy and encouragement have made art fun and empowering, helping students embrace the motto, "You can do it!" Thank you, Katie, for your dedication, creativity, and the joy you bring to our students every day!

—Candace Cohen

*Hadleigh Stewart, Student*



Hadleigh has been in my son, Rylan's, class for two years now. At the Hoedown field trip this year, Hadleigh was on the same hayride with us. My son is a nonspeaker and sometimes, even adults, don't know how to interact with him. We speak to him like we'd speak to any other child and Hadleigh doesn't miss a beat and speaks to Rylan just like he's another student in her class. On the hayride, she was showing him her toy and explaining the toy to him. She said "Are you ready, Rylan?" before the hayride took off! Sometimes people won't ask him questions because he doesn't speak. But he does have some sign language and he can answer some questions. It's heartwarming to see a young child truly see past Rylan's autism and nonspeaking.

—Meghan Madigan Wagner

*Lana Sweney, ASD Paraeducator*

Lana has been such a blessing to our family. She has taken such amazing care of our son for years. He loves her so much and looks forward to going to school because of her love. Thank you Lana for being such a bright light in this world.

— Anonymous

Lana is a veteran para educator with our team. She is consistent and dedicated. Lana is a true team player, always ready to jump in (no pun intended) and support both students and staff alike. She lends many great ideas, that often include thinking outside the box, when problem solving or finding better or more efficient methods. It is clear how much she cares about each student, individually. Thank you for being such an essential part of our team.

—Laura Nazione

It is with great pleasure that I nominate Lana Sweney for a Sparkle Award. Lana is an incredibly knowledgeable and experienced professional in the field of Autism and special education. She approaches every situation with calm and confidence, even in the most challenging moments. Her patience, insight, and expertise make her an invaluable resource for both teachers and administrators, and her guidance is always highly respected and appreciated.

Lana has a remarkable ability to connect with students who exhibit challenging behaviors. She balances warmth and compassion with firmness and structure, helping students grow and succeed under her guidance. Over the years, she has positively influenced countless students with Autism, watching them develop and thrive in meaningful ways.

Meadow Brook and our Autism community are truly fortunate to have Lana on our team. Thank you, Lana, for your dedication, wisdom, and unwavering support for our students and staff alike!

—Candace Cohen

*Liz Vernon, Learning Consultant*

Liz is a "jack of all trades" and truly one of a kind. Liz is always there to support and lend a helping hand, to problem solve, and to provide encouragement. She is hands on and helps whenever and wherever needed. Not only does she support all learners but she makes sure they are engaged and having fun while doing it. Liz has been such a wonderful addition to our team and our school would not run without her.

—Laura Nazione

I am thrilled to nominate Liz Vernon for a Sparkle Award! Mrs. Vernon has been an essential part of our special education team, consistently helping us problem-solve through complex and challenging situations. She regularly sets aside her own responsibilities to respond to support calls, assisting our ASD students and team in navigating moments of dysregulation with professionalism and care.

Liz is always ready to step in wherever she is needed. She has an incredible ability to walk into a situation, quickly assess what is happening, and seamlessly pick up right where we left off—often without needing additional explanation. Her initiative, expertise, and calm presence make a meaningful difference for both students and staff. Liz is truly a team player, and we are incredibly fortunate to have her as part of our Meadow Brook special education team. Thank you, Liz!

—Candace Cohen

*Kelly Vires, Occupational Therapist*

Kelly is a pivotal part of our team. She is hard working. Kelly is thorough and clearly well-versed in OT. She offers great ideas to support in problem solving and student success. Kelly's ideas for our special needs students are always creative and effective. Kelly is a team player and is always ready and willing to support. She collaborates well with staff to ensure that all students have what they need to maintain regulation and learning. We are so lucky to have Kelly on our team.

—Laura Nazione

I would like to take this opportunity to nominate Kelly Vires for a Sparkle Award. Kelly consistently goes above and beyond to help our students reach their full potential through a variety of learning modalities. She brings great creativity to her teaching and is always thinking of new ways to support our students. Kelly regularly shares thoughtful ideas to help students improve skills such as writing, cutting, and overall self-regulation. Her strategies are always well thought out and tailored to meet the individual needs of each student. Kelly's dedication, creativity, and willingness to collaborate make a meaningful difference for both our students and staff. Thank you, Kelly, for all that you do to support our students!  
—Candace Cohen

## Musson Elementary

### *Eva Anisimova, Student*

Eva has been a friend to our son since day one of our start at Musson Elementary. From the very beginning, she welcomed him with kindness and openness, and over time their friendship has grown into something truly endearing.  
—Kristy White

### *Becky Barthel, Social Worker*

Becky brings warmth, empathy, and unwavering commitment to her role as a social worker. She provides critical emotional and social support to our students who benefit from her understanding and advocacy. Becky creates safe spaces for students to express themselves, develop coping skills, and build positive relationships. Her collaboration with families and staff strengthens our school community and helps ensure that every student feels supported and valued.  
—Madelyn Perkins

Although Mrs. Barthel is new to our school this year, she has already made a truly lasting impact on our son and our family. After our previous social worker moved out of state a couple of years ago, there was a noticeable gap in the support system our son relies on. Mrs. Barthel has stepped into that role in a way that feels like the missing piece of the puzzle. She works with our son with patience, understanding, and genuine care, helping him navigate challenges while building the skills he needs to grow both socially and emotionally. Her ability to connect with him and meet him where he is has made a meaningful difference in his daily school experience. Mrs. Barthel's presence has brought a renewed sense of support and stability to our son's team. Even in a short amount of time, she has shown how deeply she cares about the students she serves and their success. We are incredibly grateful for the positive influence she has already had.  
—Kristy White

*Anasuya Basu, ASD Paraeducator*

Anasuya's thoughtful and nurturing approach has had a profound impact on our students. She is deeply attentive to both academic and emotional needs, always ensuring that students feel seen and respected. Her patience and steady encouragement help students build confidence and resilience, even during difficult moments. Anasuya's commitment to supporting every child with dignity and care truly exemplifies what it means to be an exceptional Paraeducator.

—Maddie Perkins

*Kylie Bice, Speech and Language Pathologist*

Kylie's work with our students reflects both professional excellence and genuine care. She skillfully supports communication development for all learners, with a particular strength in meeting the diverse needs of students with Autism. Through engaging, individualized, and evidence-based practices, Kylie helps students find their voices and build meaningful connections. Her collaboration with teachers and families ensures that communication goals are supported across settings, making a lasting difference in students' daily lives.

—Madelyn Perkins

Ms. Bice joined Musson with a fresh perspective and thoughtful new ideas for supporting students through speech intervention. We have truly appreciated her approach with our daughter and the way she partners with families to keep progress going at home as well. She shares strategies that feel practical and encouraging, making it easy for us to support the work our child is doing at school. Our student genuinely looks forward to her special time with Ms. Bice and comes away motivated to keep growing, reaching goals, and taking on new challenges. Ms. Bice has created a space where our child feels supported and proud of her progress, and that kind of encouragement makes a lasting impact.

—Cestari Family

*Debi Boyd, Paraeducator*

Mrs. Boyd has such a thoughtful presence in the way she supports students throughout the school day. Her attention and awareness never go unnoticed. She is always looking out for the students in her care, making sure they feel supported in every setting. From working with our daughter on her goals in the classroom to offering guidance on the playground and in the hallways, Mrs. Boyd helps create a sense of consistency and safety throughout the day. Knowing there is someone so attentive and invested in our child's success brings so much comfort to our family. Her care helps students feel seen, supported, and capable wherever they are in the school.

—Cestari Family

*Ellie Buschmohle, Student*

Ellie is truly a ray of sunshine! At such a young age, she shows an exceptional level of patience, kindness, and empathy towards not only our son but all of her classmates. She consistently treats others with respect and understanding, helping create an environment where students

feel valued. Her natural warmth and gentle spirit make a meaningful difference, especially for students who may need a little extra support or encouragement. Ellie is a wonderful example of what it means to be an inclusive and compassionate classmate.

—Kristy White

*Vijaya Dharamvarapu, ASD Paraeducator*

Vijaya brings kindness, patience, and a deep sense of responsibility to her work with our students. She takes the time to build meaningful connections, helping students feel comfortable, confident, and ready to learn. Her gentle guidance and encouraging attitude make a lasting difference in students' daily experiences. Vijaya's commitment to fostering growth and independence is truly appreciated, and her contributions are invaluable to our classroom.

—Madelyn Perkins

*Pavitra Giridharan, ASD Paraeducator*

Pavitra's dedication and calm presence make a meaningful difference in our classroom every single day. She approaches each student with patience, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to helping them feel safe and supported. Her ability to anticipate students' needs and respond with kindness and consistency has helped foster trust and growth, both academically and socially. Pavitra's hard work and genuine care shine through in all that she does, and our classroom is stronger because of her.

—Madelyn Perkins

*Heather Guzik, School Psychologist*

Heather consistently demonstrates exceptional dedication to supporting our students' social, emotional, and behavioral well-being. Her thoughtful assessments, compassionate approach, and collaborative problem-solving have been especially impactful for our students with Autism. Heather builds strong relationships with students, families, and staff, helping to create individualized supports that foster confidence, resilience, and success. Her calm presence and deep expertise make her an invaluable advocate for every child she serves.

—Madelyn Perkins

Mrs. Guzik has been such an incredible partner to our family and to our daughter's support team. She has a remarkable ability to help identify tools and strategies that truly set students up for success. From her detailed and thoughtful reporting to her kind and responsive communication, she has been wonderful to work with every step of the way. What stands out most is her ability to make the complicated feel understandable and approachable. She creates a space where our student feels comfortable sharing, reflecting, and learning how to advocate for herself. That is such an important skill, and Mrs. Guzik fosters it with patience and care. Her thoughtful guidance has made a meaningful difference for our child and for our family, and we feel incredibly grateful for her support.

—Cestari Family

Mrs. Guzik has been a true constant on our son's support team over the years. As staff members and roles have evolved, she has remained a steady and dependable presence for both our son and our family. That consistency is incredibly meaningful when navigating the complexities of special education.

She has witnessed the many changes and challenges along the way—what at times has truly felt like a rollercoaster—and through it all she continues to provide thoughtful guidance, understanding, and professional insight. Her ability to look at the bigger picture while still focusing on the individual needs of each student makes her an invaluable part of the team supporting our son.

Mrs. Guzik's dedication, experience, and commitment to the students she serves make a lasting difference. Having someone who brings both expertise and continuity to a child's educational journey is incredibly important, and we are deeply grateful for the role she has played over the years.

—Kristy White

#### *Charles Hong, Teacher*

Charles consistently creates a welcoming classroom where all students feel valued and supported. He is intentional about using inclusive practices that allow all students to participate meaningfully alongside their peers. His patience and flexibility help ensure every student has access to learning and success.

—Maddie Perkins

#### *Shilpa Kaur, ASD Paraeducator*

Shilpa brings warmth, positivity, and incredible attentiveness to her role as a Paraeducator. She consistently goes above and beyond to support students through challenges, celebrate their successes, and encourage independence. Her flexibility and willingness to adapt to each child's unique needs make her an invaluable member of our team. Shilpa's compassion and dedication help create an inclusive environment where students feel understood and empowered.

—Madelyn Perkins

#### *Kristi Kaye, Resource Room Teacher*

My favorite part about Ms Kaye is the collaborative relationship she has created with us as parents. The way she includes us and communicates with us really stands out, even in comparison to all of our other wonderful teachers, aids, and support educators.

At the beginning of the school year, she immediately introduced herself, and invited us to come visit her and her resource room on curriculum night. Then, she wasn't just there, she welcomed us in and sat down and talked to us for 20 minutes! She shared what she already loved about our son, and showed us what she had been working on with him in the first couple of weeks of school. She was already able to show us some of his favorite activities. She took note of our ongoing questions. She gave us her cell number. Then, she followed up on our questions, even when they involved additional steps and working with others on our son's care team. She kept us in the loop, and even called me to share and talk about the conclusions of an assessment.

When we had parent-teacher conferences, she was there meeting with us, our son's teacher, and his other resource teacher. She messages us pictures and about successes that make my mama heart sing. She emails just about weekly to share what they've worked on, and what we can practice or support at home.

When I noticed a lowered level for our son's reading, she was the first person I reached out to. And she was the first person I heard back from. Ms Kaye's focus on and gift for parental involvement and communication really make her sparkle, even among so many other sparkly educators. Thank you Miss Kaye!

—Lindsay Abdulahad

Mrs. Kaye has been a phenomenal addition to our son's support team this year. In many ways, she feels like "Mom 2.0" while he is at school. She brings a level of care, patience, and dedication that goes far beyond academics, ensuring that our son feels safe, understood, and supported each day.

Mrs. Kaye has a remarkable ability to connect with her students, meeting them where they are while helping them grow in confidence and skills. She approaches challenges with compassion and persistence, always looking for ways to help her students succeed. Her support has made a meaningful difference not only in our son's educational experience, but also in the reassurance it brings to our family.

Teachers like Mrs. Kaye are truly special. She creates a space where students who need additional support can thrive, and her kindness and commitment shine through in everything she does. We are incredibly grateful for the role she plays in our son's journey.

—Kristy White

#### *Amy King, Art Teacher*

Mrs. King consistently creates a welcoming and inclusive environment where our students with Autism can express themselves creatively and confidently. Through thoughtful lesson design, visual supports, and flexible approaches, they ensure every student can engage meaningfully in the artistic process. Her patience, encouragement, and ability to celebrate each child's unique strengths allow students to build fine motor skills, self-expression, and confidence while experiencing the joy of art.

—Maddie Perkins and Jamie Blake

#### *Jamie Kleinhans, Teacher*

Jamie works diligently to foster an inclusive environment where differences are respected and celebrated. Her space welcomes all students and makes students feel safe. Her calm, supportive approach helps students build confidence and a sense of belonging.

—Maddie Perkins

#### *Lisa Leonard, Paraeducator*

Lisa is an incredible paraeducator! Her willingness to try new things whenever needed is incredible. Also, she is truly the Data Queen! Thank you for always being diligent to get and gain

all of the data that is needed. Lisa, we appreciate you and our Resource Program wouldn't run as well as it does without you!

—Musson Resource Team

Mrs. Leonard is truly a gift to Musson and to all the families lucky enough to know her. Her compassion and joy are felt the moment you meet her. Our family feels forever grateful that we first met Mrs. Leonard during our daughter's kindergarten year, when she took the time to truly get to know the students as individuals. She had a special way of noticing the kind qualities in each child and encouraging those positive behaviors so thoughtfully.

This year, Mrs. Leonard took that impact even further by reintroducing the Kindness Club at Musson. Students of all ages, grades, and abilities voluntarily gathered on Wednesday mornings before school to talk about what kindness is, what it means, and what it looks and feels like in everyday life. They practiced together, reflected together, and carried those lessons with them throughout their school days and back into their homes and community. Hearing our daughter share those messages and take them to heart has been such a meaningful experience for our family.

Mrs. Leonard has certainly helped our daughter grow and improve on her IEP goals, but the impact goes even deeper than that. She has helped transform our daughter's confidence in everyday life. That kind of influence is truly extraordinary, and our Musson community is better because of her.

—Cestari Family

### *Maya Marsh, Occupational Therapist*

Maya's expertise and creativity shine through in her work with students across our school. She plays a vital role in supporting sensory regulation, fine motor development, and functional skills. Maya's individualized strategies and hands-on approach empower students to participate more fully and confidently in their learning. Her collaborative spirit and deep understanding of student needs make her an essential part of our support team.

—Madelyn Perkins

Maya has been our son's Occupational Therapist since kindergarten, and her support has been an incredibly important part of his educational journey. This nomination feels long overdue because the consistency, dedication, and care she has shown over the years have made such a meaningful impact.

Occupational therapy often works quietly in the background, but the skills Maya helps build are essential for students to access their learning and feel confident in the classroom. Through her patience, expertise, and encouragement, she has helped our son develop skills that support not only his academic progress but also his independence and confidence.

What makes Maya so special is her long-term commitment to the students she serves. Over the years, she has been a steady and supportive presence, always working to help our son reach his potential. We are incredibly grateful for the role she has played in his growth, and it feels only right to recognize the difference she continues to make.

—Kristy White

### *Laura Matthews, Principal*

Laura's leadership sets the tone for a truly inclusive and supportive school environment. She consistently champions the needs of all students, with a strong commitment to ensuring that all students receive the understanding, resources, and opportunities they deserve. Laura fosters a culture of collaboration, compassion, and high expectations, empowering staff to do their best work. Her vision, dedication, and genuine care for students and staff alike make our school a place where everyone can thrive.

—Madelyn Perkins

Mrs. Matthews demonstrates an incredible level of dedication to the students and families in our school community. As a principal, she carries the responsibility of supporting many students and families, and yet she consistently makes the time to listen, communicate, and show up when it matters most.

Between the many emails, meetings, and conversations she manages—not just with our family, but with countless others—her commitment to ensuring students receive the support they need is clear. The time and attention she gives to these efforts is truly priceless, especially for families navigating the complexities of special education.

Mrs. Matthews' leadership reflects compassion, patience, and a genuine desire to see every student succeed. Her willingness to invest her time and energy into supporting families and collaborating with staff makes a meaningful difference in our school community.

—Kristy White

### *Laura and Weston Matthews, Principal and Chief Happiness Officer*

When school days feel heavy or overwhelming, kids need a soft place to land. At Musson, we are so lucky to have Mrs. Matthews and Weston there to help provide exactly that. Mrs. Matthews leads with such care for the students in her building, always making time to check in when a child needs a moment of support. Whether it is taking a short walk, having a quiet chat, or simply creating space for a student to reset, she meets kids with patience and understanding. And of course, Weston plays a very important role in that support as well. A quick visit, a pet in the hallway, or a moment spent with Weston can completely shift a child's day. Together, Mrs. Matthews and Weston help create a school environment where students feel safe, comforted, and cared for when they need it most. Musson is incredibly fortunate to have both of them looking out for our students.

—Cestari Family

### *Weston Matthews, Service Dog*

Weston has quickly become a beloved member of our school community. As our school's service dog, he brings a unique kind of comfort and connection that students and staff alike truly cherish. With his gentle nature, cozy personality, and just a giant ball of fluff, it's impossible not to smile when Weston is around.

Beyond being adored by everyone who meets him, Weston plays an important role in helping create a calm and supportive environment for students. His presence offers comfort, emotional support, and moments of joy that can make a big difference during the school day.

Weston reminds us that support can come in many forms, and his quiet companionship has a way of brightening the atmosphere for the entire school. He is a special part of the community and very deserving of recognition for the happiness and comfort he brings to so many.

—Kristy White

*Kate McBride, Teacher*

Kate goes above and beyond to ensure her classroom is a safe and inclusive space for all learners. She is proactive in providing structure, clear expectations, and encouragement for all students. Her dedication helps students successfully transition and participate in the general education environment.

—Maddie Perkins

*Jennifer McGrogan, P.E. Teacher*

Mrs. McGrogan demonstrates exceptional dedication to meeting the diverse needs of our students with Autism. By adapting activities, providing clear structure, and fostering a positive, supportive atmosphere, Jenny makes movement accessible and enjoyable for all learners. Her commitment helps students develop motor skills, teamwork, self-regulation, and confidence, while ensuring every child feels included, safe, and successful during physical activity.

—Maddie Perkins and Jamie Blake

*Andrew McNeilly, District Behavior Consultant*

Andrew, you are a wealth of knowledge and a tremendous resource to us! You are so helpful and hardworking! Your knowledge, resources, and support has helped our team so much. We appreciate all of your hard work, help, and laughs!

—Musson Elementary

Mr. McNeilly is a newer addition to our son's support team, yet in a short amount of time he has already made a meaningful impact. It is clear that he has taken the time to truly understand our son—his strengths, his challenges, and the unique ways he experiences the world.

What stands out most is how naturally Mr. McNeilly seems to connect the dots when it comes to our son's needs. As a parent, it can sometimes be difficult to articulate the nuances of your child's experiences, but Mr. McNeilly consistently demonstrates a deep understanding of what we are trying to express. That level of insight reflects not only attentiveness, but also a true mastery of his craft.

His ability to recognize and respond to our son's needs so quickly has made him an invaluable part of the team supporting him. Educators and specialists who bring that level of awareness, skill, and dedication make a profound difference for students and families alike.

—Kristy White

*Maryanne Munroe, Resource Teacher*

The world of special education can sometimes feel confusing and overwhelming for students and parents alike. Mrs. Munroe has always been a grounded, calm, and reassuring presence at Musson. Every interaction with her leaves me feeling more at ease, more trusting, and more supported. She leads with both accountability and compassion, which creates such a healthy and supportive environment for students as they learn and grow. It means so much to know that there are educators who genuinely care about the whole child and take the time to guide them with patience and understanding. Having someone like Mrs. Munroe in our school community is an absolute privilege, and her care and leadership will never go unnoticed.

—Cestari Family

*Cheryl Ohlert, Paraeducator*

Mrs. Ohlert shows such patience and encouragement in the way she supports students each day. She has a wonderful ability to break things down in a way that makes learning feel approachable and achievable. Whether it is working through sentences or helping untangle a tricky math problem, she takes the time to guide students step by step so they can truly understand and build new learning connections. Just as important, she is always making sure students feel confident in themselves as they move forward. That steady encouragement makes a lasting impact. Because of Mrs. Ohlert's care and support, our student feels more capable and confident carrying what she learns into the rest of her learning journey.

—Cestari Family

*Leslie Palumbo, Secretary*

Mrs. Palumbo truly embodies what it means to see, hear, and care for the students in our school community. She is so often the first friendly smile that greets students when they walk into the office, and that warmth immediately makes Musson feel like a safe and welcoming place. But her role goes far beyond the front desk. Mrs. Palumbo notices when a student is having a hard moment and responds with such genuine kindness and compassion. She has been there for my daughter on days when her heart felt heavy and has always been ready with comfort, encouragement, and even a much needed hug. Those small moments of care make a big difference in a child's day. Mrs. Palumbo helps create an environment where students know they are supported and valued, and our school is better because of her presence.

—Cestari Family

*Veena Patil, Paraeducator*

Veena is an incredibly patient and hard working Paraeducator. This is her first year servicing students with IEPs and she has done an outstanding job being flexible, trying new things, and providing patience to our students each and everyday. We appreciate you so much Veena!

—Musson Resource Team

*Maddie Perkins, Elementary ASD Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Madelyn Perkins for a Sparkle Award. Maddie is an ASD teacher who brings tremendous heart, compassion, and enthusiasm to her work. Her students are not just learners in her classroom — they are valued and deeply cared for. She celebrates every success, advocates for her students' needs, and creates a safe, fun environment where children can learn.

This year has brought significant changes to her role and yet she has met these challenges with determination. Through it all, she has remained steady. She is not only an outstanding educator but also a caring colleague and friend who strengthens her entire school community. You are appreciated, Madelyn!

—Sonali Arora-Mata

*Angela Poppe, Resource Teacher*

If sunshine could take human form, it would look a lot like Mrs. Poppe. She greets students with a smile, a high five, and an unwaveringly positive spirit that immediately makes them feel safe and encouraged. This year she has been working closely with our daughter, and the confidence that shines through after their time together is incredible to see. Mrs. Poppe has a special way of building students up through encouragement, curiosity, and affirmations that help them believe in themselves. She asks thoughtful questions that push students to think a little deeper while still making them feel supported every step of the way. Her warmth and positivity have a massive impact on the special education students at Musson, and our family feels so fortunate that our daughter gets to learn and grow with her.

—Cestari Family

*Claire & Molly Rosevear, Students*

Claire and Molly truly show what the Sparkle Award is all about through their kindness, empathy, and commitment to including others. During March's Reading Month, they thoughtfully asked if they could come read a book to our ASD classroom because they wanted to make sure our students were included and didn't feel left out of the school's celebrations. Their visit meant so much to our class. They came in with warm smiles, read with enthusiasm, and took the time to connect with the students in a way that showed patience, respect, and genuine friendship. Both girls wrote thoughtful notes expressing how grateful they were for the opportunity to spend time in our classroom and be a friend to our students. Their words showed how much they valued the experience and how naturally they care about others. Their kindness, initiative, and willingness to include all classmates helps make our school a more welcoming place for everyone. Claire and Molly are wonderful role models for their peers and truly deserve to be recognized with the Sparkle Award.

—Madelyn Perkins

*Aline Saber, Teacher*

Aline demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusion by collaborating closely with support staff to meet diverse needs. She encourages peer acceptance and models empathy in her classroom. Because of her efforts, all students feel welcomed and included throughout the day.  
—Maddie Perkins

This year has presented unique challenges as our son has experienced regression within the general education setting. Through it all Mrs. Saber has approached the situation with patience, understanding, and genuine care for her students. She has had her hands full in ways that often go unseen, yet she continues to show up each day with compassion and dedication. Her willingness to support students through difficult moments, while still maintaining a positive and nurturing classroom environment, speaks volumes about her commitment as an educator. She recognizes that every child learns and grows differently and works hard to ensure each student feels supported and valued. For families navigating the complexities of special education, teachers like Mrs. Saber make an incredible difference. Her empathy, flexibility, and perseverance help create a classroom where all students have the opportunity to grow, even during challenging seasons.  
—Kristy White

*Marie Shiha, Third Grade Teacher*

Mrs. Shiha goes above and beyond in her role as a general education teacher, leading with both heart and intention. She cares for her students so deeply and thoughtfully, always looking for ways to meet them where they are. She quickly spots gaps and opportunities, then approaches them with creativity and problem solving to ensure the greatest chance of success for every child in her classroom. Our student struggles to speak up and keep up during lessons, but the strategies Mrs. Shiha thoughtfully put in place, including more small group work and intentional buffer time for processing, have been instrumental to our child's development and confidence this year. Her tender heart, the extra resources she sends home, and her clear and consistent communication have truly created a best case scenario year for our kiddo. Most importantly, our child feels deeply seen and heard in her classroom, and that is a gift we will never take for granted.  
—Cestari Family

*Erica Silvestri, Media Teacher*

Mrs. Silvestri plays a vital role in supporting our students with Autism by fostering a structured, inclusive, and engaging learning space. Through clear expectations, visual supports, and individualized assistance, she helps students navigate technology, literature, and research skills with confidence. Erica's dedication empowers students to become independent learners while feeling supported, understood, and valued in the media center.  
—Maddie Perkins and Jamie Blake

*Thea Simpson, Student*

Thea is a kind and thoughtful classmate who shows a remarkable ability to connect with and understand others. She has a natural empathy and seems to understand our son on a deeper level, offering patience, kindness, and acceptance in ways that truly matter. Her supportive presence helps foster a classroom environment where differences are respected and friendships can grow. Thea's compassion and awareness at such a young age make a lasting impact, and she exemplifies the spirit of inclusion and care that the Sparkle Award celebrates.  
—Kristy White

*Piotr Szawiela, Music Teacher*

Mr. S brings learning to life through engaging, sensory-aware instruction that resonates deeply with our students with Autism. With a strong understanding of individual needs, he uses rhythm, repetition, and predictable routines to create a calming and joyful learning environment. Piotr's creativity and compassion help students develop communication, listening, and social skills while building a genuine love for music.  
—Maddie Perkins and Jamie Blake

*Jen Taylor, Paraeducator*

Jen is truly a rock star para educator! Her flexibility daily and her willingness to just "go with the flow" truly makes her stand out! Jen we appreciate you tremendously. Your daily hard work does not go unnoticed!  
—Musson Resource Team

*Ava Thompson, Student*

Ava has become a wonderful new friend to our son this year, and her kindness has made a meaningful difference in his school experience. One of the things he tells us most often about Ava is how "super smart" she is and how helpful she is whenever he needs a little extra support—which, as he honestly admits, he says is often. What stands out most is the way Ava naturally steps in to help and encourage others. Her willingness to share her knowledge and offer help shows a level of patience and kindness that is truly special, especially at such a young age. Friendships like the one Ava has shown our son help create a classroom environment where students feel supported, included, and confident to keep trying. Her thoughtful and helpful nature makes a lasting impression!  
—Kristy White

*Michelle Vandenberghe, Teacher*

Michelle consistently shows care and intentionality in supporting inclusive practices. She works hard to understand each student's strengths and needs, making thoughtful adjustments to support participation. Her positive attitude and teamwork help create a classroom where all students can thrive alongside their peers.  
—Maddie Perkins

*Jen Wood, Substitute Paraeducator & Resource Teacher*

Jen approaches every job and every situation with such a magnificently positive attitude. She brings warmth, compassion and energy every time she is in the building and makes students truly feel heard, loved and respected. One specific teacher noted "I wish you could have heard (this student) working with Jen Wood! It was one of the most beautiful things that's occurred in my career!" She makes the students feel so proud of themselves.

—Anonymous

*Neelima Yamala, ASD Paraeducator*

Neelima's consistency, professionalism, and strong work ethic are evident in everything she does. She skillfully supports students in developing routines, communication skills, and positive behaviors, while always maintaining a calm and reassuring presence. Her collaborative spirit and willingness to support both students and staff make her a cornerstone of our classroom community. Neelima's dedication plays a key role in creating a structured and supportive learning environment.

—Madelyn Perkins

*Luna Zambrano, Student*

At such a young age, Luna shows a natural ability to be a supportive and caring friend. She helps create a sense of belonging and comfort that means so much for students who may experience school a little differently. Her kindness, patience, and willingness to include others make a lasting impact in ways that may seem small in the moment but are incredibly meaningful. Friendships like the one Luna shares with our son help build confidence, connection, and joy in the classroom. She is a wonderful example of the compassion and inclusiveness that make a school community stronger.

—Kristy White

North Hill Elementary

*Dina Abukumail, Paraeducator*

Mrs. Dina has been working with my son for the past two years and we are so glad she has been a part of his classroom. Her knowledge and patience has been invaluable to helping my son be successful at school. We appreciate her commitment and kindness, supporting students in different learning environments each day. Mrs. Dina is an important part of the team that has helped my son grow and develop new skills while working to achieve his goals. Thank you for everything you do!

—Lynn

*Heidi Cattanach, Paraeducator*

Mrs. Cattanach has been a paraeducator in my son's classroom since 2023. She has been a consistent person that he can rely on to help support him in different learning environments. Her positivity and communication have help my son feel comfortable in situations that may

otherwise make him feel unsure, always pointing out something good he has done. We are so grateful for Mrs. Cattanach's dedication to the students she works with, giving them the support that need to be successful. She has been a valuable part of the time that has helped my son grow and develop new skills while working to achieve his goals. Thank you for everything you do Mrs. Cattanach!

—Lynn

#### *Laura Griffin, Paraeducator*

Laura Griffin is a true light in our community. Her consistency, compassion, and genuine love for students are felt in everything she does. Laura has an incredible ability to see the heart of each student, especially those who need someone to believe in them the most. She goes far beyond her job description, advocating fiercely and selflessly to ensure every student feels safe, supported, and valued. Laura gives her time, her energy, and her heart without expectation, and her presence alone brings comfort and hope. The impact she has on students' lives is lasting and deeply meaningful. Laura doesn't just do her job—she changes lives, and that is what truly makes her sparkle.

—Sarah Ostrowski

#### *Elyse Hinkley, Resource Teacher*

Mrs. Hinkley has been my son's Resource teacher for the past two years at North Hill Elementary. In that time she has developed a great understanding of his needs and what works best for him in different situations and environments. Mrs. Hinkley greets my son as he walks up to school, giving him a consistent start to his day. He knows the expectations in her classroom, and works hard to learn and grow each day. I have appreciated her communication about his daily effort and the positive things he does while learning. Thank you Mrs. Hinkley for your dedication and support to helping my son reach his goals!

—Lynn

#### *Tamara Jones-Jackson, Principal*

I would like to nominate Mrs. Tamara Jones-Jackson, Principal of North Hill Elementary, for a Sparkle Award this school year. Mrs. Jackson is an exceptional leader who consistently fosters a positive, supportive school culture while keeping student success at the center of every decision.

Mrs. Jackson leads with a clear vision for our school and works collaboratively with staff to turn that vision into meaningful action. She empowers teachers and staff through collaboration, professional growth, and ongoing support, creating an environment where both educators and students can thrive. Her strong instructional knowledge and commitment to using data to guide decisions help strengthen teaching practices and improve student outcomes.

One of Mrs. Jackson's greatest strengths is her visibility and approachability. Whether in classrooms, hallways, or at school events, she is a constant and encouraging presence in our building. She communicates openly, listens thoughtfully to students, staff, and families, and builds trusting relationships throughout the school community.

Mrs. Jackson leads with resilience, integrity, and unwavering dedication to our students. Her leadership creates a caring, inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and supported. For these reasons and many more, Mrs. Jackson is truly deserving of the Sparkle Award.

— Anonymous

*Michelle Lafferty, Paraeducator*

Miss Michelle has been a part of my son's classroom at North Hill for two years and we would like to recognize her for the commitment she has made to supporting him during that time. It is easy to see how much she cares for the students she works with, showing patience and compassion while ensuring they know they are strong and smart! We are grateful for her consistency in the classroom. Miss Michelle is an important part of the team that has helped my son grow and develop new skills while working to achieve his goals. Thank you for everything you do!

—Lynn

*Melissa Littlefield, Speech and Language Pathologist*

Ms. Littlefield deserves a sparkle award because she is always showing kindness and respect. Mrs. Littlefield is kind to everyone she sees at speech and at drop-off, pick up and in the hallway. She always has a smile on her face . Ms.Littlefield is respecting to staff and students at North Hill . Whenever I walk into the speech room. Ms. Littlefield makes learning so more fun then just practicing words. Speech can be hard work but Ms. Littlefield makes speech one of my favorite parts of my week. I have learned so much from my three years of speech. Ms.Littlefield encouraged me to work hard on my sh, th ,ph and ch sounds.Thank you so much for helping me through my journey of speech!!!!

—Clarissa

Ms. Littlefield has been my son's speech-language pathologist at North Hill Elementary for over 3 years now. She has developed a great relationship with him and he enjoys going to speech each week! Ms. Littlefield has been great to work with, giving me frequent updates on his sessions or achievements. My son has always felt comfortable to be himself when working towards his speech goals! Her dedication is seen in her commitment to finding strategies and supports that helped my son do his best in different environments. Ms. Littlefield has also greeted my son most mornings at the front door this year, always with a smile and positive energy to start the day. We are very grateful for everything Ms. Littlefield has done to help my son reach his goals!

—Lynn

*Erin Montie, Paraeducator*

I would like to nominate Erin Montie, ASD Paraeducator at North Hill Elementary, for a Sparkle Award this school year. Mrs. Montie has been a valued member of the North Hill community for a couple years and has truly been an asset to our school and community.

Her passion and dedication to our students are remarkable. Mrs. Montie builds strong, trusting relationships with the students she supports, providing individualized care and attention that helps them feel safe, valued, and understood. She is deeply committed to fostering independence, encouraging students to build confidence and develop essential life skills rather than simply completing tasks for them.

Mrs. Montie also navigates challenging moments - whether emotional outbursts or academic struggles - with incredible patience, empathy, and grace. She serves as a steady, calming presence for students who rely on her support each day. Our students genuinely love and admire Mrs. Montie, and it is clear that she cares deeply for each of them in return. Her positive impact extends far beyond the classroom, as she consistently goes above and beyond to create an environment where every student feels seen, heard, and supported.

Mrs. Montie embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award through her compassion, dedication, and unwavering commitment to helping every student succeed.

— Anonymous

#### *Sarah Ostrowski, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Sarah Ostrowski (“Mrs. O”) for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the extraordinary care, thoughtfulness, and dedication she brings to supporting my son, Dominic, who has autism. She has a deep understanding of the details of Dominic’s IEP and consistently ensures that it is followed with intention and fidelity. While this should always be the standard, her attention to these details truly stands out and makes a meaningful difference in Dominic’s day-to-day success.

What has meant so much to our family is the way she communicates Dominic’s “wins,” no matter how big or small. She regularly sends home notes sharing his accomplishments, and it is clear that she genuinely celebrates his progress alongside him. Her excitement is contagious, and it has helped build Dominic’s confidence and love for school.

Because of the environment she has created, Dominic truly loves being in her classroom and has made remarkable growth this year. She runs her classroom in a way that is especially supportive of students with special needs, placing a strong emphasis not only on academics, but also on social skills, self-regulation, and other critical life skills.

She is also incredibly proactive and creative when it comes to supporting Dominic’s individual needs. For example, knowing how dependent he is on his chewy and our goal to gradually phase it out, she took the initiative to decorate a special box where he can “park” his chewy during certain parts of the day. This thoughtful strategy respects his needs while gently encouraging independence and growth.

Mrs. O goes far beyond what is required, and her commitment, compassion, and creativity have had a profound impact on Dominic and our family. We are incredibly grateful for the care and dedication she brings to her work every day.

—Jacki Markert

#### *Amanda Ricketts, School Social Worker*

Mrs. Ricketts has been my son’s social worker at North Hill Elementary for over 4 years. In that time he has grown and learned many skills to help him be successful at school and beyond. Her

consistent and clear support has shown him he is capable and valued in his learning environment. Mrs. Ricketts supported my son through different transitions, always working to find solutions and strategies that helped him be more independent and confident. She made her office available during times when he needed a break or a little extra time to reset, which was extremely valuable to him. Mrs. Ricketts' guidance will be difficult to replace. We are extremely grateful for the dedication and hard work she put into helping my son learn and grow throughout elementary school!

—Lynn

*Katie Sites, ASD Categorical Teacher*

For the past 3.5 years Mrs. Sites has been my son's teacher at North Hill Elementary. Her guidance and support has given him the skills he needs to be successful as he prepares to move on to middle school soon. She developed a very meaningful relationship with my son, that has allowed him to feel safe, understood, and valued at school. I will be forever grateful to Mrs. Sites for everything that she has done to show my son that he is smart and capable of doing anything he puts his mind to! The skills he now has will help guide him in the next phase of his life. We will never be able to thank Mrs. Sites enough for her knowledge, dedication, and hard work during her time as his teacher. Her contributions to my son's journey will be remembered and appreciated for a long time to come. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for being an amazing educator and person, we are so grateful for the tremendous impact you have had in our lives!

—Lynn

*Jesicalyn Stoddard-Johnson, Speech-Language Pathologist*

I would like to nominate Jesicalyn "Jesi" Stoddard, Speech-Language Pathologist at North Hill Elementary, for a Sparkle Award this school year. Jesi is a positive, fun, and highly skilled professional who brings both expertise and enthusiasm to everything she does. She is deeply student-centered and consistently advocates for the needs of the students she serves. Jesi's knowledge and clinical skill set are evident in the thoughtful, individualized support she provides, helping students build confidence and make meaningful progress in their communication skills.

In addition to her expertise, Jesi brings an infectious enthusiasm and positivity to our school community. Her upbeat attitude is contagious and helps create a supportive, encouraging environment for both students and colleagues. She is committed, collaborative, and always willing to go the extra mile to ensure students receive the support they need and deserve to succeed. Jesi's passion, dedication, and genuine care for students make her a truly deserving recipient of the Sparkle Award.

— Anonymous

*Stacy Washington, Paraeducator*

I would like to nominate Ms. Washington (“Ms. W”), ASD Paraeducator at North Hill Elementary, for a Sparkle Award this school year. Although Ms. W joined North Hill only this year, she has already made a wonderful and lasting impact on our school community. From the moment I met her, I was struck by her energy, enthusiasm, positivity, and grace. Ms. W consistently demonstrates exceptional care, compassion, and thoughtfulness toward our students while skillfully managing the many responsibilities of her role. She has outstanding interpersonal skills, collaborates seamlessly with colleagues, and approaches every situation with patience and a calm demeanor. Ms. W’s dedication, positivity, and commitment to supporting students make her a truly deserving candidate for the Sparkle Award.

— Anonymous

*Katie Woolsey, Teacher*

She helped us a lot to enjoy this year, she's very competent and enthusiastic about her work  
—Filippo Molinari

University Hills Elementary

*Najah Abdullah, ASD Paraeducator*

We would love to nominate Najah Abdullah for a Sparkle Award because of the care and dedication she shows to our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder every day. She is always willing to go the extra mile - she volunteers to assist students and staff alike without being asked. When a student is in need, she offers suggestions and support. She is patient and kind. She works closely with teachers and specialists and builds strong relationships with students, making a lasting positive impact on our classroom and school community. She is an integral part of our ASD team at University Hills!

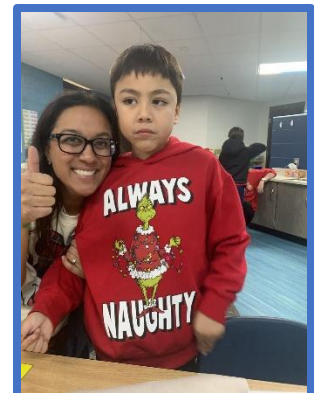
—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

*Sonali Arora-Mata, Teacher*

Sonali and her team went through an incredible amount of change this past year, moving their classrooms and teaching homes from Hamlin to University Hills, as part of the categorical program restructuring. Despite this being a huge change for her, both personally and professionally, leaving behind cherished colleagues and friends, she kept the students at the forefront and worked tirelessly to make sure their transition was smooth and successful. Sonali has become part of the U Hills family, but more importantly, her hard work as ensured that her students have also become part of the U Hills family.

—Todd Calcamuggio

I want to recognize my son’s teacher because her commitment goes far beyond just doing a job; it is clearly a vocation. Her passion is reflected



in the children every day. My son goes to school happy and comes home happy, and his great progress is a direct result of her heart and dedication.

—V́ctor Colmenares

*Harminster kaur Bedi, ASD Paraeducator*

We would love to nominate Harminster kaur Bedi for a Sparkle Award because of the incredible care and dedication she shows to our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder every day. She is patient, kind, and truly understands the unique needs of our students, always finding ways to support their communication, independence, and social growth. She has a natural ability to create a calm and supportive environment while using effective behavior strategies and structured routines. In addition to her instructional support, she is a talented artist, and the students love the creative crafts she plans and shares with them—these activities spark joy, build engagement, and provide meaningful opportunities for self-expression. She works closely with teachers and specialists and builds strong relationships with students and families, making a lasting positive impact on our classroom and school community. She is an integral part of our ASD team at University Hills!

—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

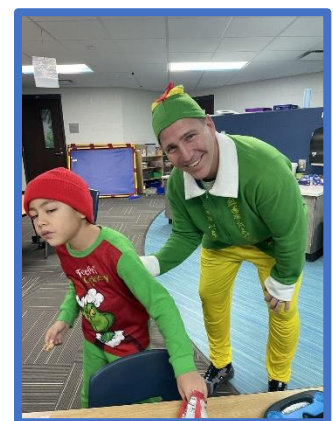
*Todd Calcamuggio, Principal*

We would like to nominate Todd for a Sparkle Award in recognition of his unwavering support, leadership, and commitment to inclusion. From the very beginning, Todd has warmly welcomed our ASD program into the school community, ensuring that our students and staff feel supported, valued, and truly seen. He consistently advocates for our students, provides meaningful education to both staff and peers, and leads with compassion, understanding, and openness. Through his actions and leadership, Todd is not only supporting an exceptional program, but actively teaching acceptance, empathy, and inclusion to the entire school community. His dedication has made a lasting and meaningful difference, and we are incredibly grateful for all that he does.

—Courtney Morgan, Morgan Wrubel and Sonali Arora-Mata

We want to thank you for your incredible dedication to making our school a truly inclusive place. We deeply appreciate the space and support you provide to the autistic community. Your efforts to ensure all children are well and treated with equality are evident. Thank you for championing values like tolerance, acceptance, and mutual support; you are building a better future for our kids.

—V́ctor Colmenares



*Isabella DeFalco, Social Work Intern*

We would like to nominate Izzy DeFalco for a Sparkle Award because of the care, effort, and enthusiasm she brings to our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Although she is new to the school setting, she has jumped right in and made a genuine effort to get to know our

students, build relationships, and connect with them in meaningful ways. She is a consistent and welcoming presence in our classrooms, interacts with students often, and takes the time to learn each student's individual needs. She is always willing to respond to support calls, offer help, and learn alongside the team. When she walks by a student stuck in the hallway, she's one of the first people to stop what she's doing to assist. Our students have really taken to her gentle demeanor and kindness. We appreciate Izzy on our ASD team!

—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

#### *Carolyn Evans, Teacher Consultant*

We would like to nominate Carolyn Evans, our teacher consultant, for a Sparkle Award. Over the past two years, Carolyn has taught us an incredible amount and has been an invaluable support to our ASD program. She consistently brings deep knowledge, compassion, and professionalism to her work. Through her guidance, we have strengthened our understanding of IDEA, improved our IEP writing, and enhanced the way we support both students and their families. Carolyn gives her all every single day to the teams she supports, and her dedication does not go unnoticed. We truly could not do this job without her, and we are so grateful for everything she does. Thank you, Carolyn!

—Sonali, Morgan & Courtney

#### *Jyothi Ippili, ASD Paraeducator*

We would love to nominate Jyothi Ippili for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her dedication to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She demonstrates patience and empathy with our students. She will continue to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the success and well-being of our students. Thank you, Ms. Jo!

—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

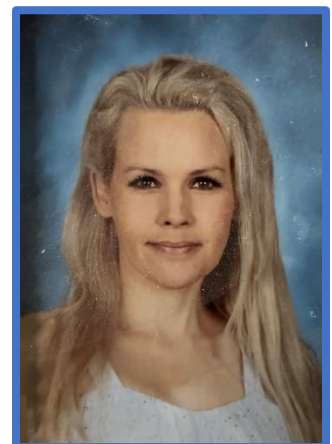
#### *Laura Jay, Special Education Resource Teacher*

It is a pleasure to nominate Mrs. Laura Jay for this award. With 17 years of experience and a Master's degree in Special Education from Oakland University, Mrs. Jay represents the gold standard of specialized instruction within the Rochester school district.

**A Legacy of Expertise and Heart:**

Mrs. Jay masterfully blends her deep pedagogical experience with an innate creativity to elevate her students. She doesn't just aim for "progress"—she pushes her students to reach their independent goals and then guides them beyond what they thought possible. Her approach is rooted in a profound level of kindness that resonates through the hallways; it is a common occurrence for her students to tell her they love her daily.

The Learning Environment:



Understanding that her students often carry external stressors, Mrs. Jay has meticulously designed a classroom that acts as a sanctuary. The environment is engineered for calm and engagement:

- Stress Reduction: Fluorescent light covers featuring blue skies and puffy clouds replace harsh industrial lighting.
- Whimsical Encouragement: Four cheerful giraffes "look down" from the décor, providing a sense of playfulness that encourages students to dive into their academics.

Collaborative Excellence:

Beyond her classroom walls, Mrs. Jay is a cornerstone of the school community. She works in close lockstep with building leadership and ancillary services staff to ensure a cohesive, productive year for every child. This holistic approach ensures that no student falls through the cracks and that every family feels supported. "Mrs. Jay is a top-tier educator. The families of Rochester are incredibly fortunate to have such a caring, creative, and experienced professional shaping the lives of their children." Mrs. Jay is well-loved by students and deeply admired by parents. She is truly an asset to the profession and deserves to be recognized for her unwavering dedication to her students' success.

—Anonymous

#### *Kaitlen Kinney, Occupational Therapist*

We would like to nominate our occupational therapist, Katie Kinney, for a Sparkle Award. Simply put—Katie rocks! Her positivity, expertise, and passion for her work shine through each day. Katie supports all students and takes the time to truly get to know each one, helping them feel comfortable and valued. She is always willing to be a thoughtful partner in problem-solving and consistently puts students first. We love working with Katie and deeply appreciate the support she provides to both our students and our team every day. Thank you, Katie!

—Courtney, Sonali & Morgan

#### *Laxmi Prasanna Kommula, Paraeducator*

We would love to nominate Laxmi Prasanna Kommula for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her dedication to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She consistently demonstrates patience, empathy, and kindness toward every student she works with. Mrs. K always puts students first and has built strong, meaningful relationships with both students and staff. She strives to do what is best for each individual student and is highly attuned to recognizing when a student needs additional support. Mrs. K is a tremendous asset to the University Hills ASD team, and we deeply appreciate her positivity and commitment. Thank you, Mrs. K!

—Morgan, Sonali & Courtney

#### *Dhanya Krishnan, ASD Student Teacher*

We would like to nominate Dhanya Krishnan, our student teacher, for a Sparkle Award. Dhanya has been a wonderful addition to the University Hills ASD team. She brings positivity, dedication, and a strong willingness to learn each day. Dhanya consistently puts students first, builds meaningful relationships, and approaches every situation with patience and care. She is

thoughtful in her planning, open to feedback, and always eager to support students and staff in any way she can. Dhanya's hard work and passion for teaching truly shine, and we are so grateful for the impact she has made on our classroom and students.

—Morgan, Sonali & Courtney

### *Courtney Morgan, Speech and Language Pathologist*

Courtney and her team went through an incredible amount of change this past year, moving their classrooms and teaching homes from Hamlin to University Hills, as part of the categorical program restructuring. Despite this being a huge change for her, both personally and professionally, leaving behind cherished colleagues and friends, she kept the students at the forefront and worked tirelessly to make sure their transition was smooth and successful. Courtney has become part of the U Hills family, but more importantly, her hard work as ensured that her students have also become part of the U Hills family.

—Todd Calcamuggio



I want to nominate Courtney Marie Klouw Morgan for a Sparkle Award. As a colleague and dear friend, I have the privilege of seeing not only the incredible professional she is, but the beautiful heart behind her work. She goes above and beyond for her students each day, making her speech lessons fun, engaging, and full of warmth. She connects with her students far beyond their scheduled sessions, building genuine relationships that make them feel truly seen and valued. Working primarily with students with ASD, she creates a space where they feel safe, understood, and deeply cared for. She also collaborates closely with teachers, always advocating for what her students need to succeed. Whether she's at the bus loop or in the classroom, she's a safe space for all. I am inspired by her compassion, fun attitude, and the love she pours into her work—our school is better because of her. Additionally, her walkie calls bring a sense of levity and joy to our school days. I appreciate you, my dear friend, Courtney!

—Sonali Arora-Mata

### *Annie Parker, BCBA*

We would like to nominate Annie Parker for a Sparkle Award. Throughout the year, Annie has supported students in the University Hills ASD program. Her positivity, expertise, and compassion for this population have had a meaningful impact on our students. Annie has helped all staff strengthen their ability to support students with autism while fostering an open and accepting environment. She has been an incredible support to our team this year, and we truly cannot thank her enough. Thank you, Annie!

—Courtney, Sonali & Morgan

*Elissa Redman, School Social Worker*

We would like to nominate Elissa Redman for a Sparkle Award because of the care and effort she shows our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Even though we are new to University Hills, she has gone out of her way to get to know our students, build relationships, and connect with them in ways that make them feel safe and supported. She is a familiar and welcoming presence in classrooms, interacts with students often, and takes the time to understand their individual needs. She is always quick to respond to support calls and provides calm, thoughtful help when students or staff need it most. Her kindness, consistency, and willingness to jump in wherever needed have already made a meaningful difference for our students and our team.

Thank you, Ms. Redman!

—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

Ms. Elissa Redman consistently goes above and beyond for the students she serves. She is an incredibly dedicated school social worker who works with the ASD program, ECSE classrooms, and K–5 students to provide meaningful support and guidance. Ms. Redman creates a safe and welcoming environment where students feel seen, understood, and motivated to grow. She is patient and compassionate, always willing to take extra time to help students regulate emotions, practice social skills, and work through challenging moments. What stands out most about Ms. Redman is the strong relationships she builds with her students. She has an amazing ability to meet students where they are and support them in ways that truly make a difference. She approaches every student with empathy and a calm, supportive presence.



Additionally, Ms. Redman helped lead the creation and organization of the Peer-to-Peer Program, which brings fifth-grade students into ASD classrooms to build friendships and meaningful peer connections while promoting inclusion within University Hills.

During the 2024–2025 school year, I had the privilege of working alongside Ms. Redman as her social work intern. During this time, I saw the commitment, thoughtfulness, and encouragement she brought to her work every day for both her students and me. Ms. Redman collaborates closely with teachers, staff, and families to ensure every child has the resources they need to thrive. Throughout my internship, she showed me what it means to support and advocate for students as a school social worker.

Ms. Redman is an amazing leader whose professionalism and positivity inspire those around her. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from Ms. Redman and witness the lasting impact she has on her students and the entire school community. For these reasons, I strongly believe Ms. Redman is highly deserving of a Sparkle Award.

—Olivia Zajac

*Caroline Rowe, School Psychologist*

We would like to nominate our school psychologist for a Sparkle Award because of the care and heart she brings to our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She has taken the time to really get to know our students and connect with them in ways that help them feel comfortable

and supported. You can often find her in classrooms checking in. She is always quick to answer support calls and jumps in calmly when students or staff need help. Her positive attitude, kindness, and willingness to be present make a big difference for our students and our special education team. Thank you, Mrs. Rowe!

—Sonali, Morgan, Courtney

#### *Dipti Shah, Paraeducator*

We would love to nominate Dipti Shah for a Sparkle Award. Mrs. Shah is a crucial member of the University Hills ASD team. She is a confident and compassionate Paraeducator, and it is evident each and every day how deeply she cares for her students and her team. Mrs. Shah consistently puts her best foot forward when working with students. She follows plans with fidelity, asks thoughtful questions, and always assumes the best of our students. She is confident in her ability to do what is best for each student every day. Mrs. Shah actively brings her ideas forward and collaborates with the team to brainstorm strategies that best meet the needs of the classroom. Her confidence during academic instruction does not go unnoticed, as she seamlessly follows the lead of various teachers and supports students in any way she can. Thank you, Mrs. Shah, for all that you do!

—Morgan, Sonali & Courtney

#### *Morgan Wrubel, Teacher*

Morgan and her team went through an incredible amount of change this past year, moving their classrooms and teaching homes from Hamlin to University Hills, as part of the categorical program restructuring. Despite this being a huge change for her, both personally and professionally, leaving behind cherished colleagues and friends, she kept the students at the forefront and worked tirelessly to make sure their transition was smooth and successful. Morgan has become part of the U Hills family, but more importantly, her hard work as ensured that her students have also become part of the U Hills family.

—Todd Calcamuggio

I'm so happy to nominate Morgan for a Sparkle Award. She's been my dear friend and teammate for over three years, and I've learned so much from her about what it really looks like to be an inclusive, thoughtful teacher.

Morgan shows up every day with so much care, creativity, and heart. She's built a classroom where kids feel safe, respected, and truly celebrated for who they are. Inclusion isn't just something she talks about—it's just who she is. She has all the SMART sayings posted outside her room, and she genuinely lives them. She takes the time to build real relationships with each student so they know they matter and have a voice. Whether she's reading a book about Grover for the eighth time or spelling out the names of different fruits and vegetables, she's creating lasting, individualized relationships with each student.

She's also such a strong advocate for her kids. She works closely with families, coworkers, and service providers to make sure her students get exactly what they need to succeed.

Morgan definitely knows how to work hard and play hard. With the students we teach, consistency is everything—both with routines and with fun—and she does such a great job balancing both.

I've learned so much just from being her neighbor, and I'm honestly a better teacher because of her. Morgan is caring, dedicated, and student-centered; she absolutely deserves this recognition.

—Sonali Arora-Mata

## Middle School

### Hart Middle School

*Bradley Crighton, Teacher*

I love my having him as a math teacher, the class is always so fun and I like the way he teaches, he explains it in a way that is easier to understand.

—Melissa Oliveira

*Lindsey Daines, Paraeducator*

I am nominating Lindsey Daines for a sparkle award this year. Lindsey is part of the best para team in the district, and does not get the credit on a daily basis that she deserves. Lindsey goes above and beyond the job responsibilities. She works so well with our students in the EI categorical room, and has for years. The students in this class appreciate her calmness, voice of reason, creativity, and problem solving ability. Our program would not be the same without her and everything that she does to support student success daily. She is relied on for so many different things from data collection, testing room responsibilities, and accommodating work in multiple classes. Without her nothing would run as smoothly as it does in the EI and general education setting. We thank you so much for all that you do, and cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award.

—Ryan Johnston

*Ivy Holland, Social Worker*

Our daughter, Lillian, is a 7th grader at Hart Middle School, and Ivy has been such an important support for her this year. From the very beginning, Ivy made Lillian feel comfortable and safe. She has a calm, kind way about her that makes it easy for Lillian to open up and feel understood. Lillian wanted to share, "Miss Holland always makes room in her day to always ask how I'm doing." That really says it all. Ivy is always present, always checking in, and always making sure her students know they matter—even on busy days.

Ivy is patient, caring, and a great listener. She meets Lillian where she is and supports her with understanding and encouragement. Her positive attitude, consistency, and genuine care have

helped Lillian feel more confident and supported at school. We are so grateful for the impact Ivy has had on our daughter this year. She truly goes above and beyond, and she absolutely deserves to be recognized with a Sparkle Award.

—Marc, Emily and Lillian

Who sparkles? Ms Holland sparkles! From her head to her diamond-studded boots, Ivy Holland, one of Hart Middle School's social workers, deserves to be recognised for her luminescent personality, shimmering interactions with students, and the glowing empathy she shows to Hart students daily. Ivy joined the Eagles' Nest last year after we unexpectedly found ourselves without a social worker due to a mid-year retirement. With very few prospects on the horizon and a high-needs building that requires all social work hands-on deck, we had a few candidates come in for an interview, including Ivy. What we all took away from the interview was: she was young and enthusiastic, she admittedly didn't have the training and experience with the paperwork



necessary for the position, and she was child-centred. This sentiment has never wavered since she was hired last January. She is here every single day for these kids, kids that need her more than she knows. Kids who stop by her room every single hour to say hi, to feel her warm personality, and possibly walk away with a snack, which she procures by taking the time to write PTA grants for or purchasing herself. Her calming space is filled with squishmellows, fidgets, and kitchy items she finds that she knows will make her students smile. Ivy has never once not answered a walkie-talkie call, even when it's the same student for the tenth time that day. Bottom line, Ivy shows up for the population of students who are on her caseload, look lost in the hallway, and for any other reason, including just because.

We know that her job isn't easy, and to be honest, she's always been transparent about the constraints she feels within the position. However, this is part of what makes her an amazing social worker. The honesty she shows those around her makes her an exceptional social worker. There has never been a day when Hart wasn't sure they made the absolute best decision to hire her. In the short time that Ivy has been a vital part of the Hart staff, she has formed strong bonds with many of our neurodivergent and emotionally sensitive learners. She has a calming presence that surrounds her space, which includes a houseplant from her family that is no joke older and way larger than she is. She meets students where they are with her communication style. As for the IEP writing, goal documentation, and experience she claimed and we corroborated, she was potentially lacking when getting hired, is and was always a non-issue. With the help and guidance of her mentor, Ivy has never had difficulty in this realm, and I would even go as far as to say she excels at it.

Furthermore, Ivy's impact can be seen throughout Hart's culture, climate, and student body, but especially in the special education classrooms. She has brought innovative ways of pushing her support into the classroom, collaborated with the speech pathologist on goals and groups, and introduced student-facilitated projects and jobs around the school. She has invited herself into meetings surrounding discipline that the assistant principals have with students to ensure her caseload kiddos are supported during difficult times. This willingness to help and serve those around her is what Hart is most thankful for. The student population at Hart has, is, and

will continue to be unique. With over 100 students on an IEP, 50 with a 504, and countless others who received behaviour support at the elementary level, there is never a dull moment. We often make and take walkie calls, phone calls, and house calls for our students. Ivy jumped in headfirst and hasn't looked back since. She is an integral part of the Hart family, and her boots are a shining reminder of how she sparkles for all to benefit from.

—Laura Reinke

*\*Shavonne Jacobson, Special Ed. Case Load Manager and Co-Teacher*

It is with deep gratitude and wholehearted enthusiasm that we nominate Mrs. Jacobson for this teacher award. Her impact on our daughter's academic journey — and on our family as a whole — has been nothing short of transformative.

Our daughter, Addison, entered middle school with significant challenges. She has been diagnosed with Tourette syndrome, severe ADHD, executive functioning deficits, a cognitive delay, and anxiety. After a difficult elementary experience marked by declining confidence and increasing academic stress, we approached middle school with serious concern. The rigor of a six-hour schedule and heightened expectations felt overwhelming. We feared that the progress she had struggled to maintain might unravel further.

From the very beginning, Mrs. Jacobson distinguished herself not only as an educator, but as an advocate and partner. She demonstrated exceptional professionalism and initiative by proactively reaching out to us, scheduling meetings to understand our concerns, and maintaining consistent, thoughtful communication. She even shared her personal contact information — a gesture that reflected her genuine commitment to accessibility and collaboration. This was not something we asked for; it was simply the standard she holds for herself. What sets Mrs. Jacobson apart is her ability to combine expertise with compassion. She did not approach Addison as a list of diagnoses or accommodations. Instead, she saw her potential. Through careful coordination of her IEP, collaboration with other teachers, and intentional scaffolding of workload and expectations, Mrs. Jacobson created a structured yet empowering environment where Addison could succeed.

The results have been extraordinary. In just one semester, we have witnessed a complete transformation. Addison's academic confidence is at an all-time high. She now takes ownership of her assignments, independently manages her accommodations, and communicates proactively with her teachers. The nightly stress that once dominated our home has been replaced with independence and self-advocacy. Most remarkably, she earned Honor Roll status — an achievement that felt unimaginable a year ago.

Mrs. Jacobson's impact extends far beyond grades. She has restored our daughter's belief in herself. She has helped shift Addison's identity from a student who struggles to a student who succeeds. That kind of transformation is not accidental; it is the product of skill, patience, persistence, and a deep belief in the capacity of every child.

Great teachers teach content. Exceptional teachers change trajectories. Mrs. Jacobson has changed our daughter's trajectory.

For her unwavering advocacy, her collaborative leadership, her professionalism, and her profound impact on student growth, we cannot imagine a more deserving recipient of this

award. We are forever grateful for the difference she has made — not just in a semester, but in the course of our daughter’s life.

—Aaron

*Jennifer Jahner, Paraeducator*

I am nominating Jennifer Jahner for a sparkle award this year. Jennifer is part of the best para team in the district, and does not get the credit on a daily basis that she deserves. Jennifer goes above and beyond the job responsibilities. She works so well with our students in the EI categorical room, and has for years.

The students in this class appreciate her calmness, willingness to participate in activities with them, particularly games, and the way she takes an interest in their daily lives. Our program would not be the same without her and everything that she does to support student success daily.

She is relied on for so many different things from data collection, testing room responsibilities, and accommodating work in multiple classes. Without her nothing would run as smoothly as it does in the EI and general education setting. We thank you so much for all that you do, and cannot think of anyone more deserving of this award.

—Ryan Johnston

## Reuther Middle School

*Ariel Blizzard, Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Blizzard for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services.

Ms. Blizzard has been Ada’s contained classroom teacher for the past three years and has played a central role in helping Ada grow into all that she can be. She consistently holds high expectations while providing thoughtful, individualized support that allows Ada to succeed.

What truly sets Ms. Blizzard apart is her deep commitment to Ada’s continuity of care. Even as she prepared for the arrival of her baby, Ms. Blizzard went above and beyond to ensure everything was thoughtfully planned and in place before her maternity leave. This care and foresight ensured Ada’s needs continued to be met smoothly and with consistency.

Through Ms. Blizzard’s guidance, Ada has become more included, more confident, and increasingly independent within the school community. Ms. Blizzard’s dedication, advocacy, and genuine care exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and our family is deeply grateful for the lasting impact she has made.

—Ann Ehlert

Mrs. Blizzard is an amazing teacher who is truly passionate about her job. We are forever grateful for all of her efforts that give her students the best opportunity to succeed!

—Ashley Prince

*England Campbell, Student*

Miss Campbell is an amazing 6th grader here at Reuther Middle School. Her kindness and enthusiasm has helped our CI students realize what our Global Digital Leadership class is all about! She demonstrates community inclusion and collaboration in our team building activities. She is an absolute joy to work with.

—Rachelle Stephens

*Emily Collier, Assistant Principal*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Collier, Assistant Principal at Reuther Middle School, for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her thoughtful and equitable support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services.

When Ada has experienced behavioral challenges, Ms. Collier has consistently greeted her with respect and calm, treating her like any other student while providing appropriate guidance and discipline. This balanced approach has helped Ada understand expectations, take responsibility, and grow in independence.

What sets Ms. Collier apart is her belief that students receiving special education services deserve the same dignity, accountability, and opportunity to learn from their experiences as their peers. Because of Ms. Collier, Ada feels respected, supported, and capable of learning and growing from difficult moments. Ms. Collier's leadership, fairness, and commitment to student growth exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and her impact is deeply appreciated.

—Ann Ehlert

*Morgan Fila, School Psychologist*

It is my honor to nominate my sister, Morgan Fila, for a Sparkle Award to recognize the incredible impact she has as a school psychologist. Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of working with her and now sharing a building, which has given me a front-row seat to her dedication, skill, and heart. I can genuinely say that I learn something from her every single day.

Morgan leads with both expertise and compassion. She is incredibly organized and always prepared, whether she is running a meeting, conducting an evaluation, or having a conversation with a student or family. Morgan shows up on time, ready to contribute meaningful ideas that help guide the team's decision-making process. Most importantly, Morgan always advocates for what is best for each individual student.

One of her greatest strengths is her ability to build authentic relationships. Morgan is approachable, kind, and creates a safe, welcoming space where students feel seen and supported. Families immediately notice her warmth and genuine care. Morgan listens thoroughly to parent concerns and makes sure families understand every step of each special education process. Parents value her knowledge, clarity, and friendly communication. Sharing a building with Morgan has also given me a deeper appreciation for her collaborative efforts. She is a true team player, and continues to remain supportive, student-centered, and solution focused. She actively seeks input from various team members to ensure she is looking at the student's performance as a whole. Morgan works well with all school staff – teachers, administrators, and ancillary – to develop plans that truly meet students' needs.

Morgan’s willingness to share her knowledge and listen to others’ perspectives strengthens the school community.

Morgan is not only hardworking and deeply knowledgeable, but she also approaches challenging situations with integrity. She truly inspires everyone around her, including me, to do better. For all these reasons (and countless more) I wholeheartedly believe Morgan deserves to be celebrated. She is a dedicated school psychologist who makes a meaningful difference in the lives of students, families, and colleagues every day. I am beyond proud to call her my sister and teammate!

—Ryan Fila

### *Kay Gazdik, Cook*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Kay, who works in food service at Reuther, for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional care and advocacy for a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services.

When Ms. Kay learned that Ada has celiac disease, she immediately took action to ensure Ada had safe, nutritious food options she could eat and enjoy. She went beyond her daily responsibilities to seek out appropriate foods and thoughtfully consider Ada’s preferences. What sets Ms. Kay apart is her genuine concern for Ada’s well-being. She did not treat dietary needs as an inconvenience but as an opportunity to care for a student in a meaningful way. Because of Ms. K, Ada’s nutritional needs are met with dignity, consistency, and kindness. Ms. K’s attentiveness, compassion, and willingness to go above and beyond exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and our family is deeply grateful for the care she provides.

—Ann Ehlert

### *Swati Sareen, Paraeducator*

I am honored to nominate Ms. S for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. Ms. S brings incredible energy and joy into the school day. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and her positive spirit creates an environment where students feel excited, welcomed, and valued. Ada absolutely loves Ms. S, and that connection speaks volumes about the care and encouragement she provides. What makes Ms. S truly special is the way she combines joy with genuine support. She meets Ada with warmth, laughter, and kindness, helping her feel safe, confident, and happy at school. Because of Ms. S, Ada experiences learning as something joyful and engaging. Ms. S’s vibrant spirit and loving presence embody the heart of the Sparkle Award, and her impact is felt deeply by both students and families.

—Ann Ehlert



*Hannah Schneider, Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Schneider for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her dedicated support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. Ms. Schneider has been Ada’s gym teacher for the past three years, providing consistent, thoughtful instruction and encouragement. Throughout this time, we have deeply appreciated her clear communication with our family and her commitment to setting high expectations while meeting Ada where she is.

What sets Ms. Schneider apart is her focus on helping Ada become as independent as possible. She balances support with challenge, always believing in Ada’s abilities and growth. Because of Ms. Schneider, Ada has gained confidence, strength, and greater independence in physical education and beyond.

Ms. Schneider’s long-term dedication, high standards, and genuine care exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and we are grateful for the impact she has made over the years.

—Ann Ehlert

*Jaiyimeson Schumborg, Student*

I am honored to nominate Jaiyimeson, a student peer, for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her kindness and inclusion of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. Jaiyimeson met Ada during lunch and immediately chose inclusion. She began inviting Ada to join her and her friends, welcoming her into social spaces with warmth and intention. Through simple but meaningful actions—sitting together, including Ada in conversations, and reaching out—Jaiyimeson helped Ada feel seen and valued.

What makes Jaiyimeson’s actions so special is the sense of belonging she has created. Because of her kindness, Ada feels included, connected, and part of a community. Jaiyimeson’s compassion and leadership reflect the very best of our school culture. Jaiyimeson exemplifies the spirit of the Sparkle Award through her genuine care, inclusion, and friendship.

—Ann Ehlert

*Rachelle Stephens, Paraeducator*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Stephens for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her extraordinary care and support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services.

Ms. Stephens is truly the “mom at school.” Her presence brings comfort, safety, and unconditional care to Ada throughout the school day. Knowing that Ms. Stephens is there to love, protect, and nurture my child when I cannot be with her is an incredible gift.

What sets Ms. Stephens apart is the way she cares for Ada as if she were her own. She offers patience, reassurance, and genuine affection, creating an environment where Ada feels secure and valued. Because of Ms. Stephens, Ada is able to learn, grow, and navigate her school day with confidence and trust.

Ms. Stephens’ impact goes far beyond her role. She provides not only support, but love—and that makes all the difference. She embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and our family is deeply grateful for the care she gives each day.

—Ann Ehlert

### *Shilpa Wari, Paraeducator*

I am honored to nominate Ms. Wari for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her thoughtful support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. Ms. Wari has a quiet and gentle presence that immediately puts students at ease. She is consistently approachable, creating a safe and welcoming space where students feel comfortable asking for help and being themselves.

What makes Ms. Wari exceptional is the calm and steady way she supports students throughout the school day. Her kindness, patience, and attentiveness help create an environment where students feel supported and respected. Because of Ms. Wari, students experience school as a place of safety, care, and understanding.

Ms. Wari's gentle presence and genuine compassion exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and her impact is deeply appreciated.

—Ann Ehlert

### Van Hoosen Middle School

#### *Laura Coleman, Resource Teacher*

Mrs. Coleman has been a wonderful asset to my son's team these last two years. She has always been kind, caring and compassionate as we've navigated a few challenges and bumps in the road along the way.

Earlier this school year, I received an email from my son's language arts teacher regarding weekly spelling and vocab tests. I immediately panicked, then looked over his IEP searching for any accommodation that might still be in effect to aid with these tests. I found none. As a parent with a child who has a learning disability, just hearing the word spelling test not only has you shaking in your boots, it also leaves you feeling helpless and sick to your stomach. Cue the immediate email to Mrs. Coleman. It was honest and raw and asked "what are we going to do", "he's going to fail these tests." I won't tell you how long that email was, but it also covered a lot of our trauma from our elementary school days and also how concerned I was about where we were now with minimal accommodations in his IEP. She called me within a few hours of receiving that email and reassured me that she would keep an eye on it and if we had to call a team meeting to make any modifications to his IEP, we would. In the meantime, we would collect data and see how he did. This phone call was beyond helpful and calming.

She was also quick to respond to my very recent email about transitioning to high school and completing the dreaded schedule card. My son wants certain classes and I'm not sure those specific classes are the best fit for him right now. Thankfully Laura was on it and responded quickly with reassurance, kindness and understanding because she gets it. I felt seen and heard. By the time she had reached back out, she had already been in touch with the team at Adams, had a proposed transition meeting date ready, and had reassured me that the team would make the best decision for him entering high school.

Lastly, I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you that besides handling parent concerns, she is there every day encouraging her students. Towards the end of last school year, she helped my son with an essay he had to write in order to apply to a local junior police academy. He was ready to go until he saw the essay part and then shut down and said he didn't want to attend. Laura was

amazing with her encouragement, and even though it was the last minute, he wrote a brief essay. In addition, she also copies me from time to time on communications she sends to my son and they are so heartwarming to read. Words like “I’m proud of you” and “great work today” and even “don’t forget your textbook” and “please remember to turn in your missing assignment.” These little “love notes” really do mean the world to my son and me. When your child has a disability, it’s so easy for them to get lost in the system. She’s constantly ensuring that they remain seen and heard.

Laura, thank you for everything these last two years. We are really going to miss you and appreciate everything you’ve done to set up our son for success in high school.

—Christine Bennett

I would like to nominate Laura Coleman for a Sparkle Award for the incredible support she provides to my daughter and our family. She consistently goes above and beyond, always communicating clearly and ensuring we feel supported. Mrs. Coleman is kind, helpful, and generous with her time, often offering extra assistance whenever it’s needed. My daughter truly appreciates her support and is very grateful for the additional help she receives. We are thankful for the positive difference Mrs. Coleman makes!

—Julie

#### *Cacey Hack, Behavior Technician*

Ms. Cacey truly understands the phrase, “Behavior is Communication” and supports students through the most difficult moments of their day with compassion, grace, and expertise. She has deep connections and understanding of her students' unique needs. She teaches her students the skills they need to communicate these needs and advocate for themselves. This mindful approach allows her to connect authentically with each student, establishing deep trust and fostering a secure, supportive learning environment. She truly has the students' best interests at heart and acts as a tireless advocate, always ensuring their unique needs are met. Through her efforts, she helps unlock each student's full potential and celebrates every win along the way.

—Anonymous

#### *Olivia Hopkins, Student*

Olivia is a remarkable student who participates in adaptive PE with our son Levi everyday! Levi loves gym, and particularly playing basketball with Olivia. We are so grateful to have amazing and kind students like Olivia sharing their gifts, talent and time with Levi. Olivia makes a truly positive impact on Levi's day at school. Thank you Olivia for being incredible!

—Megan Wilson (on behalf of Levi Wilson)

#### *Susie Kautz, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Karen Davies, Megan Haske, and Susie Kautz — Catherine’s “math team” — for a Sparkle Award. This group of educators demonstrated extraordinary collaboration, commitment, and care during what was one of the most academically and

emotionally challenging seasons Catherine has faced. Algebra 1 was the first class where the curriculum truly overwhelmed her. Instead of letting her struggle in isolation, these three women leaned in.

Mrs. Davies (special education), Mrs. Haske (general education), and Mrs. Kautz (8th grade math teacher and Catherine's tutor) communicated sometimes more than weekly to problem-solve, adjust accommodations, and creatively rethink how to support her learning. They tried multiple strategies, revised plans, and remained steadfast in their belief in her ability to grow. Their teamwork not only supported Catherine academically — it protected her confidence and mental health at a critical time. Because of their persistence and compassion, she did not lose belief in herself. That is the impact of educators who truly go above and beyond.

—Molly Corombos

#### *Emmett Krentler, Student*

I would like to nominate Emmett Krentler for the Sparkle Award in recognition of his exceptional work in our Unified Physical Education program. Over the past two years, he has consistently gone above and beyond in supporting our students with ASD. He is always lending a hand, stepping in without hesitation to assist classmates, encourage participation, and he helped create a welcoming environment for everyone.

He works well with all of our students and naturally builds positive connections with them. His constant smile, patience, and genuine kindness set the tone for our class. Our students truly light up when they see him walk through the door — his presence alone brightens their day. What stands out most is the compassion and care he shows in every interaction. He treats each student with dignity and respect, helping them feel included, valued, and successful. His dedication over the past two years has made a meaningful and lasting impact on our Unified PE program. He represents the very best of what this award stands for.

—Anonymous

#### *Kendall Kreuger, Student*

Kendall is a wonderful student who participates in adaptive PE with our son Levi everyday! Levi loves gym, and particularly playing basketball with his friends like Kendall in gym class. We are so grateful to have amazing and kind students like Kendall sharing their gifts, talent and time with Levi. Kendall makes a truly positive impact on Levi's day at school. Thank you Kendall for being incredible!

—Megan Wilson (on behalf of Levi Wilson)

#### *Anna Mansilla, Student*

She helped my daughter (Eunmin) a lot. She always help Eunmin's class and supported activities. She always treated Eunmin kindly.

—Yongsung Kim (Eunmin's father)

I would like to nominate Anna Mansilla. She consistently goes above and beyond to support my child, Eunmin, in Unified PE with kindness,



patience, and a positive attitude. Anna shows true understanding toward Eunmin, who has autism, and always helps her feel comfortable and included. Although Eunmin has very few friends and struggles to express her emotions, she often comes home talking about Anna. It means so much to our family that Eunmin truly likes Anna and feels happy because of her support. Our family sincerely appreciates Anna’s kindness and the meaningful support she has shown to Eunmin.

—Jinhee Hong (Eunmin's mother)

*Ann Marie Rea, Teacher Consultant*

My child transferred mid year (last year) and her support staff was phenomenal. I cannot thank them enough for all the support, information and care provided, especially with distance learning. The communication was perfect and transparent. Thank you

—Ayana

I would like to nominate Ann Marie Rea for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the genuine care and dedication she shows to students and their families. Her support and encouragement mean a great deal, and her kindness and commitment truly make a difference. What stands out most is how deeply she cares about the program and the success of the students at Van Hoosen. Her willingness to go the extra mile creates a meaningful impact for both students and families.

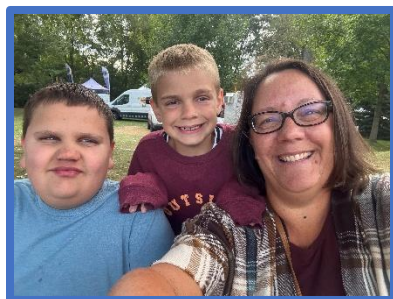
—Julie

*Michelle Rupp, Counselor*

My child transferred mid year (last year) and her support staff was phenomenal. I cannot thank them enough for all the support, information and care provided, especially with distance learning. The communication was perfect and transparent. Thank you

—Ayana

*Amanda Stapelton, Teacher*



Amanda Stapelton has consistently been outstanding and goes beyond the mark for a teacher. However, this fall my family experienced an emergency with mental health and it was very difficult to get my son who is in her class to school. He has food allergies (gluten) and has never received breakfast or lunch through the school due to the fear of cross contamination or “oops” moment. Gluten goes straight to this brain and causes him to be very unfocused, oral (chewing on everything), and overall very sensitive. His ability to learn decreases dramatically. Due to the family emergency, some mornings I did not have a lunch ready and just kept him home. Mrs. Stapelton reached out like she always does and asks how Ian is doing. I said, “Oh he is fine, I am just struggling w/ another child and couldn’t get his lunch together”. On a side note, I lost my husband unexpectedly in 2024 and so its just me. Amanda within 24 hours had the school food staU’ in an email with forms to fill out and gave me assurance that Ian’s breakfast and lunch will be

made individually and will be safe. Ian for the first time in his life in RCS has been eating breakfast and lunch with his peers. The amount of stress relief in my life with this simple change as been life changing for me personally. The love and care shown by Mrs. Stapelton speaks volumes to her heart and character. Ian is still eating at school, and has not missed a day of school due to not having safe food for him. I'm so grateful for Amanda and for this reason along with many others, I am nominating her for a Sparkle Award!!

—Theresa

Our daughter loves going to school each day and Ms. Stapleton is a huge reason for that. She always keeps in touch with us to know how our girl is doing!

—Thomas

*Eleni Thomas, Student*

She understood my daughter, who has autism, and always kindly helped her.

—Jinhee Hong (Eunmin's mother)

I hope to nominate Eleni Thomas. She consistently goes above and beyond to support my child, Eunmin, in Unified PE with kindness, patience, and a positive attitude. Eleni shows true understanding toward Eunmin, who has autism, and always helps her feel comfortable and included. Although Eunmin has very few friends and struggles to express her emotions, she often comes home talking about Eleni. It means so much to our family that Eunmin truly likes Eleni and feels happy because of her support. Our family sincerely appreciates Eleni's kindness and the meaningful support she has shown to Eunmin.

—Yongsung Kim (Eunmin's father)

*Jennifer Wordell, ASD Teacher*

Mrs. Wordell is an excellent teacher. She is always observing and keeping track of all of the children in the ASD classroom. She monitors their progress and always makes note of improvements and things that they need to continue working on. She always makes sure to relay this information with proper and efficient communication. Her devotion to her students is something that should be admired. Along with her organization and attention to detail to make sure our children continue to learn and reach their own individual goals.

—Emina Cejvanovic

## West Middle School

*\*Adelyn Abedrabbo, Anchor*



Adelyn is the kind of student who leads without ever needing the spotlight. From the moment she joined the Anchors program, she set an example through her quiet strength, patience, and genuine kindness. Her calm presence creates a sense of comfort for everyone around her, especially the students in the ASD programs, who respond so positively to her warmth and consistency.

What truly sets Adelyn apart is the way she builds authentic relationships. She doesn't just assist—she connects. She has taken the time to understand the students she works with, celebrating their personalities, interests, and achievements. Her friendships are real and meaningful; in

fact, she cared so deeply about one student that she invited them to her birthday party, a gesture that speaks volumes about her inclusive heart and natural empathy.

Adelyn's impact extends beyond the students to the staff as well. She has formed wonderful connections with the adults she works alongside, earning their trust and admiration through her reliability and positive attitude. Whether she is creating engaging crafts, organizing materials and games, helping with mail delivery, or participating in social activities, she approaches every task with enthusiasm and care.

Always willing to step in wherever she is needed, Adelyn embodies what it means to be an exceptional Anchor. Her leadership is not loud, but it is powerful—rooted in compassion, service, and a sincere desire to make others feel valued and included. She doesn't just support her school community; she strengthens it. I will miss Adelyn as she moves on to High School and I wish her the best!

—Anna Ketzler

*Deepti Agarwal, Paraeducator*

Deepti works hard to ensure the success of every child. She shows up to work each day with a smile and is ready to take on any challenge that comes her way. She makes sure each student is ready to learn and you can tell that she really loves her job - and we love her!

—Anonymous

*David Beaulac, Teacher*

Clay joined our family in September as a pre-adoptive placement and started at West shortly after. It wasn't long before we started hearing about Mr. Beaulac. A few weeks later I got to meet him when I attended fall parent teacher conferences. I could have guessed who he was by the big smile and the longest line of parents in the gym. He gushed about what a pleasure it has been getting to know Clay and how he never finishes a day without a hug from him and assured me he was available for anything he needed.

Since then there have been many days when the motivation for school was to check in with Mr. Beaulac, have lunch with him or show him his grades. Through time and adjustment and much

tweaking of his IEP, Clay went from C's and D's in his academics to now all A's and he loves to show everyone, especially Mr. Beaulac, how well he's doing.

I believe one of the biggest positive changes lately is his joining the West wrestling team, which Mr. Beaulac is one of the coaches. My husband and I were very skeptical that he would be able to commit and follow through to such an intense sport and season, but we are now seven weeks into a long eight and half week season and he is still hanging in there. It's given him so many important things like being part of a team, exercise, time out of his room and all of that translates to better sleep and mood and appetite and surprisingly better attendance and grades and I know he did all of this out of his admiration of Mr. Beaulac. At the beginning of the season I would watch him at long matches from far across the gym unsure what to do with himself and I could see him check in with Mr. Beaulac quickly and get right back to where he needs to be. As the season has progressed Clay has found his rhythm with his teammates and now I watch him watching the other matches or joking with his teammates most of the time, but if he tells me something upset him at wrestling I say "what did Mr. Beaulac say?" and sure enough, he already talked to him.

We had our spring conference recently and Mr. Beaulac said Clay shows so much perseverance. Personally, I can't begin to say how true that is. He says he keeps working even when he doesn't want to and to tell him to "keep up the good work."

Clay has several adults he truly enjoys at West, but if you ask who his favorite teacher is, the answer never changes. His foster team has asked us several times about signing him up for a mentor program like Big Brothers and Big Sisters but he always says no and I always defend him. Clay likes to choose his own adults. And he chooses so well. I have never met a kid so in tune to adults. I'm writing this Sparkle award on the last day because I've been encouraging to write this but he wasn't sure what he wanted to say, or how to say it or why he even likes Mr. Beaulac so much. He just knows. I'm sure there's so much more than I know. So I'll just end with this. These past six months have been challenging. They've been precious. They've been life changing. And I am so forever grateful for anyone and everyone who has made Clay feel safer and happier as part of our family and community.

—Melissa Hoffman

#### *Jessica Buchheister, Social Worker*

I would like to nominate Jessica Buchheister, our School Social Worker, for the Sparkle Award because she has been there for me for three years and has made a big difference in my life. Whenever I go to talk to her, she gives me good advice and helps me with my needs. When I'm struggling with friendships, she listens carefully, gives helpful advice, and makes me feel like what I'm saying really matters. When she listens, it makes me feel like she is truly hearing me and understands how I feel. She is always kind and nice, and she makes school feel like a safer place for me. I am very thankful for her support and everything she does for students like me.

—Elaina

#### *Harjeet Chauhan, Student Teacher*

Harjeet is going to make for one phenomenal educator. During her time as a student teacher at West, watching her grow and develop into her own genuine and authentic version of herself as

a teacher has been an incredible experience to be a part of. She works tirelessly to build, strengthen, and grow in her skills and role as an educator. She isn't afraid to take on a new challenge. She has built lasting relationships with her students, who continuously demonstrate respect for her. She has become a role model within the ASD team, and staff follow her lead without question. Her future students and families don't know yet just how blessed they are to have her.

— Anonymous

*Kathleen Crocenzi, Paraeducator*

Kathleen has built lasting relationships with students. She works hard every day to meet students with empathy, caring, and understanding. Kathleen takes care to "meet students where they're at". She is the first to make even the quietest of students full on belly laugh and consistently brings light and energy into the classroom.

— Anonymous

*Jessica Dara, Paraeducator*

Jess joined our team just this school year and has already made such a positive impact on all of our students. Jess brings such a calming presence into every classroom she enters and continuously meets kids where they are at. She has worked hard to build relationships with all of our students.

— Anonymous

*Gayathri Dhulipalla, Paraeducator*

Gayathri is kind, caring, and compassionate. Her attitude is always even and calm and you can tell that students trust her and enjoy working with her. She always makes sure everyone - staff and students - have what they need and is always willing to lend a helping hand without ever having to be asked. You can tell that she loves working with our students and is such a blessing.

— Anonymous

*Dona Francis, Paraeducator*

Dona is an incredible human and to know her is to love her. She is the first to take on a challenge and does so with joy-filled energy and a smile. Dona has a strong work ethic and strives to continue to learn and grow each day. She ensures that the students she works with have everything they need and recognizes the importance of social-emotional regulation. She never gives up on her students and they look forward to working with her every day.

— Anonymous

*Greyson Gammo, Anchor*



For the past three years at West Middle School, Greyson has been more than just an Anchor—he has been a steady, uplifting presence in the lives of everyone around him. From the moment he walks into a room, his larger-than-life personality seems to brighten the entire space. Smiles appear almost instantly in his presence.

But what truly sets Greyson apart is not just his energy—it's his heart. In his work with ASD students, he goes far beyond the role of student mentor. Greyson builds genuine

friendships. He listens, encourages, and meets the students where they are, creating connections rooted in kindness and respect. Whether he's offering a helping hand, sharing a joke, or simply sitting beside someone who needs support, he does so with sincerity and joy. Kind, fun, and endlessly supportive, Greyson has a magnetic quality that draws people in. Classmates gravitate toward him, not only because he's entertaining, but because he makes them feel valued and included. Over his three years as an Anchor, Greyson hasn't just filled a role—he's created a legacy of warmth, friendship, and positivity that will be remembered long after he leaves West Middle School. We will miss Greyson as he moves on to High School and wish him the best of luck!

—Anna Ketzler

*Jennifer Grauert, Registered Behavior Technician*

Jen plays such a large role within our team at West. She is a dream of an RBT and such a pillar to our program. The energy she brings into the room is infectious to all staff and students. She greets challenges with a smile and constantly pivots through her day with grace. The students look forward to working with her and trust that her word is gold!

— Anonymous

Ms. Jen has a quiet, yet meaningful presence that creates special, unspoken bonds between her and the students she supports. She approaches every student interaction with a sense of compassion, understanding, and a remarkable ability to meet them exactly where they are. Ms. Jen constantly develops personalized, strength-based, and neuro-affirming supports that truly honor each child. She is dedicated to finding meaning and effective opportunities for inclusion and learning and goes above and beyond to ensure her students have equal access. She collaborates with all members of the team and always keeps the students' evolving needs at the forefront of every decision. Her dedication is a constant reminder that the most significant leadership comes from the lasting, supportive impact she makes in the lives of her students.

—Anonymous

*Katy Hughes, Special Education Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Katy Hughes, Special Education Teacher at West Middle School, for the Sparkle Award. I have had the privilege of working with Katy for over 20 years, and

throughout that time she has earned my deepest respect - not only as an exceptional professional, but also as a trusted colleague and friend.

Katy approaches her work with students thoughtfully and intentionally. She seeks to truly understand every student she serves, taking a proactive rather than reactionary approach to instruction and support. She consistently educates herself on best practices, reflects honestly on her own teaching, and makes meaningful changes based on current research and the individual needs of her students. This level of professionalism and dedication is evident in everything she does.

Students genuinely love being in Mrs. Hughes's study skills class because she has a remarkable ability to make hard things feel achievable, and even fun. Through daily "good things" sharing, her weekly reward wheel, and countless small but intentional moments, Katy creates a classroom environment where students feel seen, heard, and respected. She builds confidence, fosters resilience, and helps students believe in themselves.

It is not uncommon for former students to return to West Middle School to visit Mrs. Hughes and thank her for all her help, something that is especially meaningful and uncommon for many special educators. She can also often be seen attending high school graduation ceremonies, proudly supporting her former students as they reach major milestones. Katy remains a steady source of encouragement throughout her students' academic journeys, and well beyond.

Katy Hughes truly brings joy, care, and excellence to West Middle School every day. She exemplifies the spirit of the Sparkle Award and makes a lasting difference in the lives of her students and colleagues alike.

—Heather Poirier

#### *Maureen Johnson, Paraeducator*

Maureen is a beam of sunshine bringing joy and light into the classroom every single day. She meets each challenge with a smile and never gives up on any child. She is flexible and models for students how to go with the flow, even when things are unexpected. Maureen has a special and unique way of making all lessons and activities fun and attainable. Maureen wears her heart on her sleeve and cares deeply for the social-emotional wellbeing, academic success, and autonomy for each and every student.

— Anonymous

#### *Joseph Kowalski, Paraeducator*

Mr. K is a smart, caring, and overall really cool guy. Mr. K makes a difference by helping us in our math class. He is always patient and kind. He explains things in a really cool way, especially when we are confused. He is encouraging and makes us feel like we can do the math. He is an important part of our class.

—Jacob H. & Sam R.

#### *Adriana Manriquez Robledo, Paraeducator*

Ms. M works in the testing room. When there are no kids taking tests she comes to my study skills class and offers to help. She lets me come work with her and she helps me a lot with my

social studies work. It's the stuff I need to do most and she helps me complete it. She helps me work in a quiet space that helps me focus. I get better grades in my classes when she helps me. I appreciate that she helps me so much.

—Silas

*Broden Masson, Student*

Brody truly embodies the meaning of inclusion and has been an extraordinary addition to our program. He is a friend to everyone and demonstrates genuine kindness each and every day - whether it is greeting his ASD peers in the hallway, celebrating their successes, or offering encouragement when they need it most. What makes Brody especially remarkable is that his interactions are never prompted or forced; he naturally seeks out opportunities to connect. During lunch, field trips, passing time, and other unstructured moments, he independently chooses to spend time with and support our students, creating meaningful and authentic relationships.

Over the past two years, Brody has shown commitment to this program and has made a lasting impact on our students and classroom community. He is a wonderful role model to all students at West Middle School and is a true leader. His ability to make every student feel seen, valued, and included is something truly special. Our program is better because of him. We will miss him as he moves on to High School, but know his positivity, integrity and leadership will continue to positively impact everyone he encounters. There is no doubt he will go on to do incredible things.

—Erin Robinson

*Dipannita Mukherjee, Paraeducator*

Mrs. M helps me with my math in study skills. She is very patient when with me when she helps me. She teaches it in a fun way. She seems to care about all the students she helps. She has helped me catch up with a lot of math that I missed. Every time I see her in study skills she makes my day better.

—Dominick

*Blanca Ordaz Arechiga, Paraeducator*

Mrs. O helps me get my work done in study skills. It is fun to work with her because she is nice and kind and helpful. She always laughs with me when I do something funny. She patient when I am working on my world studies work. Because she helps me I get better grades. I'm so glad she can come and work with me when I need help.

—Evan

*Jennifer Plumer, Paraeducator*

We would like to nominate Jennifer Plumer for the Sparkle Award. She is a very good Paraeducator. She makes us laugh all the time, and that makes class fun. When school is fun, it is easier to learn. Ms. Plumer is a great helper. When we are stuck or do not understand our

work, she helps us make it make sense. She is confident, and that makes us feel good because we know she knows what she is doing. She is kind and always helps people when they need help with classwork. Ms. Plumer also helps many other students, not just one person. She rewards us when we do good things, which makes us want to try our best. She is funny and laughs a lot, and that makes us excited to be in class. We will miss her when we go to high school. Ms. Plumer definitely deserves the Sparkle Award.

—Doriana and Leyan

### *Antonia Pokorny, Anchor*

Antonia has served as an Anchor in the Life Skills program at West Middle School, where she has made a meaningful impact through her dedication and compassion. Throughout her time in the program, Antonia has worked patiently alongside students in the ASD program, building positive relationships and offering support in a variety of ways. During cooking activities, she has helped plan menus and guided students as they prepared snacks, encouraging independence while making the experience fun and engaging.

In addition to cooking, Antonia has supported students with job training activities, such as delivering mail throughout the school, helping them practice responsibility and workplace skills. During social time, Antonia helps the ASD students create crafts, engages with them in games and reflects on different ways she can support and interact with the students. She has also assisted with the dismissal process, ensuring students feel supported and safe as they transition at the end of the day. Antonia approaches every interaction with care, patience, and kindness. Her calm and supportive presence helps students feel comfortable and confident, and she consistently shows genuine respect for every student she works with. Through her thoughtful actions and dedication, Antonia has been a positive role model and a valued member of the West Middle School community. We will miss Antonia and wish her the best next year as she begins High School.

—Anna Ketzler

### *Erin Robinson, Teacher*

Erin has built such strong relationships with her students. She has a keen eye of seeing and knowing what they need and is always willing and on top of identifying and using new evidence-based practices and strategies. She models and educates staff on positive interventions for her students. Even on the challenging days, she never gives up on her students or on herself. Her students and families are lucky to have her as their teacher.

— Anonymous

### *Gabrielle Soule, Student*

Gabby consistently demonstrates strong leadership qualities in our classroom community. She has taken initiative in designing projects, such as creating fliers to promote our Anchors candy



sale. She also took initiative in volunteering her timing during lunch to support this activity. She is kind, compassionate and determined. Gabby comes to school each day with a positive attitude and spreads her positivity while interacting with our ASD students, showing genuine care and enthusiasm in those relationships. In addition to her leadership, she interacts with her peers with kindness and patience, helping to create a welcoming and supportive environment. She truly embodies the value of inclusion and is a positive role model for others. It has been so awesome getting to know Gabby and watching her grow this year. She is a great addition to any classroom, and we will miss her next year!

—Erin Robinson & Anna Ketzler

### *Bailey Warren, Teacher*

It is an honor to nominate Miss Bailey Warren for the Sparkle Award. While many teachers are dedicated to their students' academic success, Miss Warren possesses a rare level of empathy and heart that transforms the lives of the children she teaches.

In October 2025, our family faced a significant crisis when my son suffered an accident that required hospitalization. At the time, his mother was in India, and he felt understandably frightened and alone. Without being asked, Miss Warren took it upon herself to visit him in the hospital. That visit changed everything for him. She didn't just come as a teacher; she came as a source of comfort and a reminder that he belonged to a community that truly cared for him. She brought him a soft-toy bunny, which—five months later—remains his most cherished possession. He still sleeps with it every night, a testament to the lasting impact of her kindness.



#### Why She Shines

Miss Warren embodies the spirit of this award through:

-Unwavering Compassion: She recognizes that a student's emotional well-being is the foundation for all learning.

-Building a Bridge of Trust: By showing up for my son during his darkest moment, she built a bond of trust that has made him more confident and engaged in the classroom.

-Excellence in Special Education: She navigates the complexities of middle-grade education with a "student-first" mentality, ensuring every child feels seen, safe, and supported.

To my son, Miss Warren isn't just a teacher; she is a hero. She didn't just teach him lessons from a book; she taught him that he is valued. We are eternally grateful for the "sparkle" she has brought into his life during a very difficult year.

—Mayuresh Fulambrikar

We have a seventh grader who is profoundly autistic, has very limited language and attends the categorical program at West Middle School. He can't tell us every day what makes him happy or unhappy so we rely on signs and moods and communication from caregivers.

So how do we know Elliott loves Ms. Warren? Most parents have the simple luxury of asking their children about their teacher. We have never been able to do that with Elliott. But that doesn't mean there aren't ways to know. At home with the words he does have Elliott will

often exclaim “West Middle School!” and happily go to bed on a school night. When we have to tell him we are sorry but there’s no school due to a snow day or day off, he will often cry or go



to his room and shut the door. Recently we were singing “Who stole the cookie?” and he grinned and proudly shouted “Miss Warren stole a cookie from a cookie jar!” She communicates with us constantly asking about why he might be sad today or letting us know he made it through an unexpected event such as a pulled fire alarm ok. She sends pictures of him happily playing with peers in gym or engaged in learning. We have been to school and seen him light up at the sight of her. He isn’t an easy kid. He’s big and knows what he wants. Just like us she has dealt with his big moods and sneaky behaviors. Elliott will steal your lunch and your heart all in a moment. But she has no shortage of empathy and patience and understanding and autism

know-how to keep working with him every day. While we never try and speak for our son, we always have to be his voice. I think we have enough evidence to say that Elliott does in fact love his teacher, Miss Warren. We have found very few people willing to stick around long enough to see what an incredible person Elliott is, but inevitably, when they do, we have always found someone equally remarkable.

—Melissa Hoffman

## High School

### Adams High School

*AHS Peer Mentors: Vivienne Bell, Leah Blackmore, Kaitlyn Bothe, Landon Clow, Kate Dagenais, Saachi Dahanukar, McCallister Doelle, Maya Dorsey, Ella Eischeid, Emma Genord, Nathan Hawkins, Nadia Heppner, Chloe Hitt, Lucas Honeycutt, Raegan Jerrell, Bella King, Daniella Levitt, Lilyana Lock, Jade Lucaj, Kate Lyons, Alanna Mannhalt, Molly Nordoh, Peyton Nugent, Jaslyn Oliver, Katherine Plummer, Aleksander Rivas, Madden Roumayah, Carson Salajan, Julia Sawyer, Ian Ugorowski, Joslyn Upina, Danika Vallis, Adriauna Washington, Ryland Watters, Ezekiel Wilson, Zachary Young*

We are proud to nominate this outstanding group of high school students for a 2026 Sparkle Award. These peer mentors truly exemplify excellence. They have formed meaningful friendships with our students and bring energy, dedication, and compassion to their roles each day. Our students eagerly anticipate their mentors’ daily interactions and the genuine connections they share. Throughout the year, these mentors go above and beyond to ensure every student feels valued and included. Their leadership extends beyond the classroom into electives, lunch, school events, clubs, and the community. They consistently step outside their comfort zones to promote inclusion, independence, and dignity. Many have continued for multiple semesters and actively support the LINKS program. On behalf of our students, families, and staff, we are honored to nominate these exceptional AHS Peer Mentors for the 2026 Sparkle Award. Thank you!

—Melissa Perkins, Nicole Burch, & Sarah Kowal



*Alyssa Assaf, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Rebecca Bezemek, Teacher*

Each semester Catherine usually has a class or two that is cotaught and I love this model. In this situation, if communication with a teacher is necessary, I generally communicate with the special education teacher and that works out very well. But this year Catherine’s ELA class has been cotaught and more often than not the teacher I’ve had the pleasure of partnering with has been the general education teacher - Rebecca Bezemek.

I have thoroughly enjoyed this partnership and Mrs Bezemek has gone above and beyond for Catherine in so many ways. She contacts me regularly with Catherine’s achievements and issues. She asks me questions. She truly understands my daughter, gives her grace and pushes her hard because she knows Catherine is capable of so much.

As a professional writer, writing is my lifeblood and it has been a true joy to reinforce Mrs Bezemek’s teachings at home as I help Catherine with her assignments and try hard to keep her off AI. All teachers have so much on their plates but general education teachers did not sign up for teaching children with an intellectual disability. It’s just simply extra work. Mrs Bezemek treats Catherine like any other child and I know my daughter causes her extra on so many levels. But all the extra that Mrs Bezemek puts into Catherine is easy to see from my end as Catherine is thoroughly enjoying ELA and is spending time at home writing in her free time.

Thank you Mrs Bezemek!

—Molly Corombos

*Jerry Bondy, Teacher*

— Anonymous

*Nicole Burch, Teacher*

— Anonymous

*Matt Call, Teacher Consultant*

— Anonymous

*Allison Canzano, Registered Behavior Technician*

— Anonymous

Allison jumps into the most difficult situations with grace and grit. No challenges or behaviors are too big for her. She approaches the biggest behaviors with a sense of connection, understanding, and emotional safety for the student. Students know Ms. Allison is there to empower, regulate, and communicate through the most difficult times. Her leadership during high-intensity situations provides reassurance and direction for the teams around her. Allison not only supports students directly but also empowers educators by coaching teachers, paraeducators, and support staff on effective behavior support strategies. She emphasizes that behavior communicates a need and that meaningful support begins with understanding and regulation. Through her use of neuro-affirming, evidence-based practices, Allison has created lasting positive change for students and strengthened the capacity of staff throughout the district.

—Anonymous

*Joey Ciluffo, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Daniel Cromie, Teacher*

I met Mr. Cromie for the first time in my 10th grade Language Arts class. He mainly worked with the special education students, but would help with the rest of the class too. It was clear to me from the very beginning that he went above and beyond his job requirements to help all of the the students in the class. He supported us all in any way possible by answering every question he could. There were times that students struggled to get on board with the task, however Mr. Cromie patiently guided them. He treated them with the same amount of respect that he treated all of the students with regardless of how much respect they showed in return. This showcased his true love of education and his resilient nature. Mr. Cromie is always positive no matter the circumstance and that is why he should receive the Sparkle Award.

—Emma Kocher

Simply put - Dan Cromie's existence means that I breathe easier each day that my daughter is at school. Mr Cromie has been a co-teacher in one of Catherine's classes for the entire school year last year and again this year. He's an excellent teacher. But he is also Catherine's IEP case manager. And in that role especially he has gone above and beyond more times than I can count. Catherine gets nervous about self advocacy. Mr Cromie will encourage, guide and help Catherine advocate. When she gets bogged down in logistics and process, he won't figure things out for her but he will help her figure things out for herself. He helps her ensure she remains on top of her classes, assignments, and homework. And - in the middle of all of this - he has formed a wonderful partnership with me. He's someone I can go to with all sorts of questions related to Catherine's education. Mr Cromie has a heart for special education and the Corombos family feels so incredibly lucky that it is he who is helping steer Catherine through high school.

—Molly Corombos

*Jan Damman, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Karen Davies, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Karen Davies, Megan Haske, and Susie Kautz — Catherine's "math team" — for a Sparkle Award. This group of educators demonstrated extraordinary collaboration, commitment, and care during what was one of the most academically and emotionally challenging seasons Catherine has faced. Algebra 1 was the first class where the curriculum truly overwhelmed her. Instead of letting her struggle in isolation, these three women leaned in.

Mrs. Davies (special education), Mrs. Haske (general education), and Mrs. Kautz (8th grade math teacher and Catherine's tutor) communicated sometimes more than weekly to problem-solve, adjust accommodations, and creatively rethink how to support her learning. They tried multiple strategies, revised plans, and remained steadfast in their belief in her ability to grow. Their teamwork not only supported Catherine academically — it protected her confidence and mental health at a critical time. Because of their persistence and compassion, she did not lose belief in herself. That is the impact of educators who truly go above and beyond.

—Molly Corombos

*Quin Gonzalez, Cheerleading Coach*

Adams High School's cheer team wins championships so many would give them a free pass if they concentrated only on winning and not on inclusion. But the beauty of this program is that they also practice inclusion.

My daughter Catherine's experience at Adams has been so wonderful in large part because she's a member of the Adams sideline cheer program. Brooke, Quin and Jocelyn lead this program and every year they go above and beyond to ensure not only that Catherine participates but that she truly belongs. At the beginning of the season Brooke takes time out from all she has going on to touch base with me about Catherine's strengths and weaknesses

and how best to ensure that she pulls her weight. Brooke, Quin and Jocelyn don't flinch at honest conversations and they both foster a culture of belonging from the very top.

The result for Catherine is a cheer season where she's expected to work hard, pull her weight, and try new skills. And Catherine ends up with cheer friends - at the varsity and JV level - who include her without question and help make her life during the school day so meaningful and wonderful.

Winning is so important and fun but I would argue that Brooke, Quin and Jocelyn are teaching their cheerleaders so much more about life and humanity because of the kind of inclusive program they lead.

—Molly Corombos

*Megan Haske, Teacher*

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—Molly Corombos

*Vera Horo, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Fabricia Kranz, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Christie Larson, Speech and Language Pathologist*

— Anonymous

*Emily McGowan-Zajac, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Emily McGowan for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the extraordinary care, inclusion, and encouragement she shows Catherine and other students receiving special education services. Mrs. McGowan goes far beyond simple accommodation — she ensures Catherine is fully included, actively engaged, and genuinely valued in both Art Club

and the National Art Honor Society. Inclusion in her classroom and programs is not performative; it is intentional, thoughtful, and rooted in high expectations and respect. Mrs. McGowan sees Catherine's abilities, not her challenges. She consistently creates an environment where Catherine feels confident, capable, and proud of her contributions. As a parent, I have witnessed the impact of having a teacher who not only welcomes my child, but champions her. Mrs. McGowan's encouragement has strengthened Catherine's confidence and sense of belonging in ways that extend far beyond the art room. She is exactly the kind of educator the Sparkle Award was created to honor.

—Molly Corombos

*Brooke Miller, Cheerleading Coach*

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—Molly Corombos

*Ryan Mulrenin, Paraeducator*

Ryan does a wonderful job in guitar class. He has been helping our two students in the class Shawn and Josh since the class started at the semester. They continue to learn every and improve. He does a wonderful job and helps them constantly.

—Matthew Harris

— Anonymous

*Jocelyn Murphy, Cheerleading Coach*

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—Molly Corombos

*Andrea Noel, Assistant Principal*

— Anonymous

*Annie Parker, Behavior Specialist*

Annie consistently demonstrates exceptional dedication to the buildings and teams she supports. She works with staff across the district, from elementary classrooms through post-secondary programs, ensuring that students with the most significant support needs receive thoughtful, individualized support. Annie brings a strong knowledge of neuro-affirming, evidence-based practices and shares that expertise generously with teams. She takes the time to listen to staff perspectives and collaborates closely with them to design strategies that are practical, effective, and sustainable. Through her coaching approach, Annie empowers teachers, para-educators, and support staff to build confidence in implementing interventions and supports. Her ability to model strategies, provide feedback, and celebrate progress helps strengthen staff capacity and ultimately leads to better outcomes for students. Annie's contributions to the behavior support team are invaluable, and the positive impact of her work can be seen across the district.

—Anonymous

*Melissa Perkins, Teacher*

— Anonymous

*Emily Quaine, Cheerleading Coach*

When it comes to practicing inclusion, Emily and Marli don't flinch. They could say no to adding my daughter Catherine to the Adams High sideline cheer squad but they welcome her with open arms. They help me keep an eye on her diabetes while she's practicing and at games, they keep in touch with me if Catherine has had a rough practice or an exceptional practice and they

ensure that they develop a culture of inclusion throughout the entire team. The result? Catherine had a phenomenal season that allowed her to experience life as a typical Adams student athlete. And her closest friends during the school day are fellow cheerleaders. I am forever grateful for the kind of coaches and people Emily and Marli are - and for what they've taught my daughter and all her teammates about humanity.

—Molly Corombos

*Sarah Quinn-Kowal, Teacher*

— Anonymous

*Marissa Russo, Registered Behavior Technician (RBT)*

— Anonymous

There is something truly special about the connections Ms. Marissa builds with her students. The way students naturally gravitate toward her—and the genuine joy on their faces when they see her—says everything about the trust and comfort she creates. Watching her connect with students is remarkable; the relationships she forms are authentic and meaningful. Through her empathy and deep understanding, she creates a space where students feel safe, valued, and supported. Marissa works with students who have the highest support needs in the district and she approaches this work with incredible advocacy, understanding, compassion, and knowledge. She is deeply committed to ensuring students receive the support they deserve and consistently keeps their needs at the center of every conversation and decision. She collaborates with educators across the district, always striving to ensure that student voices and well-being remain the priority. Ms. Marissa goes above and beyond for her students and it shows in the joy they have coming to school and the progress they make throughout the year.

—Anonymous

*Marli Scalici, Cheerleading Coach*

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—Molly Corombos

*Tracye Schwartz, Learning Consultant*

Tracye, we made it! He's going to graduate! Thank you for being there from the beginning of our journey with Lydia and now with Evan. I truly don't have enough words to convey how much your support and calm presence has meant over these last few years.

Even in the thick of things earlier this school year when the kid was failing math, you reminded me to breathe, that he would get his act together and that you were ALWAYS quietly watching. Something we've been building to this year - confidence for him to handle things on his own, in his own time. And he did! I know I was skeptical when you kept reassuring me that he would come into his own, but thank you for constantly repeating that message. It was something I needed to hear.

While I don't know if this is goodbye and we'll miss you (hope it's not!) or if our next one moving up will be under your umbrella, we will never forget everything you've done for us. We will be forever grateful for your humor, your calm, your creativity, your honesty and truly just your awesomeness. You are amazing at what you do! Thank you again for everything!

—Christine Bennett

*Luke Swanson, Principal*

— Anonymous

*Alex Welsh, Assistant Principal*

— Anonymous

*Alyssia Wiczorkowski, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Michelle Wilcox, Social Worker*

— Anonymous

*Angie Wornson, School Psychologist*

— Anonymous

## Rochester High School

*RHS Peer Mentors: Rania Abbas, Ella Abraham, Angeline Bielis, Santino Crocenzi, Meredith Cromer, Paula Deda, Juliette Dedvukaj, Molly Fox, Isabella Goga, Maren Greve, Emily Hartmann, Allison Jeric, Katelyn Jones, Gabriella Joseph, Kayla Kennedy, Zoran Khawaja, Patricio Marquez Ledesma, Emma Max, Kole McClelland, Michelle McNamara, Esha Mengle, Harper Miesch, Frans Mousa, Emma Nagey, Claire O'Neill, Nicole Ollesheimer, Abbey Pudlo, Gracelyn Ruddle, Alexander Sabbagh, Makayla Teed, Caden Webb, Wyatt Woltman*

It is an honor to nominate our Classroom Peer Mentors and Unified PE Partners , who have transformed the classroom and gym experience through their unwavering kindness and genuine

commitment to their fellow students. They bring a rare blend of patience and warmth to every interaction, making them far more than just classroom helpers—they are true friends. Whether they are sparking engaging conversations or providing steady support during a difficult task, their presence creates an inclusive environment where our students with special needs feel seen, heard, and deeply valued.

Beyond their exceptional interpersonal skills, these mentors are an integral part of the Falcon Family and consistently exhibit our core values of Tradition, Character, and Achievement. Their dedication extends far beyond the classroom; they can always be counted on to attend field trips and were recently seen cheering and volunteering at the Falcon Friendship Basketball Game to support our team. Their reliability ensures a consistent, safe space for our students to grow, while their authentic enthusiasm for helping others sets a standard for the entire high school community. By consistently going above and beyond, these mentors have forged lasting bonds that prove a friendly heart can truly change lives.

For the positive friendships they've built and the joy they bring to our halls, we proudly nominate our RHS Peer Mentors and Peer Partners for the Sparkle Award—a group of young leaders who truly define what it means to care.

— Mrs. Cosentino, Mrs. Fischione, Mrs. Mitton, Mr. Fox

### *Renu Bala, Paraeducator*

We are proud to nominate the Paraeducators that support our SCI and SXI classrooms for the Sparkle Award. Their dedication, flexibility, compassion, and school spirit truly make them shine. First and foremost — they show up. Every. Single. Day. Their consistency is not just attendance; it is commitment. Even on the most challenging days, they walk into the classroom ready to support, encourage, and love every student unconditionally. Our students depend on routine, trust, and connection — and these Paraeducators provide that foundation without fail. Their flexibility is their superpower. They can switch gears in a moment's notice to accommodate a student in need. If a behavior situation arises, a teacher needs to take a parent phone call, or an administrator steps in to speak with staff, they seamlessly take over. They do so calmly, confidently, and professionally, ensuring that learning and support continue without disruption.

They are true instructional partners. They speak up with thoughtful, creative ideas on how to deliver instruction and adapt lessons to meet diverse needs. Their insight strengthens our program and enhances student learning every single day. Beyond instruction, they provide essential hands-on support with dignity and care. They assist with feeding, restroom needs, PE participation, field trips, and bus transitions. They understand that every moment — whether academic, social, or functional — is an opportunity to build independence and confidence. They also bring joy and creativity into our classrooms. From engaging bulletin boards and hands-on crafts to festive celebrations of holidays and birthdays, they make school a fun, welcoming, and inclusive place. Their enthusiasm creates a positive atmosphere where students feel valued and celebrated.

Additionally, they actively include themselves in the RHS community. They participate, collaborate, and contribute beyond their classrooms, helping strengthen connections across the building and reinforcing that our SCI and SXI programs are an integral part of Rochester High

School. The Paraeducators who support our SCI and SXI programs embody teamwork, resilience, compassion, and unwavering dedication. Their impact extends far beyond daily tasks — they help create a culture of belonging, inclusion, and excellence. For their daily commitment, their enormous hearts, and the sparkle they bring to our students and school community, we wholeheartedly nominate each of them for the Sparkle Award.  
—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

### *Clay Brennan, Student & RHS Robotics Student Lead*



Clay is a student committed to inclusion through and through. In his time involved in middle and high school robotics, he's constantly identifying ways to improve inclusion in our robotics programs. One gap he noticed was that robotics events are not as accessible to people with hearing impairments or without the ability to hear. To address these issues, he rallied his team around an initiative to advocate with FIRST robotics to successfully secure a commitment to closed captioning at all FIRST Robotics Competitions. He is currently helping our team advocate for the addition of a certified sign linguist as a volunteer role for all FIRST events. Additionally, he spearheaded our district's first ever FLL (FIRST Lego League) program for students with hearing impairments. This program was intentionally focused on building an accessible on ramp for students to build confidence and incrementally integrate into the next level of FIRST programs. This year, in its second year, the students who participated last year have done just that: joined the next level of FLL and continue to be involved in the program. Clay's role in this was comprehensive as he came up with the idea, pitched it and garnered support, promoted it and attracted participants, ran the program and provided weekly facilitation and mentoring of the program. He also helped showcase these students' work by helping host a culminating event.

Clay's passion for inclusion has extended this year as he also helped our team pilot a unified robotics program at our high school which was a huge success. As a result, all stakeholders are excited to expand the unified robotics program next school year.

Clay established a new guiding principle for our team two years ago that built on our team's inclusive culture. Realizing that our team number "201" matched the rule number "201" in the FIRST rule book, which is to "be a good human", he created a G201 initiative focused on projects association with being good humans for each other and the environment (G = green). Inclusion is a vital component of our team's G201 initiatives, which Clay inspired and is now being spread across the FIRST universe.

Clay was recognized this year by our mentors as one of our two nominees for the FIRST Leadership Award, largely due to his efforts to improve inclusion in FIRST robotics. We are all inspired by Clay's compassion, which makes the world a better place.

—Shishir Gupta

*Sandra Cano, Teacher*

Because Mrs. Cano helped me learn some Spanish when it was complex.  
—Damian Gonzalez

*Amy Cosentino, Teacher*

Some educators make an impact during the years a student sits in their classroom. Others make an impact that quietly continues long after the final bell rings. Amy Cosentino is one of those rare educators. Amy was my son's teacher in high school, but even now, three years after he graduated, she continues to show up in ways that remind us how deeply she cares about the students whose lives she touches. My son is no longer on her roster, but she has never stopped being part of his team. Recently, after I was involved in an auto accident that left me with some significant and life-altering injuries, Amy reached out in the most thoughtful way. One evening she quietly dropped off a homemade chicken pot pie and cookies on our doorstep, along with a simple note offering encouragement and support. It wasn't a grand gesture for recognition, it was the kind of quiet kindness that comes from someone who genuinely cares.



Amy also continues to create meaningful moments for her former students. She helped arrange a special opportunity for my son to shoot around at halftime during the Falcon Friendship Game, an experience that meant the world to him and reminded us again that Amy never forgets her kids.

What makes Amy extraordinary isn't just what she does inside the classroom, it's the way she continues to invest in her students long after they leave it. In the stillness of moments like these, our family is reminded of the lasting impact she has had on my son Tim's life. Even now, three years removed from high school, Amy Cosentino is still a household name in our home. She embodies what it truly means to go above and beyond, not for recognition, but because caring for students is simply who she is. Amy Cosentino absolutely deserves to sparkle. Thank you Mrs. Cosentino.

—Tim MacLean & Charlotte Oliver

*Nancy Cox, Social Worker*

Rochester High is great because of staff like her. On a regular basis if there is anything we question for my children she is always willing to help. This is a group effort and they work together as a dynamic team. I could not ask for a better support staff for my children while they are in school. Having multiple children in special education is very challenging. Each child is treated individually with respect, kindness, courtesy, dedication, and the willingness to always go above and beyond. We are ever so grateful for every day.

—Anonymous

We are honored to nominate our school social worker - Mrs. Nancy Cox - for this recognition due to her exceptional dedication, expertise, and unwavering support of both students and

staff. She is incredibly resourceful when developing behavior plans, consistently approaching challenges with creativity, data-driven strategies, and a deep understanding of student needs. Her ability to analyze behaviors and implement effective, individualized plans has had a meaningful and lasting impact on our school community.

She is also truly outstanding in her work with students. She builds strong, trusting relationships and meets each student with patience, empathy, and respect. Her calm presence and genuine care allow students to feel safe, supported, and understood, even during their most difficult moments. She has a remarkable ability to connect with students of all backgrounds and abilities, helping them grow socially, emotionally, and behaviorally.

In addition, she is an invaluable support to the special education teachers she works alongside. Whenever support is needed—whether it be problem-solving, collaboration, or hands-on assistance—she is always the first to step in without hesitation. Her willingness to help, collaborate, and advocate for both students and staff exemplifies true professionalism and teamwork. Our school is a better place because of her commitment, compassion, and leadership.

For these reasons and so many more, it is with heartfelt gratitude that we nominate Mrs. Nancy Cox for the Sparkle Award—a true shining star whose warmth and dedication light up our students' lives every single day.

—Amy Cosentino and Andrea Fischione

#### *Chad Dazo, Paraeducator*

We are proud to nominate the Paraeducators that support our SCI and SXI classrooms for the Sparkle Award. Their dedication, flexibility, compassion, and school spirit truly make them shine. First and foremost — they show up. Every. Single. Day. Their consistency is not just attendance; it is commitment. Even on the most challenging days, they walk into the classroom ready to support, encourage, and love every student unconditionally. Our students depend on routine, trust, and connection — and these Paraeducators provide that foundation without fail. Their flexibility is their superpower. They can switch gears in a moment's notice to accommodate a student in need. If a behavior situation arises, a teacher needs to take a parent phone call, or an administrator steps in to speak with staff, they seamlessly take over. They do so calmly, confidently, and professionally, ensuring that learning and support continue without disruption.

They are true instructional partners. They speak up with thoughtful, creative ideas on how to deliver instruction and adapt lessons to meet diverse needs. Their insight strengthens our program and enhances student learning every single day. Beyond instruction, they provide essential hands-on support with dignity and care. They assist with feeding, restroom needs, PE participation, field trips, and bus transitions. They understand that every moment — whether academic, social, or functional — is an opportunity to build independence and confidence. They also bring joy and creativity into our classrooms. From engaging bulletin boards and hands-on crafts to festive celebrations of holidays and birthdays, they make school a fun, welcoming, and inclusive place. Their enthusiasm creates a positive atmosphere where students feel valued and celebrated.

Additionally, they actively include themselves in the RHS community. They participate,

collaborate, and contribute beyond their classrooms, helping strengthen connections across the building and reinforcing that our SCI and SXI programs are an integral part of Rochester High School. The Paraeducators who support our SCI and SXI programs embody teamwork, resilience, compassion, and unwavering dedication. Their impact extends far beyond daily tasks — they help create a culture of belonging, inclusion, and excellence. For their daily commitment, their enormous hearts, and the sparkle they bring to our students and school community, we wholeheartedly nominate each of them for the Sparkle Award.

—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

*\*Tarra Dodge, Teacher*

I think Mrs Dodge is deserving of this award due too the simple factor of how much she has helped me succeed and grow as a student i came from last year really not caring a whole lot about school really just kinda blowing by with the bare minimum and now i actually care about school and im dedicated to work hard and get all As and trully succeed in school i thank her a lot for that because she showed us that with a little help school really isn't all that difficult and trully isn't impossible

—Christopher Thompson Atkinson

Rochester High is great because of staff like her. On a regular basis if there is anything we question for my children she is always willing to help. This is a group effort, and they work together as a dynamic team. I could not ask for a better support staff for my children while they are in school. Having multiple children in special education is very challenging. Each child is treated individually with respect, kindness, courtesy, and the willingness to always go above and beyond. We are ever so grateful for every day.

— Anonymous

she has helped me a lot when i did not under stand some school work and, helps me talk to teachers about a problem.

—Parker Harrison

—Anonymous

I am nominating Tarra Dodge for the Sparkle Award because she is seriously such a huge help to me. Whenever I'm struggling, she is right there to help me out with my work or guide me through a test when I'm feeling stuck. She makes me feel fine and relaxed in class instead of stressed out like I am in other subjects. She is definitely one of my favorite teachers because she actually takes the time to help me on my work and stuff, making sure I really get what we are doing.

—Kellan Wilamowski

I am so excited to nominate Mrs. Dodge for the Sparkle Award! She is honestly one of my favorite teachers because she is just so nice and genuinely cares about how I'm doing.

Whenever I'm feeling overwhelmed, she helps me with my work by breaking everything down so it actually makes sense. She is amazing at helping me stay on top of my work, which makes me feel so much more productive and less stressed during the day. I really appreciate how much she helps me out, and she definitely deserves this award for being such a great teacher!  
— Anonymous

because she helps with work and helps me practice for test and helps me find new study habits and find better ways to study and get prepared for test  
—Devonte Bush

It is an absolute honor to nominate Tarra Dodge for the Sparkle Award. Working alongside Tarra over the past many years has been a true gift. She consistently embodies what it means to be a champion for students, and her impact is both profound and lasting.

Tarra has been an unwavering advocate for a great number of learners. She is persistent and intentional in ensuring her students have exactly what they need to succeed—whether that means clearly communicated due dates, organized class materials, detailed notes, study guides, or consistent follow-up. Her organization and proactive planning create stability and clarity for students, allowing them to focus on learning rather than logistics.

What truly sets Tarra apart is her commitment to championing all learners and honoring their unique paths. She meets students exactly where they are, setting achievable yet high expectations that encourage growth day by day and month by month. She nurtures each student with empathy and care, taking meaningful “pulses” on their mental and emotional well-being. Her classroom is not just a place of instruction—it is a safe, supportive space where students feel seen, heard, and valued.

Tarra excels at building authentic connections with both students and families. Her communication is thoughtful and consistent, and she collaborates seamlessly with support staff to ensure every learner's needs are met. From IEP implementation to assignments and testing accommodations, she works diligently and effectively with colleagues to create equitable opportunities for success.

Perhaps one of the strongest testaments to Tarra's impact is that students continue to return to her classroom long after they are no longer on her schedule. That speaks volumes. She creates an environment of belonging and trust—one that students seek out because they know she genuinely cares.

Tarra Dodge exemplifies dedication, compassion, organization, collaboration, and relentless advocacy for students. She doesn't just do her job—she sparkles in it. For all these reasons and more, we wholeheartedly and enthusiastically nominate Tarra Dodge for the Sparkle Award.

—Laura Martin, Nancy Cox, Kim Williamson, Lauren Greve

I would like to nominate Tarra Dodge for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the incredible support she has given my daughter. As a student who was new to the school last year, the transition to public school could have been challenging, but Mrs. Dodge made it a very positive experience. She has been so kind, patient, and supportive, always taking the time to help and encourage her. Her caring approach and dedication have made a meaningful difference and

have helped my daughter feel confident and successful during her senior year. We are truly grateful for the support and encouragement she has provided!

—Julie

she helped me my junior year and senior year i think she is very helpful for me to keep myself on top of things

—Anonymous

### *Steve Fox, Teacher*

We are honored to nominate Steve Fox for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the extraordinary care, dedication, and joy he brings to our school community each and every day.

Steve consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that all students — especially those with special needs — feel successful, included, and valued in Physical Education. He thoughtfully adapts activities to meet a wide range of abilities, breaking down skills into manageable steps and providing visual models, peer support, and individualized encouragement so every student can participate with confidence.

Steve collaborates closely with special education staff and Paraeducators to truly understand each student's unique strengths and needs. He modifies equipment, pacing, and expectations to promote meaningful participation, ensuring that no student is left on the sidelines. His commitment extends beyond the gym — he attends a significant number of IEP meetings and always contributes with positivity.

What truly sets Steve apart is the environment he creates. He fosters a positive, respectful space where students feel safe taking risks, building confidence, and celebrating their progress. His patience and genuine care make a lasting impact on all students. He actively seeks out information from support staff to continue learning how to better connect with students, including expanding his understanding of AAC and other communication supports.

Even when faced with last-minute changes or unexpected challenges, Steve handles everything with a positive attitude, flexibility, and a smile. His great sense of humor and willingness to “put himself out there” — including showing off his impressive Zumba dance moves — make Physical Education a place of joy and belonging.

Steve Fox truly sparkles in his dedication to students, his collaborative spirit, and his unwavering belief that every child deserves to feel successful. He is more than deserving of this recognition.

Sincerely,

—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Laura Martin, Lauren Greve, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione, Olivia Mitton

### *Monica Hinojosa, Paraeducator*

We are proud to nominate the Paraeducators that support our SCI and SXI classrooms for the Sparkle Award. Their dedication, flexibility, compassion, and school spirit truly make them shine. First and foremost — they show up. Every. Single. Day. Their consistency is not just attendance; it is commitment. Even on the most challenging days, they walk into the classroom

ready to support, encourage, and love every student unconditionally. Our students depend on routine, trust, and connection — and these Paraeducators provide that foundation without fail. Their flexibility is their superpower. They can switch gears in a moment's notice to accommodate a student in need. If a behavior situation arises, a teacher needs to take a parent phone call, or an administrator steps in to speak with staff, they seamlessly take over. They do so calmly, confidently, and professionally, ensuring that learning and support continue without disruption.

They are true instructional partners. They speak up with thoughtful, creative ideas on how to deliver instruction and adapt lessons to meet diverse needs. Their insight strengthens our program and enhances student learning every single day. Beyond instruction, they provide essential hands-on support with dignity and care. They assist with feeding, restroom needs, PE participation, field trips, and bus transitions. They understand that every moment — whether academic, social, or functional — is an opportunity to build independence and confidence. They also bring joy and creativity into our classrooms. From engaging bulletin boards and hands-on crafts to festive celebrations of holidays and birthdays, they make school a fun, welcoming, and inclusive place. Their enthusiasm creates a positive atmosphere where students feel valued and celebrated.

Additionally, they actively include themselves in the RHS community. They participate, collaborate, and contribute beyond their classrooms, helping strengthen connections across the building and reinforcing that our SCI and SXI programs are an integral part of Rochester High School. The Paraeducators who support our SCI and SXI programs embody teamwork, resilience, compassion, and unwavering dedication. Their impact extends far beyond daily tasks — they help create a culture of belonging, inclusion, and excellence. For their daily commitment, their enormous hearts, and the sparkle they bring to our students and school community, we wholeheartedly nominate each of them for the Sparkle Award.

—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

*Kathryn Karwacki, Counseling Secretary*

Rochester High is great because of staff like her. On a regular basis if there is anything we question for my children she is always willing to help. This is a group effort, and they work together as a dynamic team. I could not ask for a better support staff for my children while they are in school. Having multiple children in special education is very challenging. Each child is treated individually with respect, kindness, courtesy, and the willingness to always go above and beyond. We are ever so grateful for every day.

— Anonymous

*Jami Kay, Teacher*



I am proud to nominate Mrs. Kay for the Sparkle Award because of the incredible impact she has on her students every single day. From our very first day together, we clicked instantly, and I never could have imagined how much our connection would help me grow both as a student and as a person. She possesses a magnetic energy and a wonderful sense of humor that makes learning fun, interactive, and truly enjoyable. Even on my toughest days, Mrs. Kay has a unique way of calming me down and lifting me up, creating a safe space where I feel consistently valued and happy. She carries herself with such grace as both a teacher and a person, and I will always look up to her as a role model. I love Mrs. Kay for so many reasons, but above all, I am grateful for the genuine environment she builds for all of us. She truly is the G.O.A.T!  
—Maddie May

*Kris Kehren, Paraeducator*

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—Kim Williamson, Laura Martin, Laren Greve, Nancy Cox, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

### *Jami Kleinert, Teacher*

Mrs. Jami Kleinert is an extraordinary teacher in all aspects of her field. Rochester Community Schools is fortunate to have an abundance of incredible teachers and staff, and Mrs. Kleinert goes above and beyond, making a profound and lasting impact on every student she encounters. As an orchestra teacher, she is deeply involved in advancing her students through her work with MSBOA, MASTA, Honors Orchestra, and the Michigan Music Conference. Yet what truly defines her impact on students isn't just the music she teaches, but the care and kindness she infuses in everything she does along the way. Mrs. Kleinert has an extraordinary ability to see potential where others see inadequacy. She nurtures confidence, resilience, and compassion in every interaction and teaches her students not just how to "perform" in this world, but how to live in it with passion, strength, and kindness.

Mrs. Kleinert has a distinct capability to lift students when they need it and to gracefully step back as they learn how to fly on their own. She supports those who struggle just as fiercely as those who succeed, ensuring every student feels seen, valued, and capable. Her care extends far beyond the classroom, as she continues to champion former students and anyone she encounters who may need encouragement or support. Through her guidance, students discover that music is more than notes on a page; it is a way to understand themselves and to connect with the world around them.

As the philosopher Plato famously proclaims, "Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything." Mrs. Kleinert embodies these words every day as she encourages her students to grow not only as musicians but also as thoughtful, capable, and compassionate human beings. Mrs. Kleinert inspires her students not just to live in this world, but to make it their masterpiece. And she does it with "Sparkle" every day!

—Jennifer

### *Kristen Lemieux, Paraeducator*

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—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

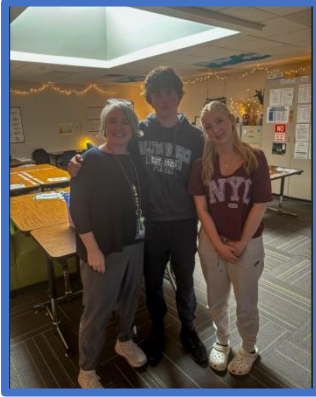
#### *Madison May, Student*

Madison has been an exceptional leader and friend to the athletes on the Triple Treat Unified basketball team. As a peer partner, Madison was at every single practice and every game playing alongside the athletes, encouraging them and helping everyone develop stronger basketball skills. At Rochester Madison prioritizes inclusion and has developed strong friendships with the students in the categorical classrooms, eats lunch with her friends in these classes and is a protective and loving friend in the hallways and on a daily basis. Madison has post high school plans to study education and wants to be a special education teacher in the future.

—Anonymous



*Kathryn Michalski, Paraeducator*



Mrs. Michalski brings such a positive mindset to students every single day. She takes the time to talk with students about their lives and truly get to know them, which makes everyone feel seen and supported. Kathryn has gone above and beyond to learn material not only in core classes but also in electives so she can help all students reach their academic goals. She is always there for everyone. For me personally, Mrs. Michalski has been more than just a teacher. She has been someone I can rely on. Whether it is something going on at school, extracurricular activities, or challenges in my personal life, she has always taken the time to listen and help me think through solutions. Her support and encouragement have meant so much to

me. Mrs. Michalski truly makes our days brighter at Rochester High School and has made a lasting impact on so many students, including myself.

—Carma Muran

*Todd Miesch, Teacher*

—Anonymous

*Olivia Mitton, Special Education Teacher*

We are pleased to nominate Olivia Mitton, she is an outstanding new Rochester High School special education teacher. We nominate her for her exceptional dedication, professionalism, and positive impact on our building. From the moment she joined our team, she has embraced an incredibly demanding schedule with grace and enthusiasm. Each day, she is quite literally on the run—serving students across three different classrooms located in separate areas of our large building and supporting five different classes. Despite the constant movement and complexity of her role, she remains consistently positive, approachable, and smiling, never once complaining about the challenges she faces.

One of her most impressive responsibilities is co-teaching our Unified Physical Education class, which serves 36 students with an incredibly diverse range of needs. This class includes students who are severely multiply impaired, students who use wheelchairs, students with cognitive impairments, students with emotional needs, students with autism, students with learning disabilities, peer mentors, and general education students. She thoughtfully plans and implements activities that are inclusive, meaningful, and accessible to all learners—no small task given the wide range of abilities and needs represented. In addition, she effectively manages and collaborates with the general education teacher, six paraeducators during this class, ensuring smooth instruction, student safety, and meaningful engagement for everyone involved.

Beyond her direct work with students, she is a true team player. She consistently meets with her co-teachers to plan, brainstorm, and problem-solve, particularly when navigating challenging behaviors. In these meetings, she demonstrates professionalism, creativity, and innovation, always keeping the best interests of students at the center of every decision. Her colleagues value her thoughtful input and collaborative spirit.

She also goes above and beyond her assigned role by assisting staff with technology needs and proposing creative ideas to improve and simplify scheduling within our department. Her willingness to help others, combined with her forward-thinking mindset, has made a noticeable and positive difference in our daily operations.

In every aspect of her work, she exemplifies what it means to be a dedicated special education professional. Her positivity, work ethic, creativity, and unwavering focus on students make her truly deserving of this nomination. For these reasons and so many more, we are proud to nominate Mrs. Olivia Mitton—a true shining star—for the Sparkle Award

—Amy Cosentino and Andrea Fischione

#### *Addie Myers, German Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Frau Myers for the Sparkle Award. She has truly gone above and beyond for me throughout the years. She has helped me learn a lick of German even when I was totally lost, she always would encourage me to keep trying even when I was frustrated. She makes me feel capable and smart, which is huge because I used to be so intimidated by German. She is one of my favorite teachers because she actually listens to her students and brings so much positive energy to her classroom every single day!

—Katelyn

#### *Maria Fernanda Padilla Maldonado, Paraeducator*

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—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

*Megan Pasquale, Assistant Principal*

Rochester High is great because of staff like her. On a regular basis if there is anything we question for my children she is always willing to help. This is a group effort, and they work together as a dynamic team. I could not ask for a better support staff for my children while they are in school. Having multiple children in special education is very challenging. Each child is treated individually with respect, kindness, courtesy, and the willingness to always go above and beyond. We are ever so grateful for every day.

— Anonymous

*Jenn Porter, Teacher Consultant*

It is my absolute pleasure to nominate Jenn Porter for the Sparkle Award! Since joining the Falcon Family this school year, Jenn has been nothing short of transformative. She has mastered the rare art of aligning our department with both systems and genuine heart. Jenn has a unique gift for kindly guiding us toward greater accountability and streamlined procedures, ensuring we never lose sight of our "why." Because of her leadership, we are better equipped than ever to support our students who learn differently at RHS. Jenn truly makes our department shine!

—Tarra Dodge

*Morgan Quinn, Teacher*

I am so excited to nominate Mrs. Quinn for the Sparkle Award because she truly makes our school a better place! She has helped me so much this year, especially when I'm stuck with my work or struggling with wording my assignments so they actually make sense. Whenever I walk into her classroom, she makes me feel so happy and supported, no matter how stressed I am. She is definitely one of my favorite teachers because she is just so nice and always takes the extra time to make sure I understand everything. Mrs. Quinn really deserves this recognition for all the heart she puts into helping her students succeed!

— Anonymous

*Nick Reed, Teacher*



Nick Reed has been a teacher in the district for many years. He has always had the incredible ability to relate to all students and meet them where they are in their lives. Recently, I have had the opportunity to observe Nick coaching the Unified basketball team, Triple Threat. In this setting, his commitment to inclusive practices and relationship-driven leadership is especially evident. Nick creates environments where students of all abilities feel seen, respected, and challenged to grow. His calm demeanor, clear expectations, and authentic encouragement reflect the kind of student-centered approach that is valued within our district. Nick is an exceptional leader, mentor and friend to all!

—Angie May

*Pam Salkowski, Paraeducator*

I am honored to nominate Pam Salkowski for a Sparkle Award. Pam is the definition of "above and beyond" at RHS; her absence during a recent medical leave served as a profound reminder of just how vital she is to our Falcon community. Upon her return, Pam hit the ground running with her trademark energy you would have never known she had a major surgery. She possesses a rare gift for reaching our most challenging students, particularly when tackling daunting subjects like cell division and mutation. Her ability to make biology accessible and engaging ensures that every student feels capable of success. On a personal note, she is an indispensable teammate; quite simply, I could not do this job without her.

—Tarra Dodge

*Angela Sambanis-Olstyn, Academic Center Director & Interventionist*

Mrs Sambanis is that kind of teacher that in the movie Matilda she's your miss honey. She helps you. She goes out of her way to make sure things are okay. She cares for you not only in school but also outside of school. Miss Sambanis has helped me in ways I never imagined a teacher would.

—Brooklyn O'Neill

Mrs. Sambanis is one of the most hardworking teachers in the school. She is always there for students when they need help and is someone you can easily talk to and feel comfortable with. Even though she always has a lot on her plate—whether it's meetings or working with students—she still comes in every day with a positive attitude and a willingness to help.

—Gabriel

Mrs. Sambanis has made a real difference in the lives of so many students, including me. She doesn't just care about our grades or how we do in school she genuinely cares about us as people and about what's going on in our lives. Whenever someone walks into her classroom needing help or just having a rough day, she takes the time to listen, support them, and help turn their day around. No matter what might be going on in her own life, she still shows up

every day with kindness, patience, and a willingness to help anyone who needs it. She creates a classroom where students feel supported and valued, and because of that she makes my days and so many other students day so much better.

—Carma Muran

She always goes above and beyond to help and support the students in the Academic Center. Whenever I send my students there for help, I know that they will receive the best support and encouragement that they need! She makes students feel confident and comfortable at school. If she ever needs support, she searches for it and doesn't stop until she is confident she can help our students the way they need it! The Academic Center is always flooded with students during lunch and I know she is one of the biggest reasons why. I have never NOT seen her helping a student and I know that she makes so many people's days throughout each week. We are so lucky to have her at RHS!

—Lauren Hope

Angie exemplifies what it means to lead with compassion, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to students. She has created a truly inclusive environment within the Academic Center where all students are welcomed, valued, and supported. Angie has intentionally cultivated a culture where every student feels a sense of belonging and where differences are embraced and respected. Through her leadership, the Academic Center staff works collaboratively as a strong and supportive team, and Angie consistently treats every student and colleague with genuine respect, kindness, and empathy.

Angie goes above and beyond to advocate for students and ensure their needs are met, both inside and outside the classroom. When a student in our community was experiencing homelessness, Angie worked tirelessly researching outside resources and supports to ensure the student had access to the help they needed. When she recognized that a family in need might struggle during the holiday season, she personally delivered food to their home to ensure they had what they needed to get through the holiday break. Her actions demonstrate that she sees and supports the whole child, always advocating for the dignity and well-being of her students. Angie's dedication to students is evident every day. She regularly works through her lunch and prep period to support students who need extra help or simply a safe place to connect. In addition, Angie leads and runs the Rotary Club, providing students with opportunities to develop leadership, service, and community connections.

Angie is also intentional about helping her students feel connected to the culture of RHS. She continuously encourages them to get involved in the school community by joining clubs, activities, and sports, helping them build confidence, friendships, and a stronger sense of belonging. Her positive energy is contagious, and students are naturally drawn to her down-to-earth personality and her authentic ability to connect with them on a real-world level.

Angie does far more than fulfill the responsibilities of her role—she transforms lives through her compassion, advocacy, and unwavering belief in every student she serves. Our school community is stronger because of her, and there is no one more deserving of this recognition than Angie.

—Aubrey Trimble

*Swathi Shibu, Paraeducator*

We are proud to nominate the Paraeducators that support our SCI and SXI classrooms for the Sparkle Award. Their dedication, flexibility, compassion, and school spirit truly make them shine. First and foremost — they show up. Every. Single. Day. Their consistency is not just attendance; it is commitment. Even on the most challenging days, they walk into the classroom ready to support, encourage, and love every student unconditionally. Our students depend on routine, trust, and connection — and these Paraeducators provide that foundation without fail. Their flexibility is their superpower. They can switch gears in a moment's notice to accommodate a student in need. If a behavior situation arises, a teacher needs to take a parent phone call, or an administrator steps in to speak with staff, they seamlessly take over. They do so calmly, confidently, and professionally, ensuring that learning and support continue without disruption.

They are true instructional partners. They speak up with thoughtful, creative ideas on how to deliver instruction and adapt lessons to meet diverse needs. Their insight strengthens our program and enhances student learning every single day. Beyond instruction, they provide essential hands-on support with dignity and care. They assist with feeding, restroom needs, PE participation, field trips, and bus transitions. They understand that every moment — whether academic, social, or functional — is an opportunity to build independence and confidence. They also bring joy and creativity into our classrooms. From engaging bulletin boards and hands-on crafts to festive celebrations of holidays and birthdays, they make school a fun, welcoming, and inclusive place. Their enthusiasm creates a positive atmosphere where students feel valued and celebrated.

Additionally, they actively include themselves in the RHS community. They participate, collaborate, and contribute beyond their classrooms, helping strengthen connections across the building and reinforcing that our SCI and SXI programs are an integral part of Rochester High School. The Paraeducators who support our SCI and SXI programs embody teamwork, resilience, compassion, and unwavering dedication. Their impact extends far beyond daily tasks — they help create a culture of belonging, inclusion, and excellence. For their daily commitment, their enormous hearts, and the sparkle they bring to our students and school community, we wholeheartedly nominate each of them for the Sparkle Award.

—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

*Brandon Shurter, Teacher*

I am so excited to nominate Mr. Shurter for the Sparkle Award because he is genuinely one of my favorite teachers. He is constantly checking on me to make sure I'm doing okay, and he always goes out of his way to help me out whenever I'm struggling with my work or just having a rough day. His classroom is one of the few places where I can actually feel relaxed and be myself without feeling stressed. Plus, it is so cool that he has traveled all around the country; he always has the best stories and a really unique perspective that makes his class way more interesting. He truly cares about his students, and I think he deserves this recognition more than anyone!

—Daniel Milton

*Shane Skelcy, Teacher*

I would like to nominate my US History teacher, Mr. Skelcy, for the Sparkle Award. Mr. Skelcy always helps me understand my homework and prepare for tests, and he makes learning fun with his great sense of humor. He's the kind of teacher who always stands up for his students and makes everyone feel happy to be in class. I really enjoy being in his class and he is definitely one of my favorite teachers because he's both cool and funny. US History wouldn't be the same without him!

—Tanzeel Mohammed

*Diana Sorentino, Counselor*

Rochester High is great because of staff like her. On a regular basis if there is anything we question for my children she is always willing to help. This is a group effort, and they work together as a dynamic team. I could not ask for a better support staff for my children while they are in school. Having multiple children in special education is very challenging. Each child is treated individually with respect, kindness, courtesy, and the willingness to always go above and beyond. We are ever so grateful for every day.

—Anonymous

*\*Casper St. Clair, Student & RHS Robotics Co-Captain (People & Culture Lead)*



In ten years of coaching this robotics team, I have not met another student more authentically inclusive and passionate about modeling kindness to others as Casper. He leads with a gentle and affirming assertiveness that demands the best of everyone around him. His presence, and what he emulates just by being himself, raises the bar for those in his company. Casper has struggled with a speech impediment, something he sought speech therapy to improve, and which he shares significantly affected his confidence. What he has done with this challenging experience is beyond inspiring. Not only did he confront this challenge head-on personally, but he is also using his experience to make a significant positive impact on others. Casper auditioned for, and was selected, as one of our team's 3 impact presenters, as a freshman. This role is highly coveted, demanding, and comes with the pressures associated with presenting a memorized script to a panel of judges, fielding questions and holding the fate of the entire team's advancement to the next level of competition in the balance. He handled this with grace, modeling hard work and confidence building to his peers, and successfully helped our team win the Impact award at the Michigan State Championship for the past two years in a row, advancing our team to the World Championship. Casper's persistence and willingness to show vulnerability through an adversity he faced has created safer space for his teammates to challenge themselves in new ways. In addition to this personal triumph, he felt compelled to come up with a way to inspire young students like his younger self who may be struggling with a speech impediment or lack of confidence in their communication. As a result, he developed a program called SAY STEM and authored, illustrated, and published a book entitled "I Grow with My Own Words". SAY STEM

stands for Speaking & Youth in STEM. Casper is organizing workshops promoted to elementary students and teachers to provide workshops using this book and simple STEM toys, like Legos, blocks and simple circuits, to share a message he hopes will normalize challenges, taking on challenges in healthy ways, confidence building and interest in STEM. He plans to sell the books and donate any profits to support the growing Unified Robotics program in RCS.

As you can see, Casper's passion for inclusion and using his own resilient triumph over adversity to inspire others is beyond inspiring. This is one of many reasons Casper was recently nominated by our team's mentors for the FIRST Leadership Award, which recognizes students in FIRST robotics who go above and beyond to model the FIRST values of inclusion, hard work, innovation, fun, and impact.

—Shishir Gupta

### *Rafea Sultana, Paraeducator*

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They are true instructional partners. They speak up with thoughtful, creative ideas on how to deliver instruction and adapt lessons to meet diverse needs. Their insight strengthens our program and enhances student learning every single day. Beyond instruction, they provide essential hands-on support with dignity and care. They assist with feeding, restroom needs, PE participation, field trips, and bus transitions. They understand that every moment — whether academic, social, or functional — is an opportunity to build independence and confidence. They also bring joy and creativity into our classrooms. From engaging bulletin boards and hands-on crafts to festive celebrations of holidays and birthdays, they make school a fun, welcoming, and inclusive place. Their enthusiasm creates a positive atmosphere where students feel valued and celebrated.

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—Kim Williamson, Nancy Cox, Lauren Greve, Laura Martin, Amy Cosentino, Andrea Fischione

*Sarah Thomas, Teacher*

I am so excited to nominate Mrs. Thomas for the Sparkle Award! She is honestly such an amazing teacher because she has a way of teaching that actually makes sense and helps me learn so much better. No matter what kind of morning I'm having, she always brightens my mood with her energy, and being in her classroom just makes me feel really happy. She is definitely one of my favorite teachers because she is genuinely nice to everyone and makes school feel like a much better place to be.

—Cameron Brooks

—Anonymous

Mrs. Thomas is the most nicest, caring, understanding, and funniest teacher I might have ever met. I will always and only have good things to say about her, her teaching has made me actually like History. Have her as my teacher is the highlight of my freshman year.

—Anonymous

*Kim Williamson, Speech and Language Pathologist*

We are honored to nominate our school speech-language pathologist - Kim Williamson - for her outstanding dedication to students and staff. She consistently goes above and beyond to meet the diverse needs of her students, building strong, trusting relationships that allow them to feel safe, supported, and confident. Her patience, compassion, and deep understanding of communication challenges help students make meaningful progress, often exceeding expectations. She celebrates every success—big or small—and ensures that each student feels valued and capable.

In addition to her exceptional work with students, she is remarkably innovative in her approach to instruction and classroom ideas. She regularly develops creative, engaging, and individualized strategies that make learning accessible and enjoyable. Whether through hands-on activities, visual supports, or technology-based tools, she continually adapts her methods to meet students where they are. Her willingness to try new ideas and refine practices demonstrates her commitment to growth and excellence in her field.

She is also an incredible source of support for the special education teachers she works with. She collaborates openly, shares resources generously, and is always willing to problem-solve alongside her colleagues. Her guidance, encouragement, and teamwork make a meaningful difference in classrooms and contribute to a positive, unified support system for students. Her professionalism, kindness, and collaborative spirit make her not only an exceptional speech-language pathologist, but also an invaluable member of our school community.

For these reasons and so many more, it is with heartfelt gratitude that we nominate Mrs. Kim Williamson for the Sparkle Award—a true shining star who gives our students the confidence to find their voices.

—Amy Cosentino and Andrea Fischione

I would like to nominate Kim Williamson for a Sparkle Award in recognition of the care and encouragement she provides to her students. While she works with my daughter through speech services, she has gone far beyond those expectations by making herself available as a safe and supportive presence whenever it's needed. She has opened her office as a welcoming space and is always patient, kind, and encouraging. Knowing there is a friendly and understanding person my daughter can turn to when she is feeling anxious about school has meant so much to our family.

—Julie

*Joshua Wrinkle, Principal*

I think that Mr Wrinkle is in deserving of this award because he tries his hardest everyday to have a bond with his students and he is a very positive type of person

—Anonymous

## Stoney Creek High School

*Carleen Allen, Special Education Teacher*

It is with great appreciation that I nominate Carleen Allen for a Sparkle Award. Carleen's dedication to students receiving special education services is evident in her thoughtful, student-centered approach. She supports both special education and general education students in our Team-Taught Algebra 1 classes, ensuring that all learners feel supported and capable of success.

Carleen consistently goes above and beyond to help students build confidence, achieve academic success, and develop a genuine appreciation for mathematics. Her commitment to meeting the needs of every student makes a meaningful difference in our classroom and school community.

Carleen consistently goes above and beyond to ensure students feel supported, respected, and understood. She is attentive to individual needs and works tirelessly to help students succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Her calm and nurturing presence makes a meaningful difference in students' daily experiences.

Carleen's commitment, empathy, and professionalism embody the heart of the Sparkle Award, and she is truly deserving of this honor.

—Jeff Castonia

*Nichole Allen, Guidance Counselor*

I would like to nominate Riley's guidance counselor for the Sparkle Award because she has truly gone above and beyond for Riley since day one. From the moment Riley began experiencing Lyme disease symptoms, she showed extraordinary compassion, patience, and advocacy—ensuring Riley felt supported both academically and emotionally during an incredibly challenging time.

She consistently worked with us to navigate school accommodations, checked in on Riley's well-being, and never made her feel like a burden or "problem" student. As Riley entered the college

admissions process, her guidance, encouragement, and belief in Riley made an enormous difference. She took the time to truly understand Riley’s journey, strengths, and challenges, and supported her every step of the way.

What makes her exceptional is not just her professionalism, but her heart. She is kind, genuine, and deeply invested in her students. Riley feels seen, valued, and cared for—and it’s clear that this counselor truly loves what she does and truly cares about Riley as a person. She has been an incredible advocate and a constant source of support, and our family is profoundly grateful for her.

—Erika

### *Abby Barbuto, Teacher*

Ms. Barbuto has been a huge help for both my son and my wife and I. She is very caring. It is evident that she is attuned to my son and his need and is always very positive. She shares feedback and is very responsive. As my son transitioned to high school, my wife and I were very anxious about the next leap forward. Ms. Barbuto has helped ease our fears and help him progress by continuing to stay on top of our son's progress.

She advocates for us with his other teachers and with athletics. At times, as bumps in the roads hit, we reach out worried about the worst, and she does a great job of putting things in perspective and helping to show us the next steps and to show us that he is on a good path for him.

Our son struggles substantially with grades and attention and executive functioning, and she does a wonderful job of showing us how hard he is working. I cannot imagine how much harder it would be for our son and us as parents to navigate high school without Ms. Barbuto in our son's corner.

In closing, she is a rock star. We cannot put into words how much we appreciate her. My son, Stoney, and all of Rochester Schools is lucky to have someone who puts so much effort and caring into her work. I am glad that she found her way into this profession, and into my son's path.

—Gregory

It is my pleasure to nominate Abby Barbuto for a Sparkle Award. Abby instructs Learning Strategies at Stoney Creek High School. She consistently demonstrates exceptional dedication to students receiving special education services through her patience, compassion, and unwavering support. She approaches each student as an individual, taking the time to understand their strengths, challenges, and needs.

Abby goes above and beyond her role by creating a safe, welcoming environment where students feel valued and capable. Her calm demeanor and positive attitude help students build confidence and independence, even during challenging moments. Families and colleagues alike recognize Abby as someone who can always be relied upon to put students first.

Abby’s impact reaches far beyond the classroom—she makes a lasting difference in the lives of the students she supports. She is truly deserving of recognition through the Sparkle Award.

—Jeff Castonia

*Amanda Bausack, Teacher*

Amanda exhibits a strong commitment to meeting the diverse needs of all learners. She works collaboratively with her department and with support personnel and she approaches every challenge with a positive, solutions-focused mindset. Amanda is always open to adjusting strategies and testing new accommodations. Her willingness to adapt and partner with others helps create a learning environment where every student has the opportunity to thrive.

—Anonymous

*Beth Blane, Teacher*

Beth consistently goes above and beyond to support students with a wide range of learning needs. She is a true team player—collaborative, open-minded, and always willing to try new accommodations to see what will best help each student succeed. Her flexibility and commitment to problem-solving create an inclusive classroom where students feel supported and valued. It's clear that Beth genuinely cares about doing what's right for every learner.

—Anonymous

*Jeff Castonia, Teacher Consultant*

I am honored to nominate Mr. Castonia for a Sparkle Award in recognition of his consistent and compassionate support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. From the student's perspective, Mr. Castonia is always there whenever support is needed. His presence is steady and reassuring, helping create a sense of safety and trust throughout the school day. As a parent, I deeply appreciate knowing that Mr. Castonia regularly checks in and communicates clearly. His attentiveness and willingness to stay connected provide reassurance that the student is supported both academically and emotionally. Mr. Castonia's care, reliability, and thoughtful communication exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and his impact is felt by both the student and family.

—Ann Ehlert

*Stephanie Chatman, Teacher*

Stephanie consistently goes above and beyond to support students with a wide range of learning needs. She is a true team player—collaborative, open-minded, and always willing to try new accommodations to see what will best help each student succeed. Her flexibility and commitment to problem-solving create an inclusive classroom where students feel supported and valued.

—Anonymous

*Adam Clyne, Teacher*

Adam has been absolutely incredible this year at advocating and supporting the needs of all of the students in his classroom. He is a team player who has been fantastic at communicating with all the support personnel in the building to make sure every child has their best chance at success.

—Anonymous

*EmmaLee Collis, Special Education Teacher*

I am pleased to nominate EmmaLee Collis for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional dedication to students receiving special education services. EmmaLee brings warmth, enthusiasm, and a genuine passion for helping students thrive. She supports students in a variety of ways, working with them in Team-Taught Biology, Team-Taught Physical Science, and Learning Strategies. In each of these settings, EmmaLee demonstrates patience, commitment, and a strong belief in every student's potential.

EmmaLee consistently goes above and beyond to support all students in her classes, creating a positive and encouraging learning environment where students feel valued and capable of success. She consistently creates positive, encouraging environments where students feel comfortable taking risks and celebrating successes—big or small. EmmaLee's attentiveness and adaptability allow her to meet students where they are and support their growth in meaningful ways. EmmaLee's compassion and commitment do not go unnoticed by students, families, or colleagues. She truly exemplifies the spirit of the Sparkle Award.

—Jeff Castonia

*Katelyn Cryderman, Teacher*

Mrs. Cryderman goes above and beyond as a teacher and in her role as Senior Class Advisor. As the Senior Class Advisor, she organizes several key events throughout the year. Beginning the 1st week with the Senior Sunrise. Not only does she make sure everything is ready, but she also buys donuts and cider for the students, creates playlists, sets up and helps clean up and overall, just makes sure everything is perfect!

She does this for every single senior event at Stoney Creek! She makes sure everyone is included and reaches out to make sure everyone can go to each event eliminating any type of barrier. She plans and decorates Prom, Color Rush, the Senior Walks, Senior Sunset. She works the entire year to find things that will be unique, fun and memorable for the kids. She is truly amazing! When she saw a gap in communication last year between Students and parents, she planned and organized an event with both Senior Students and Parents to come to the school, enjoy coffee and donuts and go over all of the events. This is now part of our traditions at Stoney Creek High School and parents look forward to it! I can't say enough about how much time, thought and caring she puts into being the Senior Advisor! The decorations and effort put into our prom make it THE EVENT for seniors!

But, Mrs Cryderman is not just amazing in this role! She is also a great teacher. She teaches our business classes and is often one of our students favorite teachers! She brings personal experience to the position and provides meaningful lessons. Recently, when one of our other teachers was injured. Katelyn jumped in to take over one of her classes to lessen the impact of the teacher being out. She worked with Mrs Ivory to develop lesson plans and advise the DECA club. Without her actions, many students would have been negatively impacted.

I can't say enough about how happy I am the Mrs. Cryderman is at Stoney Creek High School and the great work she does! I am so excited to nominate her and hope she gets the recognition she deserves for her selfless, hard work she does for the school!

—Anonymous

*Melissa Deluna, Chartwells Employee*

I am honored to nominate Melissa Deluna for the Sparkle Awards. I have known Melissa for four years in my role as a special education teacher at Stoney Creek High School, and I am grateful for her work in the school cafeteria, where she is employed by Chartwells. During this time, I have observed, at close range, the consistently compassionate and effective ways she supports our students with special needs.

Melissa approaches every interaction with genuine care and patience. She goes above and beyond her role by taking the time to learn the routines, procedures, interests, and strengths of the students she interacts with. Because of this thoughtful attention, many students feel more included and safer within the school community, especially in the cafeteria. Her daily presence in the cafeteria provides continuity for students who benefit from predictable, supportive adults during transitional times; I have seen students develop increased independence by following the cafeteria routines that Melissa helps advocate for, teach, and reinforce.

Her partnership with school staff is deeply collaborative. Melissa has taken deliberate steps to understand individual students' needs and interests to build meaningful relationships. She is not content with simply doing her job; she actively encourages students to practice skills, celebrates small successes, and models warm, respectful interactions that promote belonging. These contributions extend well beyond her own child. Melissa's influence is felt across many students' lives and contributes directly to their social, emotional, and functional growth.

Melissa's generosity and investment in our classroom also demonstrate her commitment. She has donated a Holiday tree and seasonal decorations that bring joy and a sense of celebration to my students. Additionally, she has provided numerous fidgets and other supportive materials that have measurably improved students' focus and progress toward learning goals. Small acts like these create an environment where students feel seen and supported, and they reflect Melissa's thoughtful, student-centered approach.

In the broader context of my experience working with families and school staff, Melissa stands out as a partner who combines empathy with practical action. She consistently demonstrates reliability, discretion, and a positive presence that both students and staff trust. Her efforts are not performative; they are steady and intentional, producing real benefits for students' day-to-day experiences and long-term development.

For these reasons, I nominate Melissa for the Sparkle Award. Her Sparkling light is expressed through kindness, dedication, and concrete support, which helps my students shine every day. I am grateful to have her in our school community and proud to recommend her for this recognition.

—Jason Lacy

*Alex DeSantis, Teacher*

Alex has been extremely accommodating to students with IEP's and 504's this year. He has been a great at teaming bio and ensuring that all students are getting the proper supports that they need.

—Anonymous

*Emily Dybowski, Social Worker*

I would like to proudly nominate Emily Dybowski for a Sparkle Award. Emily is an exceptionally dedicated, hardworking, and compassionate social worker who consistently goes above and beyond for both her students and her colleagues.

This year, when the social work department was short-staffed for several months, Emily stepped up without hesitation. Her reliability, professionalism, and willingness to support others made a challenging time more manageable for everyone. She supports our emotionally impaired program with a positive attitude, thoughtful and proactive lesson planning, and an impressive responsiveness to crisis situations.

Emily is especially skilled at collecting and using data to better understand student needs and create individualized, meaningful interventions that truly make a difference. Most importantly, she cares deeply for her students and goes out of her way to ensure they feel seen, heard, and respected every single day. I am incredibly proud and grateful to work alongside Emily. Her dedication, empathy, and commitment to students truly embody the spirit of the Sparkle Award.

—Brandee Lamontagne

I am honored to nominate Ms. Dybowski for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her compassionate support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. From the student's perspective, Ms. Dybowski is someone who always feels safe and approachable. June shared, "I feel like I can always talk to her," a statement that speaks volumes about the trust Ms. Dybowski builds with students. What sets Ms. Dybowski apart is her ability to listen without judgment and create space for students to be honest and open. Her presence offers comfort, understanding, and reassurance, helping students feel supported as they navigate both school and personal challenges. Ms. Dybowski's empathy, availability, and genuine care exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and her impact is deeply appreciated.

—Ann Ehlert

*Kim Filips, Special Education Teacher*

It is an honor to nominate Kim Filips for a Sparkle Award. Kim's dedication to students receiving special education services is evident through her reliability, kindness, and unwavering support. Kim works with Stoney Creek students in Team-Taught Language Arts 9, Language Arts 1, and Composition and Literature. With over 30 years of teaching experience, she continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting students with disabilities.

Her dedication, expertise, and compassion consistently resonate in her instruction and interactions with students, creating a supportive learning environment where all students are encouraged to grow and succeed.

Kim approaches her work with patience and care, always prioritizing student well-being and success. She is known for building strong, trusting relationships with students, helping them feel safe, valued, and capable. Her supportive presence positively impacts both learning and confidence. Kim's commitment to going above and beyond makes her an outstanding nominee and a deserving recipient of the Sparkle Award.

—Jeff Castonia

*Sarah Guadalupe, Social Worker*

I would like to proudly nominate Dr. Sarah Guadalupe for a Sparkle Award. Although this is her first year at the high school level, she stepped into Stoney Creek High School as if she had been part of the community for years. From day one, she has built meaningful connections with students and consistently puts their needs first, making a point to check in with them daily — even if it's just a warm hello that lets them know they are seen and cared for.

Dr. Guadalupe's knowledge, skill, and professionalism have been an incredible asset to Stoney Creek High School. She is collaborative, dedicated, and tireless in her efforts, skillfully balancing the demands of paperwork while never losing sight of what matters most: advocating for students and ensuring they receive the support they need to thrive.

Stoney Creek High School is truly fortunate to have Dr. Sarah Guadalupe as a social worker. She is a valued and trusted member of our team, and her compassion, work ethic, and commitment to students make a lasting difference every single day.

—Brandee Lamontagne

*Jackie Hubar, Paraeducator*

Jackie Hubar is a tremendous asset to the Stoney Creek community through her dedicated work in the Academic Center. She supports students with diverse learning needs, helping them navigate their classes with confidence and success. Beyond academics, Jackie works closely with students to strengthen their executive functioning skills—such as organization, time management, and self-advocacy—empowering them to become more independent learners. Her patience, expertise, and genuine care make a meaningful difference in the lives of so many students.

—Anonymous

*Mary Hunter, Teacher*

It is a privilege to nominate Mary Hunter for this year's Sparkle Award. As a special education teacher, Mary consistently demonstrates a level of dedication that exceeds the standard expectations of her role, transforming the way her students engage with a traditionally challenging subject.

I have the pleasure of team teaching with Mary in two Geometry classes. She is the ultimate team player and is a tremendous support to me and our students. Mary's impact is most visible in her ability to tailor complex mathematical concepts to the unique learning profiles of every student. She doesn't just adapt curriculum; she reinvents it. Whether she is developing tactile 3D-modeled geometry tools for kinesthetic learners or creating individualized digital resources to make geometric logic accessible to all our students, her "above and beyond" effort ensures no student is left behind.

Beyond her innovative lesson plans, Mary's advocacy for her students is relentless. She frequently spends her personal time researching the latest assistive technologies and collaborating with families to ensure that the progress made in the classroom translates to life skills at home. She demonstrates an abundance of patience and models a growth

mindset. Students – who once feared math – now tackle equations and concepts with newfound confidence.

Mary Hunter embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award through her tireless work ethic, her creative approach to specialized instruction, and her unwavering belief in her students' potential. Mary Hunter is truly the standard of excellence for teachers here in RCS.

— Anonymous

She is a wonderful person that helps my Daughter

—Daniel Case

Mary works hard for every student. She gets to know each student and helps them to do their best, wherever that may be. Mary helps encourage kids by setting realistic goals that they can achieve and then celebrating successes as students strive for their goals.

—Jessica

Mary works relentlessly to build meaningful relationships with staff, students, and parents, supporting both her students and her colleagues.

—Jason Kluzak

I am honored to nominate Mary Hunter for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her outstanding support of students receiving special education services. Mary spends her day team teaching Geometry, Algebra 2a, and Language Arts 10. Her commitment to inclusion, dignity, and respect is evident in everything she does.

Mary has a unique ability to connect with students on a personal level, helping them feel understood and empowered. She consistently advocates for their needs while encouraging growth, independence, and self-confidence. Her thoughtful communication and collaborative spirit make her a trusted partner for families and staff.

Mary's kindness, professionalism, and tireless dedication truly exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award. Rochester Community Schools is fortunate to have her supporting students every day.

—Jeff Castonia

#### *Jason Kluzak, Assistant Principal*

I am honored to nominate Brian Shelson, Jason Kluzak, and Beth Tocco of Stoney Creek High School for the Sparkle Award. As administrators, they consistently lead with heart, integrity, and compassion, setting a tone that truly reflects what it means to put students first.

Their unwavering support of our special education students is evident through their thoughtful, creative interventions and their commitment to meaningful collaboration with the TEAM. They approach every challenge with empathy and a problem-solving mindset, always ensuring that each student feels seen, supported, and valued.

What stands out most is their genuine care for all students. Their dedication is visible in the everyday moments — the extra time they give, the inclusive environment they foster, and the

way they consistently advocate for what is in the best interest of students. I feel incredibly fortunate to work alongside such a compassionate, student-centered administration team.  
—Brandee Lamontagne

*Pam Krogh, Teacher*

Pam consistently shows dedication to supporting students with a wide range of learning abilities. She is highly collaborative within her department and with the support personnel in the building. She is always willing to explore new strategies and accommodations to better meet individual student needs. Pam's flexibility and proactive approach ensure that students receive the support they need, and her commitment to continuous improvement makes a meaningful difference in the classroom.

—Anonymous

*Jennifer Kulasooriya, Paraeducator*

This year, I had the honor of having a Paraeducator, Jen K. in my classroom for two hours each day. ChatGPT describes Paraeducators as “essential support roles that keep systems functioning — often very hands-on and very important,” and Jen truly embodies that description. She is an invaluable member of the Stoney Creek High School staff. Jennifer consistently supports students, ensuring they do what is necessary to pass their classes, and her rapport with students is exceptional. She is always willing to jump in and help all students. Resource teacher, Abby Barbuto, has had the pleasure of having Jen as a Paraeducator in her Learning Strategies classes for the past three years. Barbuto states, “She truly has become one of my partners in crime. I would be a mess with her. Jen pours her heart into the students and their success.” The Stoney Resource Program would be lost without Jen K.

—Kim Filips & Abby Barbuto

*Jason Lacy, Teacher*

Mr. Lacy provided non-stop help for my son. He stood beside him every step of the way, helped and prepared my son for the job world. He provided planning, resources, and guided him for post-high school. He gave us plenty of options for which we were not aware of. He was very understanding and well communicated with me and my son, so he completely deserves this award.

—Anonymous



He is an awesome teacher. He is very understanding and he takes his time to get to know each student. He makes it a mission to get the students to a place that is comfortable and safe.

—Caitlin Wagner-Deluna

Jason is an exceptionally patient and kind educator who creates a safe space for learning. He sees potential in every moment and every student. He

turns life lessons into life skills, from academics to baking bread and bagels. His endless creativity and heart allows him to find new ways to help his students grow. His kindness, innovation, and belief in his students make a lasting difference every single day.

—Melissa Burcham

I would like to enthusiastically nominate Jason Lacy for a Sparkle Award. Jason's support of students receiving special education services is nothing short of exemplary. He brings consistency, encouragement, and genuine care to every interaction. Jason's positive presence helps students feel safe and supported, allowing them to engage more fully in their school day. He demonstrates patience and understanding while maintaining high expectations, helping students build both skills and confidence. His willingness to step in, problem-solve, and support students wherever needed makes him an invaluable asset. Jason's dedication and compassion leave a lasting impact on students and families alike. He is truly deserving of this recognition. I would also like to recognize Jason's commitment to helping teach business skills with our Bread by the Creek students. Jason was recently awarded the Council for Exceptional Children's Entrepreneurial Classroom Award. His dedication to supporting and empowering all students is truly appreciated and admired by everyone.



—Jeff Castonia

#### *Brandee Lamontagne, Social Worker*

Brandee leads with her heart. She is caring, empathetic, and firm, always putting the needs of her students first. No matter the situation, she is just a call or text away and never hesitates to show up for her colleagues and teammates. Her professionalism, compassion, and unwavering support truly define what it means to be a social worker.

—Jason Kluzak

#### *Montana Lozen, Special Education Teacher for the Emotionally Impaired*

I am pleased to nominate Montana Lozen for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her dedication and commitment to supporting students with special needs at Stoney Creek High School. As a first-year Special Education teacher, Montana has already demonstrated remarkable passion and professionalism in her role.

Montana teaches in our Emotional Impaired Program, where she works closely with students who require additional emotional and behavioral support. She approaches her work with patience, compassion, and a genuine desire to help each student succeed. Montana consistently creates a supportive and structured learning environment where students feel safe, understood, and encouraged to grow.

Despite being in her first year of teaching, Montana has shown exceptional perseverance and dedication to meeting the unique needs of her students. She works hard each day to build positive relationships, support emotional development, and help students develop the skills

they need to be successful both in and out of the classroom. Montana’s commitment to her students and her willingness to go above and beyond make her a very deserving recipient of the Sparkle Award.

—Jeff Castonia

*Eric Magiera, Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Mr. Magiera for a Sparkle Award in recognition of his supportive and student-centered approach to working with a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services.

According to June, Mr. Magiera always makes June feel comfortable in class. When accommodations are needed, they are provided easily and without fuss, allowing the focus to be on learning rather than feeling singled out or uncomfortable.

What sets Mr. Magiera apart is the way he creates a calm, respectful classroom environment where students feel understood and supported. His approach communicates trust, flexibility, and care, helping students feel confident and capable.

Mr. Magiera’s thoughtful support and quiet advocacy exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and his impact is deeply appreciated.

—Ann Ehlert

*\*Jacob Matles, Student & Peer Mentor*

Jake is patient, kind, accepting, and works well with others. He is an amazing peer-mentor and exemplifies the core values of Stoney Creek.

—Anonymous

I am pleased to be able to nominate Jacob Matles for the Sparkle Awards. I have had the privilege of working with Jacob for two semesters in my capacity as his Peer Mentor Teacher; during that time, he has served as a peer mentor in my class and has consistently connected with my students as a true peer.

Jacob approaches mentorship with warmth, humility, and an authentic sense of care. He treats my students as equals and invests time in getting to know them personally, which has made a profound difference in their classroom experience. My students absolutely love working with Jacob and often describe him as a big brother figure. Their respect for him is evident: when Jacob is present, students engage more readily, work with greater focus, and demonstrate higher confidence in their classwork. This shift is not superficial; his encouragement and steady presence help many students with special needs to access learning and participate more fully than they might otherwise.

A specific example that stands out occurred during a challenging group activity this past semester. One of my students became overwhelmed and began to withdraw. Jacob noticed the change, calmly sat with the student, and used a combination of gentle prompts and affirmations to re-engage them. Within minutes, the student rejoined the group, completed the task, and later commented that having Jacob there helped. Moments like this repeat across

days and activities; Jacob’s consistent, patient presence helps students move from hesitation to productive participation.

Jacob brings genuine excitement to his work with peers. He celebrates small successes, models problem-solving without judgment, and adapts his approach to meet each student where they are. His kindness is evident in everyday interactions. The positive energy he contributes daily uplifts the classroom environment and strengthens the community of learners.

In the larger context of my experience working with high school mentors and volunteers, Jacob stands out for his reliability, emotional intelligence, and the tangible impact he makes on students with diverse needs. He demonstrates maturity beyond his years while remaining approachable and relatable to those he supports. These qualities make him exceptionally well-suited for recognition by the Sparkle Award, and I am overjoyed to have the opportunity to recommend Jacob. His warmth, dedication, and ability to inspire confidence in students ensure that his “sparkle” will continue to light up the world for others throughout his life.

—Jason Lacy

### *Esther Mazzara, Paraeducator*



I am very pleased to nominate Esther Mazzara for the Sparkle Awards. I have worked alongside Esther at Stoney Creek High School for seven years and have seen firsthand the care, expertise, and steady leadership she brings to our school community. In my role as a colleague, I observe Esther daily and can attest to the depth of her commitment to students, especially those with special needs.

Esther is a powerhouse Paraeducator who instinctively understands what students need to succeed. She balances high expectations with compassionate support, pushing each student to reach their full potential while honoring their individual learning needs. Her work is characterized by a clear focus on fostering independence: Esther plans

and implements small, intentional steps that help students build skills they will use throughout their lives. Whether guiding classroom routines, modeling social skills, or adapting materials for accessibility, she uses every interaction as an opportunity to teach lessons that prepare students for adulthood.

Esther is also the school mom in the best sense of the phrase. She consistently makes sure students have what they need: materials, encouragement, snacks, or a quiet moment to recalibrate, and she keeps careful tabs on the well-being of every student in her care. Her students respond to her warmth and steadiness; many seek her out not only for academic help but for advice and reassurance.

A hallmark of Esther’s practice is ongoing professional growth. She actively seeks advice to integrate new strategies into her work. Her collaborative approach raises the capacity of the entire staff; she offers concrete suggestions, models interventions, and follows through to ensure plans translate into meaningful student progress.

Esther’s impact extends beyond individual support and accommodations. She strengthens our school culture by modeling patience, persistence, and respect for each student’s dignity. Students and co-workers describe Esther as dependable, compassionate, and joyful, someone

who “sparkles” every day. Her presence improves classroom climate, increases student engagement, and supports measurable gains in independence for the students she serves. I am proud to nominate such an outstanding professional for the Sparkle Award. Esther Mazzara embodies the qualities this honor celebrates: dedication, creativity, teamwork, and a sustained commitment to student success. I am confident she will continue to shine for the students and families she serves and that this recognition will be a well-deserved acknowledgment of her contribution to our school community.

—Jason Lacy

*Emily McGowan-Zajac, Teacher*

I am honored to nominate Ms. McGowan-Zajac for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her compassionate support of a Rochester Community Schools student receiving special education services. From my child’s perspective, Ms. McGowan-Zajac is someone who responds with calm and care when it matters most. My child shared that when a panic attack happened in class, Ms. McGowan-Zajac was incredibly supportive and helped guide my child through the moment with patience and understanding. What sets Ms. McGowan-Zajac apart is the way she creates a safe and supportive space for students. In a vulnerable moment, her presence helped my child feel grounded and supported rather than overwhelmed. Ms. McGowan-Zajac’s empathy, attentiveness, and ability to care for students in difficult moments exemplify the spirit of the Sparkle Award, and the impact of that support is deeply appreciated.

—Ann Ehlert

*Lucas Nikaj, Student*

Lucas is kind, easy going, and exemplifies great leadership and social skills. He is a great Peer-Mentor and exemplifies the core values at Stoney Creek.

—Anonymous

*Kristin Olson, Teacher*

When I first started my job at Stoney Creek High School after a brief retirement, I was told that I would be co-teaching LA9 with Kristin Olson. I had no idea who Kristin was, and I wondered whether team teaching with a complete stranger would actually work. I was assured that I would love Kristin—and that she truly had missed her calling as a special education teacher. I first met Kristin in the hallway at SCHS during professional development. She warmly introduced herself, not yet realizing that I was her team-teaching partner. From that very moment, I knew I was going to like her.

As the year progressed, Kristin and I quickly discovered the power of team teaching. We exchanged ideas, supported one another, and found our groove as a true team. Kristin sees every student as an individual—with unique strengths, challenges, and needs. She embodies everything a high school student could hope for in a teacher: organized, compassionate, flexible, and genuinely inspiring.

Many of the students in Kristin’s classes face significant challenges, yet they absolutely adore her. Because of her commitment and passion, students who once resisted reading and writing

now feel proud of their growth and success. Kristin may have missed her official calling as a special education teacher, but Stoney Creek High School is incredibly fortunate to have her as a general education language arts teacher. Now when asked how long I plan to keep teaching, my answer is simple, “As long as I continue to team teach with Kristin Olson!”

—Kim Filips

It is with great enthusiasm and deep respect that I nominate my friend and colleague, Kristin Olson, an outstanding high school English teacher, for a Sparkle Award. Kristin exemplifies what it means to go above and beyond for students, particularly those with special needs, and her impact is felt far beyond the walls of her classroom.

Teaching high school English requires balancing the academic standards with the emotional, social, and developmental needs of adolescents—and Kristin does this with exceptional skill and compassion. She thoughtfully designs lessons that make complex texts, writing tasks, and literary analysis accessible to all learners while still challenging students to think critically, express themselves clearly, and grow as readers and writers. Her instruction is carefully scaffolded and differentiated so that all students may experience success.

What truly sets Kristin apart is her commitment to students with special needs. She takes the time to understand each student’s IEP-at-a-glance. She thinks about each student’s strengths and challenges and adapts instruction accordingly, whether it is accommodating assignments or providing alternative ways to showcase understanding. Additionally, she offers resources to provide the extra support needed for success. When students are in Kristin’s classroom, they feel capable, included, and respected. Her students know they are seen, supported, and capable of achieving more than they thought possible.

Kristin is also exceptional in her grading and feedback. She recognizes effort, celebrates progress, and provides clear next steps, helping students develop confidence in their writing and critical thinking skills—skills that are essential for graduation and life beyond high school. Collaboration is also central to her practice. Kristin works tirelessly with her co-teacher and other support staff to ensure that IEPs and accommodations are implemented with fidelity. She is proactive, reflective, and always willing to adjust her instruction for student success.

Kristin’s extraordinary dedication to teaching, her heartfelt commitment to students with special needs, and her profound impact on the lives of high school students not only makes her an exceptional educator, but also a powerful advocate and role model for her students and colleagues alike.

—Beth Blain

Kristin continues to be a rock star teacher who supports every single student in her classroom. She is always on top of what accommodations each student receives and is also willing to try new things to better meet the needs of her students.

—Anonymous

### *Blerta Progni, Paraeducator*

Blerta leads with compassion and understanding, while never losing sight of accountability - helping students learn responsibility and confidence. She has a gentle approach and an

unwavering commitment to helping students grow both academically and personally. We are lucky to have her on our team at Stoney Creek!

—Melissa Burcham

### *Dan Pryde, School Psychologist*

It is with the utmost excitement and pleasure to nominate Dan Pryde for the Sparkle Awards. Dan Pryde is our school psychologist, who is the brightest light and spark of optimism the world could know. Dan is calm, resourceful, and has the best student-centered solutions that allow our students with special needs to thrive. Staff and students alike look forward to seeing Dan



and his joyful spirit. Dan supports my work-based learning classroom with donations and supplies monthly and enjoys popping in to work with the students one-on-one when he is not testing or collaborating with parents and staff. Dan's passion for supporting students and staff is evident in his daily work. Dan volunteers to take on extra duties for resource staff so they can focus on the work to help

students thrive. Dan is the big brother staff love, and the uncle students look forward to seeing. I can't express enough how wonderful of a man Dan Pryde is and the impact he has on all who know him and interact with him. Dan is the sparkle that ignites the sparkle in the rest of us. I am lucky to know Dan and learn from his wisdom and kind nature. I full heartily recommend Dan for the Sparkle Award and know he will sparkle forever because of the legacy he left in all of us.

—Jason Lacy

### *Rebecca Riggs, Teacher (504 Coordinator)*

Rebecca consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that every student at Stoney Creek High School receives the support they need to succeed. In her role as the 504 coordinator, she is a tireless advocate who empowers students to understand and speak up for their learning needs. She approaches her work with compassion, organization, and a deep understanding of individual student challenges, always keeping what's best for the student at the center of every decision.

As a true team player, Rebecca collaborates closely with teachers, counselors, administrators, and families to problem-solve around any struggling student in the building. She is often a student's biggest champion, navigating complex situations with patience and determination to find effective solutions. Her willingness to listen, adapt, and support others makes her an invaluable resource to both students and staff, and her impact is felt throughout the entire school community.

—Anonymous

*Meagan Rigney, Special Education Teacher*

I am proud to nominate Meagan Rigney for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional service to students receiving special education support. Meagan consistently demonstrates empathy, dedication, and a deep understanding of her students' needs.

She teaches Team 12 Composition, Team Economics, Composition and Literature, and Language Arts 1. In each of these courses, Meagan works tirelessly to ensure that students feel included, supported, and encouraged throughout their school experience.

Meagan's ability to remain patient, flexible, and positive—especially during challenging situations—sets her apart as a true advocate for students. Her commitment and daily contributions make a meaningful difference in the lives of her students.

In addition, Meagan collaborates effectively with colleagues to support student growth and success. Her willingness to adapt instruction, provide individualized support, and celebrate student progress helps create a positive learning environment where all students feel valued and capable of achieving their goals. She also is one of the coaches for Stoney Creek's Power Lifting team. For these reasons, Meagan is highly deserving of recognition through the Sparkle Award.

—Jeff Castonia

*Jessica Rome, Teacher*

Jess Rome has been incredible at supporting our students with 504's and IEP's. She is fantastic at building positive relationships with all of her students and challenges them to be their best.

—Anonymous

*Amy Sartor, Speech and Language Pathologist*

I would like to proudly nominate Amy Sartor for a Sparkle Award. As a speech and language pathologist, Amy is incredibly knowledgeable and skilled, and she has a natural ability to build trusting, meaningful relationships with students. Her work consistently reflects a deep commitment to helping students grow, communicate, and succeed.

On a personal note, Amy and I began our careers together at Meadowbrook Elementary, and it feels incredibly special to now be ending our journeys together at Stoney Creek High School.

Having the opportunity to work alongside her across all these years has been both meaningful and inspiring.

We co-lead social communication groups, and Amy continually brings creativity, intention, and purpose to every lesson. Her innovative ideas support our students' growth, independence, and confidence in ways that truly matter. As a team player, Amy has impressed me with her clinical expertise from the very first day I met her. She consistently goes above and beyond — ensuring students stay on track academically while also stepping in to support their social and emotional needs with compassion and care.

I am incredibly proud to work alongside Amy and deeply grateful for the impact she has had on so many students, families, and colleagues throughout her career. I wish her nothing but happiness and fulfillment as she enters a well-deserved retirement.

—Brandee Lamontagne

I am honored to nominate Amy Sartor for the Sparkle Award in recognition of her exceptional, daily commitment to her students with special needs at Stoney Creek High School. I have worked alongside Amy for seven years in our special education department, collaborating closely on classroom supports, scheduling, and extracurricular inclusion. In that time, I have come to know her as a dependable, compassionate professional whose steady presence meaningfully improves the lives of our students and the functioning of our entire team. Amy's work at Stoney Creek extends well beyond routine duties. She has become, like, "the Auntie of Stoney Creek." She consistently checks in with each student, learning individual preferences and needs, and ensuring they have what is necessary to participate and thrive. Whether advocating for a communication device, reinforcing speech techniques, or quietly checking that a student understands the plan for the day, Amy approaches each interaction with warmth, respect, and a calm steadiness that puts students at ease and fosters trust. Amy's contributions to students' speech development and broader educational progress are notable. She regularly collaborates with speech-language pathologists and classroom teachers to reinforce individualized goals during daily routines, using naturalistic opportunities to practice targeted skills. These small, consistent interventions have produced measurable gains in student participation and confidence. Importantly, Amy documents progress thoughtfully and shares observations with the team, helping to ensure continuity of care and targeted instructional planning.

Amy is also the organizational backbone of many of our services. She takes on the responsibility for fixing up schedules so that students receive the support they need at the most effective times. Her attention to detail, coordinating with staff, and anticipating conflicts, saves time, reduces stress for colleagues, and enhances student access to instruction. Staff repeatedly rely on Amy's clear communication and proactive problem-solving to keep programs running smoothly.

Perhaps most striking is Amy's commitment to student inclusion in the full life of the school community. She quietly ensures that students who lack resources still have opportunities to participate by arranging free event tickets, securing appropriate clothing for dances or performances, and making small but meaningful accommodations so every student can feel connected to their peers. These gestures, often done without fanfare, profoundly affect students' sense of belonging and self-worth.

Amy's motivation is entirely student-centered. She performs these daily acts of care without expectation of recognition or reward, driven instead by genuine love and passion for the young people she serves. Her humility and consistency model the highest professional and ethical standards and inspire colleagues to prioritize relationship-based supports. The cumulative effect of her efforts is a school environment where students with special needs experience greater dignity, opportunity, and success.

In the larger context of my experience working with special education professionals, Amy stands out for the breadth and depth of her impact: consistently reliable, deeply empathetic, and highly effective at both direct student support and the behind-the-scenes coordination that makes inclusive programming possible. Our students are profoundly fortunate to have her in their lives, and the school community benefits daily from her presence.

I am overjoyed to nominate Amy Sartor for the Sparkle Award without reservation. Her steady dedication, thoughtful practice, and unwavering advocacy exemplify the qualities this award seeks to honor.

—Jason Lacy

It is my honor to nominate Amy Sartor for a Sparkle Award in recognition of her outstanding dedication and service to students at Stoney Creek High School. As a Speech and Language Pathologist in our Special Education department, Amy has spent her career supporting students with compassion, expertise, and an unwavering commitment to their success.

With more than 30 years of experience providing speech and language services to students from elementary through high school, Amy brings an incredible depth of knowledge and skill to her work. She consistently goes above and beyond to meet the diverse needs of her students, ensuring they receive the support necessary to develop their communication skills and build confidence in both academic and social settings.

Amy's dedication to helping every student succeed is evident in the care, patience, and professionalism she demonstrates each day. She collaborates closely with staff, builds strong relationships with students, and continually advocates for the services and supports they need to thrive.

As Amy prepares to retire this year, her impact on our students, staff, and school community cannot be overstated. She leaves behind a legacy of excellence and compassion, and there is no doubt that she will leave big shoes to fill in our Special Education department. Amy is truly deserving of recognition through the Sparkle Award for the lasting difference she has made in the lives of so many students.

—Jeff Castonia

#### *Stacie Schultz, Financial Secretary for SCHS*

I am honored to nominate Stacie Schultz for the Sparkle Award for going above and beyond for our students with special needs in the Work-Based Learning Program at Stoney Creek High School. I have had the privilege to collaborate with Stacie in the main office for three years and have collaborated with her closely this year on supporting the special education program's new award-winning work-based learning enterprise, Bread By The Creek.

In her role as financial secretary, Stacie developed and implemented the financial framework essential for our Work-Based Learning program to operate as a small business. She created processes that allowed our class to properly sell products, manage receipts, and receive reimbursements in compliance with district procedures. Those systems were clear, reliable, and tailored to the realities of a classroom enterprise, enabling students and staff to focus on learning and product quality rather than administrative obstacles.

Stacie's contributions went well beyond bookkeeping. When our class lacked critical supplies, she took immediate action to ensure students had what they needed to complete projects and fulfill customer orders. Most notably, she championed and secured a new stove/oven for our classroom, and the equipment needed that directly expanded the scope and safety of the culinary work our students perform. That advocacy required coordination with vendors, district

purchasing, and our program staff and administration; Stacie navigated each step with professionalism, persistence, and a calm, solution-oriented approach.

Her attention to detail and genuine care for students are evident in everything she does. Stacie anticipates problems before they arise, prepares clear documentation and instructions, and patiently explains procedures. Her meticulous records and consistent follow-through created a dependable environment in which students could practice workplace skills and take on increasing responsibilities.

The success of Bread By The Creek is as much Stacie's success as it is ours. Her financial systems and hands-on support played a central role in our classroom being recognized as the Entrepreneur Classroom of the Year by the Council of Exceptional Children. She celebrates student achievements with authentic enthusiasm. Her passion for this work is visible in the way she lights up when interacting with students and staff. Stacie embodies the spirit of the Sparkle Award. She brightens our office each day and consistently opens doors for students who benefit from meaningful vocational experience. Her combination of technical skill, steady professionalism, and heartfelt commitment to youth with special needs makes her an outstanding nominee. It is with great pleasure and without reservation that I nominate Stacie Schultz for the Sparkle Award.

—Jason Lacy

#### *Jessica Schwartz, Paraeducator*

Jessica Schwartz has been a wonderful addition to the Academic Center and is an incredible asset to all the students she works with. She provides thoughtful, individualized support to students with diverse learning needs, helping them build confidence and succeed in their classes. Her dedication and care are making a meaningful impact in our school community.

—Anonymous

#### *Brian Shelson, Principal*

I am honored to nominate Brian Shelson, Jason Kluzak, and Beth Tocco of Stoney Creek High School for the Sparkle Award. As administrators, they consistently lead with heart, integrity, and compassion, setting a tone that truly reflects what it means to put students first.

Their unwavering support of our special education students is evident through their thoughtful, creative interventions and their commitment to meaningful collaboration with the TEAM. They approach every challenge with empathy and a problem-solving mindset, always ensuring that each student feels seen, supported, and valued.

What stands out most is their genuine care for all students. Their dedication is visible in the everyday moments — the extra time they give, the inclusive environment they foster, and the way they consistently advocate for what is in the best interest of students. I feel incredibly fortunate to work alongside such a compassionate, student-centered administration team.

—Brandee Lamontagne



It is with great honor that I nominate Brian Shelson for this year's Sparkle Award. I have worked alongside Brian in a professional capacity at Stoney Creek High School and have known him for seven years. In that time, he has been our program's number one cheerleader and an indispensable partner in advancing work-based learning and student-centered initiatives. Brian consistently demonstrates a

readiness to support creative, "outside the box" opportunities that directly benefit our students. Because of his unwavering support and willingness to take trusted risks, my students have access to meaningful, real-world learning experiences they would not otherwise encounter. He has never hesitated to secure what our classroom needs to operate effectively: he ensured we had new uniform shirts for students, advocated for and helped secure a replacement oven, and personally dedicated time to make certain our classroom received proper flooring and the equipment necessary to function at its full potential.

Beyond meeting material needs, Brian has actively supported my vision to grow students' employability skills and foster independent adult living. He seeks out and encourages program expansions so that every student at Stoney Creek High School has the chance to develop and thrive. His leadership is purposeful and student-focused; his decisions reflect an understanding of both practical classroom needs and long-term student outcomes.

In my experience as an educator, an administrator who combines consistent, hands-on support with a genuine commitment to student growth is rare. Brian is that rare leader. He brings optimism, clear follow-through, and collaborative energy to every project he touches. His support has directly improved students' opportunities, boosted staff morale, and strengthened partnerships between our classroom and the community. Brian is an ideal administrator whose leadership and advocacy have not gone unnoticed. He is a bright spark of light whose dedication will continue to benefit our district for many years to come.

—Jason Lacy

#### *Megan Terbrack, Teacher*

Megan consistently shows dedication to supporting students with a wide range of learning abilities. She is highly collaborative and values input from the team, always willing to explore new strategies and accommodations to better meet individual student needs. Her flexibility and proactive approach ensure that all students receive the support they need.

—Anonymous

#### *Liz Tigue, Teacher*

Liz continues to go above and beyond for supporting all students and their needs. Liz is quick to recognize if students are in need of additional accommodations and is willing to try different strategies to help students succeed.

—Anonymous

*Beth Tocco, Assistant Principal*

I am honored to nominate Brian Shelson, Jason Kluzak, and Beth Tocco of Stoney Creek High School for the Sparkle Award. As administrators, they consistently lead with heart, integrity, and compassion, setting a tone that truly reflects what it means to put students first.

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What stands out most is their genuine care for all students. Their dedication is visible in the everyday moments — the extra time they give, the inclusive environment they foster, and the way they consistently advocate for what is in the best interest of students. I feel incredibly fortunate to work alongside such a compassionate, student-centered administration team.

—Brandee Lamontagne

*Jacob Uhler, Work Based Learning Peer Mentor*



I am pleased to write in strong support of Jacob Uhler's nomination for the Sparkle Awards. I have known Jacob over the past academic school year in the capacity of instructor and supervisor of peer mentors at Stoney Creek High School. During that time, he served as a peer mentor in my work-based learning class and worked extensively with special needs students. His contributions as a peer mentor have been exceptional and worthy of formal

recognition.

Jacob quickly distinguished himself as an ideal role model for his peers. As a peer mentor, he connected naturally and respectfully with students who face a range of social, behavioral, and learning challenges. He modeled empathy and compassion in everyday interactions—welcoming students, patiently guiding them through new tasks with kindness and gentleness, and offering encouragement when activities felt difficult. His approach was neither performative nor superficial; rather, it was grounded in genuine respect for each student's dignity and potential. Because of his calm presence and steady encouragement, students repeatedly sought him out, trusted him, expressed admiration for him, and looked forward to seeing him in class.

One particularly meaningful aspect of Jacob's mentorship was his willingness to share parts of his own story. He spoke openly about struggles he experienced, which created an authentic connection and helped demystify the vulnerability of asking for help. That honesty fostered trust within the class, and my students listened, respected him, and importantly, were inspired to try new experiences they might otherwise have avoided. His influence went beyond individual moments; he became a catalyst for sustained growth among his peers.

Jacob's commitment extended beyond the classroom. He regularly participated in the Green Club alongside one of my students, ensuring that they felt included and valued in extracurricular settings. These seemingly modest acts had a measurable impact on my students'

engagement and belonging. The connections he helped create were reciprocal; Jacob himself has told me that his relationships with our students have left a lasting, positive impression on him and strengthened his own sense of purpose.

In my professional experience, I have worked with many peer mentors, and Jacob ranks among the very best. His combination of compassion, reliability, and humility is rare. He sets high expectations for himself while maintaining warmth and accessibility for others. These qualities make him not only an effective peer mentor but also a dependable leader in collaborative settings. He demonstrates the kind of moral clarity and interpersonal skill with others that the Sparkle Awards seek to honor.

For all these reasons, I am honored to nominate Jacob for a Sparkle Award. He embodies the values of empathy, connection, and service that the award celebrates, and I am confident he will continue to “sparkle” as he moves forward, bringing light, encouragement, and genuine care to every community he joins.

—Jason Lacy

#### *Donald Wilson, Teacher*

This teacher shows a never ending passion to teach students not only the academic content, but also how to manage common student problems such as sleep, stress, and study habits. I have never felt more supported and motivated by a teacher-- Mr. Wilson is truly one that cares deeply for his students.

—Taelyn Whang

#### *Paula Woodman, Paraeducator*

I am writing with great pleasure to nominate Paula Woodman for the Sparkle Awards. I have had the honor of working alongside Paula at Stoney Creek High School, and I have known her and observed her as a Paraeducator for seven years. In that time, she has consistently demonstrated the professional commitment and compassionate practice that make her an outstanding Paraeducator at Stoney Creek.

Paula is one of the hardest-working and most dependable Paraeducators in our building. Her unending energy, dedication, and student-centered focus are evident in everything she does. She approaches each school day with a readiness to support both instructional goals and the social-emotional needs of students. As a colleague, I have seen her routinely go above and beyond the expectations of her role to ensure that students are prepared, feel safe, and are able to participate meaningfully in classroom learning.

One of Paula's most notable strengths is her ability to identify students who are struggling academically, emotionally, or socially and to respond with both practical help and genuine warmth. She has a natural, maternal instinct that students respond to: she knows which students are “lost” in a lesson or situation and quietly steps in to coach, reassure, or provide scaffolding so that those students regain confidence and reengage. Her interventions are consistently thoughtful and effective; she uses strategies that calm students and encourage them to return to class ready to learn.

Paula also demonstrates everyday compassion in very concrete ways. On multiple occasions, she has ensured that students who came to school hungry were provided with food so they

could focus on learning. She models dignity and respect when meeting student needs, never drawing unnecessary attention but always making certain no student is left behind because of unmet basic needs. Her balanced focus on practical support and emotional safety creates an environment where students feel cared for and able to succeed.

Her reliability and consistency make her a trusted presence for both students and staff. The students themselves express appreciation for the steady support she provides; many find her encouragement instrumental to their progress. Her calm authority, paired with warm encouragement, makes her particularly effective with students who might otherwise disengage. In the larger context of my professional experience, Paula stands out as someone who combines professionalism with deep empathy. She contributes to a positive school culture through quiet leadership, strong interpersonal skills, and an unwavering focus on student welfare. Her work models the kind of humane, student-first approach that schools strive to achieve.

For these reasons, I am overjoyed to nominate Paula for the Sparkle Awards. She brings light, stability, and effectiveness to our classrooms every day, and I am deeply grateful for the difference she makes in the lives of our students.

—Jason Lacy

## Adult Transition Program and Services (ATPS)

*Amy Austin, Teacher*

She has been the best teacher for my son. She is constantly communicating with me trying to bring the best in all of her students. She is fully engaged and truly cares

—Neena

This nomination is for Amy Austin for a Sparkle Award. Amy is a fantastic teacher that goes above and beyond for her students. She carries herself with poise, even in times of crisis or high stress situations. Amy is always looking for ways to make learning fun and engaging for her students. She is a dependable colleague, who can help lighten up a tough day and is always willing to jump in and help out when needed.

— Anonymous

*Rosie Axelson, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Heather Blair, Paraeducator/Job Coach*

I am nominating Mrs. Heather, Because she walks and talks with me. She worked with me at the library before. She and I can talk about educational shows. She is a good helper and a good listener, too. We can say hello to each other, she likes the adorable pictures I show her. We talk about anything that causes nostalgia. And she is a good para to be around.

—Henry

I would Like to Nominate Heather Blair for the Sparkle Award. Heather is such a good Para. She has known me for a long time, actually since the 3rd grade. Heather has my Job Coach scenes at the beginning at the PAES Lab. Heather is my Job Coach at Mercy Bellbrook and she was my Job Coach at Neighborhood House. Mrs. Heather helps to teach me to be independent. Mrs Heather Makes my days Better And We Talk About The Detroit Pistons All the Time. We always Talk About New Movies that are Coming out to the movies Like Toy Story 5, Wonka, Wonka 2 [ 2027] thank you Mrs Heather for All you do  
—Tim

*Katie Cloos, Teacher Consultant*



Katy Cloos was my teacher when I first arrived at ATPS. She helped me transition to this new environment. She is so amazing. She shares my love of Christmas and all things Disney. She is always smiling and happy. She isn't my classroom teacher anymore, but she always looks out for me. If I'm having a bad day, my people at ATPS know that Katy Cloos can help me cheer up. I love having pictures of Katy on my iPad. Just seeing her smiling face makes me happy!!!!  
—Katy Asmus

*\*Kellie Conner, Job Coach*

Kellie Cooner:

1. She helps me work idpendently when at my job site AND at school
2. She helps me learn how to use my adult actions and control my emotions
3. She helps me realize when I make excuses by mistake
4. She alway helps me with adult of the day
5. She is such a great para and job coach

—Griffin

I have the absolute pleasure of working with Kellie at Jitterz. Jitterz is the Adult Transition's coffee shop located at Rochester Community School's board office. There truly are not enough words to describe what an exceptional job coach Kellie is and the incredible impact she has on everyone around her. She has a rare and genuine gift for believing in every single student who crosses her path. No matter the situation, background, or ability level, she sees potential, promise, and endless possibilities in each individual student. Her unwavering belief builds confidence and inspires students to reach heights some may never have thought possible. Kellie approaches every task presented to her with enthusiasm, determination, and a positive attitude. She never hesitates to step in, take initiative, and give her full effort. Whether the responsibility is large or small, she handles it with professionalism, care, and dedication. She dives into every opportunity wholeheartedly and models what commitment and excellence truly look like.

What truly sets Kellie apart is her heart. She forms meaningful connections with her students and creates an environment where they feel valued, supported, and encouraged. She celebrates their successes, guides them through challenges, and consistently goes above and beyond to ensure they have what they need to succeed. Her encouragement leaves a lasting impact that extends far beyond the classroom and job sites.

On a personal level, I feel incredibly lucky to work alongside someone like Kellie. She is not only an outstanding job coach, but also someone I truly look forward to coming to work with each day. We support each other, collaborate, and share moments of joy that make even the busiest days fly by. We laugh until our sides hurt, and those moments of laughter remind me how fortunate I am to call her not just a colleague, but a friend. Kellie is more than a job coach she is a mentor, a role model, a leader, and a bright light at Rochester Community ATPS. Our students are better because of her, and I am better because I have the privilege of working beside her.

—Jennifer Anderson

*Chelsea Cortese-Allen, Teacher*

I would like to nominate Chelsea for the sparkle award. Chelsea is very funny. She makes me laugh. She says hi to me in the hallway every single day. She keeps me safe at school, by checking on me. Chelsea makes me feel happy.

—Antonio

*\*Peggy Dona, Teacher*

I would like to nominate my teacher Peggy, because she's a fair teacher and easy to talk to when I have a problem. She's a really nice person. She's also intelligent and loyal when it comes to her profession with her students. Peggy gives me good advice on how to socialize with my friends and classmates. She is also fun to be with and has a humorous side to her. She is a hard worker and dedicated to her classroom by offering a variety of life skills for her students. She also makes sure everybody is safe. Peggy also gets along with me and that's why she's a really good teacher. I am so thankful to be in her class.

—Rashdan

1. She always reminds me to use my strategies.
2. She always helps me try new things even when things are HARD.
3. Peggy Always helps me find a way to solve a problem even if it is hard she always helps me find a way to solve the problem.
4. Peggy is Fair teacher.
5. I can always Trust Peggy to help me when I have a concern

—Griffin

Ms. Peggy deserves a Sparkle Award for many, many, many, many reasons. First off, she always makes me feel so special and she gives the best hugs. I always go see her when I'm feeling overwhelmed or sad. She's been there for me and I want to be there for her too! She's one in a trillion!!!!

—Catie



Peggy Dona is family. Not in title or obligation, but in the truest sense of what family means. It's the simple moments throughout the day that I'm certain often go unnoticed. It's the grand gestures that people talk about out loud. To our family, both mean the same thing. Peggy embodies sparkle. She shines brightly in the moments everyone sees and just as brightly in the behind-the-scenes moments that will matter many years from now.

If you asked AI to define the role of a teacher who works with individuals with disabilities, it might say something like this: a certified educator who provides tailored instruction, life skills training, and vocational support to adults with cognitive, physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. Someone who creates individualized plans to foster independence, improve functional and social skills, and help individuals transition to thriving in community living. While that definition may be technically accurate, it barely scratches the surface of who Peggy Dona truly is. To us, she is family. She is an extraordinary mentor and advocate who bridges the gap between professional care and personal, unconditional support. Peggy goes far beyond the required curriculum to nurture Tim's emerging independence, emotional well-being, and social integration. In doing so, she has become one of the most trusted people in our lives. She answers the phone at quite literally any hour of the day or night. She is the first person Tim thinks of when he is experiencing difficulty or when he has something joyful to share. Think about that for a moment, that's family, and that's everything. I'm quite certain Peggy sometimes believes I'm a bit manic. As a parent, I have fleeting thoughts, questions about Tim's care, and decisions that can feel overwhelming. Yet whenever I reach out, she is there, ready to listen, offer reassurance, and help develop a thoughtful plan. Tim turns 21 this year. It's his third year at ATPS, and like many families navigating the transition years, we don't yet know where Tim will land after school or whether he will continue there through age 26. But the truth is, in many ways, those uncertainties matter less because of the foundation Peggy is helping him build right now.

Tim loves the Detroit Pistons. He talks about them endlessly and even makes TikToks about them during class breaks. Nearly every day he walks through our door bursting with stories about his day, and more often than not, those stories start with, "Ms. Peggy said..." or "Ms. Peggy did...". I don't think Tim has ever used the word respect to describe how he feels about Peggy. But it is absolutely felt. As an educator myself, I know that qualities like compassion are not simply things we do as part of a job description. They are things we feel. They are part of who we are. Peggy doesn't just demonstrate compassion, she lives it in the way she shows up for her students and their families every single day.

The Sparkle Award recognizes individuals who go above and beyond. Peggy does that in ways that are both visible and invisible; the big moments and the quiet ones no one else sees. She doesn't just teach life skills; she builds confidence, dignity, trust, and possibility. Long after these school years are over, the lessons she instills and the belief she pours into her students will continue shaping their lives. For our family, Peggy Dona isn't simply an exceptional educator. She is someone who has helped shape Tim's sense of belonging, his confidence, and

his future. That kind of impact doesn't just sparkle — it shines for a lifetime. Thank you Ms. Peggy.

—Charlotte Oliver

*Genet Haise, ATPS Supervisor*



Our son, Patrick Omahen, attends ATPS. He is non-speaking and communicates by using a communication app on his iPad. Patrick is nominating Genet Haise, Adult Transition Program and Services Supervisor, for the 2026 Sparkle Award. As Patrick's parents, we appreciate Genet's hard work and dedication to ATPS. She strives to provide quality programming and best opportunities for all students, in order to prepare them for their future life. Genet cultivates a strong sense of community at ATPS allowing students to feel supported, valued and empowered to learn and pursue their dreams.

Patrick Omahen's nomination for Genet Haise, Supervisor at ATPS: My name is Patrick. I go to school ATPS. Genet help make school fun. She

make me feel safe calm happy. She is nice kind awesome.

—Patrick Omahen

*Theresa Hazard, Paraeducator*

— Anonymous

*Brittany Iserman, Paraeducator*

Brittany deserves a Sparkle Award because she's tough, funny and so caring! She's very kind with a twist because she uses her wit and strength to help students that need her. She makes me laugh!

—Catie

*\*Sarah Kizer, Nurse*

Sarah consistently goes above and beyond in her role at ATPS. Her dedication to student wellbeing, paired with her warm and approachable personality, makes her an exceptional nurse. Whether she is interacting respectfully with students or collaborating as a reliable team player with staff, Sarah brings a positive energy and a wonderful sense of humor to our school community.

—Cayla Scharoll

Twenty years ago, my son, Cameron, was in kindergarten when he came down with viral encephalitis. We emerged from the hospital after 6 months and began our medical journey. Those of you who have medically complex or frail children know that this path is paved with uncertainty, worry, last-minute plan changes, as well as immense gratitude for the days that proceed smoothly, and unlimited love for your child. Oftentimes on this path, the education part takes a backseat to the medical concerns.



RCS generously provided Cameron with a wonderful nurse, Sarah Kizer. She has given Cameron excellent cares at school. She has had to deal with a temperamental feeding pump that often arrives at school beeping an alarm, enteral tubing that pops open and soaks his clothing, timing and noting multiple daily seizures, administering medications, breathing problems and oral suctioning, extreme weakness or sleepiness, multiple broken parts of his wheelchair, temperature dysregulation, and onset of illness, which for Cameron can be sudden and alarming. Of course,

Sarah has performed these duties with skill and care. She has done so much more than that for us, though. Cameron is nonverbal. He uses subtle gestures to communicate. Raised eyebrows, a blink, eye contact, touching in face or head in a particular way, gentle hand squeezes, changes in his coloring or demeanor are all ways that he tries to relate to us. They are little things that someone can only recognize if they are familiar with him. It takes a special person to put the time and effort to understand him. Cameron has his own little language, and Sarah has become fluent in it.

Sarah has also been a huge help to me, personally. Twenty years ago, as we left the traditional school setting and moved into the world of special education, I couldn't envision Cameron still be in school at age 26. In my mind, I would have my act together and we would be traveling the world together. Well, I can tell you that it is extremely hard to have everything together when you have a medically frail child. The days are unpredictable. Sarah has given me grace. She has helped me with so many things these past few years – forgotten supplies, difficulties getting some seizure medications, sudden schedule changes, and nursing questions. She has made herself available to us at school and at home, answering calls or texts even on the weekends. She is always flexible, positive and kind.

Perhaps the biggest gift she has given us, however, is peace of mind. Sarah has helped me take care of Cameron without judging the things I mess up, with giving me reassurances and confidence that we are doing well. She has kept me informed about any changes in him during the school day and reminded me that he is in good hands. In doing that, Sarah provided me with the ability to send Cameron to school without worrying. She gave me the ability to replenish during the day, knowing he is in good hands, so that I can be a good caregiver when he gets home.

As we move on, please know that we will be forever grateful to Sarah for her kind care, and to all of the ATPS family for embracing Cameron as the amazing person he is.

—Julia Wasiluk

It is with great pleasure to nominate nurse, Sarah Kizer for this Sparkle Award. Sarah consistently demonstrates exceptional compassion, dedication and professionalism in caring for our students. Each day, Sarah provides excellent medical care for our students and responds promptly to medical situations. Sarah handles each situation with skill and empathy. What truly sets Sarah apart is her unwavering commitment to the well-being of each student.

For these reasons, I whole heartedly recommend Sarah for this award. Her dedication, compassion and excellence make an impact in the lives of our students every day.

—Lynn

*Sabrina Krolicki, Social Worker*

I like to nominate Mrs. Sabrina for many reasons. She knows and understands me better than anyone else. She helps me with processing my thoughts and emotions when I'm sad, upset or anxious and gives me hugs whenever I need it.

She helps me calm down when I have a panic attack and checks on me when my anxiety is high or if I'm not OK.

She cares so much about me and does whatever she can to help. She is very easy to talk to and makes me feel safe and comforted especially when she gives me a hug. She is funny and always makes me smile and I love when we do our dance parties in her office. She never gives up on me even on my worst days. She is the best social worker ever and I'm so grateful for her. I don't know what I would do without her. Mrs. Sabrina is a very special person! :)

—Lorelei

I want to nominate Sabrina Krolicki for the Sparkle Award. She is a good Social Worker.

—Milen

Ms Sabrina reminds of my mom/my grandma. Whenever I'm in ruff spot she is always there for me. She is the best person this world could ask for. She is a good wife to her husband and mother to her kids and i hope she has a great day... every day of the year i wish her the best i pray that she has an angel watching or she is an angel.

—Kail

I am nominating Sabrina for this Sparkle Award because she goes above and beyond in her support of my classroom. She is always willing to collaborate and brainstorm with me to help come up with creative ideas for student learning and social groups as well as to help solve whatever may arise throughout the school day. You can see the care that she puts into all of her students in her thoughtful social groups, monthly mental health awareness activities, and collaboration with families and staff to ensure the students are at their best when they are at school.

—Melissa

Ms. Sabrina is magic kind of like Sabrina the Teenage Witch! She always knows how to help someone feel better like singing La Vita Loca. While she can't really cast magic spells she does a lot of great stuff to help me. I appreciate you Ms. Sabrina!

—Catie

*Allison Manos, Paraeducator*

Allison has supported Katy as a para educator for the five years Katy has been at ATPS. Katy really likes spending time with Allison. She will often come home from school and use her iPad to say "Allison" which I take to mean she had fun spending time with Allison at school that day. There have been a few days when Katy has been in a sad mood, and when I ask Tiffany about it, she has said Allison wasn't in school that day and Katy missed her. Thank you Allison for bringing joy to Katy's life. She has been so happy to have you as an important part of her ATPS family!

—Katy Asmus

*Tiffany Marble, Teacher*



Tiffany has been my teacher for 3 years. She is so wonderful to be around. She gets me. She is always helping me be the best version of myself. She knows when to push me and when to let me take a break. She cares about me and wants the best for me. She does such a great job of sharing pictures and updates with my parents. I love that she keeps them informed of my time at ATPS. She has given me a new opportunity to be a greeter for the salad program for the teachers. I love that she is always thinking of new things to keep me engaged in our community. Thank you Tiffany for being such a bright light in my life!

—Katy Asmus

*Dennis McDermott, Safe Ed Security*

I would like to nominate Mr. Dennis Because: he announces the buses everyday. He is a good friend. He keeps us safe. He knows what codes to give when there is trouble. He reports it. He can announce some friend trips, too. He does the fist bump with me and I think he is awesome.

—Henry

*Angelika Morhard, Paraeducator*

I would like to nominate Ms. Angelika for a Sparkle Award because she helps me with my math and reaching my IEP goals. Sometimes when we get our work done she lets us have a dance party. She's there for me when I'm sad or anxious. She says non-ya-business when someone is asking about someone else's personal information. It makes me laugh. She is my favorite para.

—Linnea

I'm nominating Mrs. Angelika because, she helps me in the community to find good deals and we also exercise and walk around the mall. She also helps me when I have questions. She is a very nice person and makes me smile.

—Taras

1. Angelika always helps me with my Goals

2. She always helps me with adult of the day when I need help
3. She always comforts me and reminds me to use my strategies to cool and calm down
4. I love making jokes with you and hearing your laugh
5. She is a AWESOME person

—Griffin

*Angie Petcoff, Teacher*

Angie deserves a Sparkle Award because she's so kind and loving. She puts up with a lot but she never quits. She makes every day filled with sunshine for so many people including me. She makes me feel really happy!

—Catie

*Heather Romzek, Job Coach*

It is my absolute honor to nominate Heather for this sparkle award. I have the pleasure of working with Heather at Jitterz, a student lead special needs coffee shop that is located at Rochester Community School's board office. As a special needs job coach, she exemplifies compassion, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to the adult students she serves. Heather genuinely loves her students, and that love is evident in the way she advocates for them, believes in their abilities, and celebrates their growth. She sees strengths where others may see limitations and consistently works to build confidence, independence, and pride in everyone. Heather goes far above and beyond her job description. She takes the time to understand each student's unique needs, fostering strong relationships with employers, ensuring that every opportunity becomes a stepping stone toward long term success. Her patience, positivity, and steady encouragement create an environment where students feel respected, capable, and empowered. Because of Heather's leadership and heart, her students are not only developing job skills but also gaining the confidence and independence needed to thrive in their communities. She is more than a job coach she is a mentor, advocate, and true champion for individuals with special needs, and there is no one more deserving of this recognition.

—Jennifer Anderson

— Anonymous

*Karl Schuster, Paraeducator*

Karl is vital part of our classroom and school community. Known for his sense of humor, he has a unique gift for connecting with students through laughter. His ability to bring joy to the classroom does more than just entertain; it builds a culture of warmth and belonging. Karl is hardworking, consistently providing the support and dedication required to meet the complex daily needs of his students with care and dignity

—Cayla Scharoll

*Pete Sexton, Paraeducator*

I would like to see Mr. Pete get the Sparkle Award this year. Pete is a para in my classroom. Mr. Pete is so funny. He helps me with my goals and teaches me that women should always get off the bus first. Mr. Pete is a good man and I hope he gets the Sparkle Award.

—Milen

I'm nominating Mr. Pete because he is a shiny boy who makes me laugh when he sits at the computer with his glasses on and when he puts his hat on too to keep his head from being shiny in the sun. He helps me learn when we are in the community and helps me to reach my IEP goals

—Taras

1. I love all Pete's jokes; they make me laugh and brightens my mood. 2. He always helps me problem solve with any problem. 3 he always helps me with my independence in the community. 4. I feel safe when Pete is around 5. Pete is a amazing person

—Griffin

I would like to nominate Mr. Pete for the Sparkle Award this year. Mr. Pete is the funniest man I know. I love coming to school to see Mr. Pete. He makes my days happy, he helps me and my peers learn how to be men. We makes learning my Goals and Transition needs fun. Mr. Pete helps me get my jacket on when it is time for me to go home; which is a big help because this is something that I can't do for myself. Mr. Pete makes me laugh and I really think he deserves this award for all that he does for me and my peers.

—Noah

*Stephanie Smith, Teacher*

Ms. Stephanie deserves a Sparkle Award because she always makes the funniest jokes and she always knows how to have a great time and when to party! She's a great teacher and I love spending time with her. She's a jokester but doesn't share her candy lol.

—Catie

*Lynn Thelen, Paraeducator*

Lynn is the definition of a dedicated Paraeducator. Known for his empathetic approach and sharp attention to detail, he consistently anticipates the needs of students and colleagues alike. Lynn never waits for instruction when he sees an opportunity to help; he simply steps in and makes a meaningful difference.

Beyond his daily tasks, Lynn makes a point to know every student by name. It is a testament to his character that students throughout the building seek him out for a friendly interaction, knowing they can trust him to take a genuine interest in their lives.

—Cayla Scharoll

*Lorelei Tomezak, Student*

Hi, my name is Milen, and I would like to nominate my friend Lorelei for the Sparkle Award. Lorelei is my friend at ATPS, and she is an awesome friend. She makes me smile and laugh every single day. When I see her, my day gets better right away. We text each other before school and after school because that's what good friends do! We like to check in and say hi. It makes me happy. We also love making TikToks together. You should see our dance moves! We have so much fun. Sometimes we laugh so hard we can't even finish the video. But that's okay-that's part of the fun and friendship. Lorelei is kind, funny, and a great friend. That's why I think she deserves the Sparkle Award. She is my friend, and I am lucky to know her.

—Milen

*Kristin Truelove, Teacher*

Ms. Kristin deserves a Sparkle Award because she's very funny and smart. She always makes me laugh. She always likes to do very funny things and even cracks me and herself up. She's also sensitive and gives me a little push in the right direction when I need it. She always knows that I can do it and that I'm very capable. Ms. Kristin is THE BOMB!

—Catie

## Durham Transportation Services

*Marcia Cushman, Bus Driver*

Marcia has been wonderful to George since Kindergarten, every day. She genuinely cares for him. Beyond her professional duties, she organized a fundraiser and a group to sing for our family during Christmas break, providing our family with much-appreciated support and gift cards. This level of kindness has truly bridged the gap between school and home for George. He now associates her with someone who is not just a bus driver, but as someone who cares enough about him, to care about his family. (Daniella, his preschool ECSE bus driver also came with Marcia). The kindness made my eyes well up.

— Anonymous

*\*Andrew Hartness, Bus Driver*

It is with deep appreciation that I nominate Mr. Andrew Hartness, Dominic's bus driver, for an RCS PAC Sparkle Award. Mr. Andrew is not only an exceptional bus driver, but an exceptional human being. For Dominic, he has truly become the highlight of the school day. Mr. Andrew shows up for Dominic every single day with consistency, enthusiasm, and care. Most importantly, Dominic trusts him.

Last year, riding the bus presented many challenges for Dominic. Because of sensory sensitivities, entering and exiting the bus could be extremely overwhelming for him, and there were many months when he was unable to ride at all. Mr. Andrew took the time to truly connect with Dominic, and through that relationship, Dominic slowly began to feel safe enough to try again. Mr. Andrew developed routines that helped Dominic feel comfortable and supported. He anticipated moments that might be difficult and gently frontloaded transitions or

offered scaffolding when needed. His calm presence and thoughtful approach helped Dominic succeed in ways that once felt very difficult.

The strength of their relationship became clear in so many moments. Even when there were transportation changes and Mr. Andrew was driving a substitute bus, Dominic was brave enough to get on and ride because he knew Mr. Andrew was there. Mr. Andrew also showed tremendous patience when Dominic was having a hard time, always speaking with a gentle, calming voice.

Over time, Dominic's confidence grew. He began greeting Mr. Andrew on his own in the mornings and entering the bus willingly and enthusiastically — something that once felt impossible. And when Dominic succeeded — even in small moments — Mr. Andrew was genuinely proud of him. It was the warmest thing to watch. You could see that pride glow in his eyes. Transportation can be one of the most vulnerable parts of the day for families, especially when a child has sensory challenges. Mr. Andrew has been an incredible source of safety and reassurance for our family. We always knew Dominic was in the very best hands.

Mr. Andrew is truly special. He has been such a gift to Dominic and to our family this year, and we are deeply grateful for the care and connection he brings to his role each day.

—Stefanie Maiuri

#### *Heather Kessel, Bus Driver*

I nominate my bus driver Mrs. Heather for a Sparkle Award. She has a good sense of humor because she laughs at my jokes. When I get on the bus she always smiles at me. She has fabulous fashion, and a great ponytail. I like when we talk about her horse. We both have krement pants. Being on her bus makes me happy, she knows how to calm me down because sometimes in the morning I get cranky.

—Linnea

#### *Jean Lamberson, Bus Aide*

For past few years Gary and Jean have been amazing to us. From ECSE till now 5th Grade they have been with Leila. At the beginning of every school year seeing Gary and Jean gives us a peace of mind knowing how much kindness and care they have provided our child.

—Seada and Nedim Lejlic

#### *Judy Meshefski, Bus Aide*

Sending our son on the school bus for the first time was a big step for our family. It meant trusting someone else to help him start his day safely, and it was a completely new experience for him as well. From the very first day, Ms. Judy made that transition so much easier. With her warm smile, positive energy, and genuine kindness, she made sure our son felt welcomed and supported. She takes the time to connect with him, greeting him with such warmth and often holding his hand, helping the day begin with comfort and confidence. Her care and encouragement have meant so much to our family, and the kindness she brings each morning truly makes a difference.

—Anonymous

*David Noah, Bus Driver*

David is a true pleasure. I look forward to our morning and afternoon laughs. He always comes smiling and takes time to make sure everyone is settled and waits patiently when my boys are taking it a bit slower. We are so grateful for him and the incredible job he does. He truly loves his job and our boys. Thank you David for sharing your light with us.

— Anonymous

*John Park, Bus Driver*

We would like to nominate Mr. Park for a Sparkle Award, as he is an exceptional bus driver whose phenomenal service, patience, and understanding make a meaningful difference every single day. Mr. Park consistently goes above and beyond to ensure our special education students feel safe, respected, and valued, always greeting each child with kindness, compassion, and a positive attitude. His dedication does not go unnoticed and truly shines. Thank you for all you do!

—Courtney Morgan, Morgan Wrubel, and Sonali Arora-Mata

*Christine Petracca, Bus Driver*

Ms. Christine has helped make the bus ride a safe and positive part of our son's school day. With patience and understanding, she respects his unique needs and allows him the space to feel comfortable and be himself. Her calm and thoughtful approach helps create an environment where he feels secure and supported, which means a great deal to us as parents. Knowing that our son is welcomed with such kindness and understanding each day brings us immense reassurance and gratitude.

—Anonymous

*Gary Schwartz, Bus Driver*

For past few years Gary and Jean have been amazing to us. From ECSE till now 5th Grade they have been with Leila. At the beginning of every school year seeing Gary and Jean gives us a peace of mind knowing how much kindness and care they have provided our child.

—Seada and Nedim Lejlic

*Vivian Spence, Bus Aide*

We would like to nominate Vivian for a Sparkle Award, as she is an exceptional bus aide whose dedication, patience, and genuine care make a meaningful difference every single day. Vivian consistently goes above and beyond to support our special education students, ensuring they feel safe, respected, and valued throughout their ride. Her commitment and heart for our students do not go unnoticed and truly shine. Thank you, Vivian, for all that you do!

—Courtney Morgan, Morgan Wrubel and Sonali Arora-Mata

*Jan Szynski, Bus Driver*

She is the best bus driver. Very patient, always smiling and takes good care of me. She is so nice. ( words from Katie).

—Katherine

*Tina Townsend, Bus Driver*

We would like to nominate Tina for a Sparkle Award, as she is an exceptional bus driver whose phenomenal service, patience, and understanding make a meaningful difference every single day. Tina consistently goes above and beyond to ensure our special education students feel safe, respected, and valued, always greeting each child with kindness, compassion, and a positive attitude. Her dedication does not go unnoticed and truly shines. Thank you for all you do!

—Courtney Morgan, Morgan Wrubel, and Sonali Arora-Mata

*\*Jarith Walker, Bus Driver*

We are so happy to nominate our bus driver, Jarith Walker, for a Sparkle Award. Each day, Mr. Jarith plays an essential role on our team by safely transporting our youngest learners to and from school. His work goes far beyond driving a bus — he creates a warm, welcoming start and end to each child’s day.

For many of our ECSE students, coming to school can sometimes feel overwhelming. On those mornings, his kindness makes all the difference. With a friendly smile, a gentle greeting, and endless patience, he helps ease worries and build confidence. He understands that for some students, stepping onto the bus is their very first step toward independence — and he treats that responsibility with care and compassion.

He consistently interacts positively with every student he sees. He celebrates their small victories, and models respect and encouragement in every interaction. His calm presence and genuine warmth set the tone for a safe and supportive environment before students even enter the classroom.

We are incredibly grateful for the dedication, professionalism, and heart that Mr. Jarith brings to our school community each day. He truly exemplifies the spirit of the Sparkle Awards by making a meaningful difference in the lives of our students through simple, consistent acts of kindness and care.

It is an honor to nominate him for this well-deserved recognition.

—Karen Revenaugh