Singing the Praises of Unsung Heroes

Our 2011 Honorees

Six site coordinators were honored in October with the Communities In Schools Unsung Heroes Award for demonstrating superhero-like qualities in the exceptional work they do every day.

"With acts of courage, acts of love and acts of transformation, these Unsung Heroes are the best in the country at what they do," said Communities In Schools President Dan Cardinali at the ceremony in Arlington, Va. "They play an extraordinary and integral part in getting our students the help they need to be successful."

The annual award is presented to members of the Communities In Schools network who demonstrate an unwavering commitment to those most in need of integrated student services. After the award presentations, several heroes met with policy makers on Capitol Hill to brief them on the impact site coordinators have on the students they serve.

Here are the six site coordinators recently honored:

Amanda Fox, Communities In Schools of the Charleston Area, S.C. For the past two years, Amanda has worked at Jane Edwards Elementary School, a rural school with limited community resources. In that span, Amanda recruited 34 individual and partner agency volunteers who provided 556 hours of service and $11,605 of donated goods or services.

Shayla Jones, Communities In Schools of Marietta/Cobb County, Ga. As the site coordinator of the Marietta Performance Learning Center, Shayla works to level the playing field for all of her students. Her connection with the Marietta Rotary Club provides her students with job shadowing opportunities at a number of professional locations. Last year, 61 percent of students Shayla worked with participated in job shadowing opportunities, and eight of her students completed internships.

Donna Miranda-Urzua, Communities In Schools of Southeast Harris County, Texas. Donna is the Communities In Schools campus coordinator at Jessup Elementary School, where she works primarily with more than 100 third- and fourth-grade students. Because of her commitment, Donna was nominated by all 28 Communities In Schools affiliates in Texas for the "Best of Texas, Staff Member" award, and won this past April out of the 1,400 statewide staff members.

Virginia “Ginger” Pollock, Communities In Schools of Wichita/Sedgwick County, Kan. Ginger is the site coordinator at Hamilton Middle School in Wichita Public Schools. She has focused her efforts on academic and behavior improvement strategies for the 116 students she works with. During the 2010-11 school year, Ginger provided services to 24 percent of the school population at Hamilton and coordinated 35 volunteers, arranging 585 hours of service for students. She has orchestrated collaborations with partners like the YMCA and Big Brothers Big Sisters, and provided or coordinated more than $98,000 worth of in-kind donations, services and resources for students at Hamilton.

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President’s Message

Heroes In the Making

Dan Cardinali, president, Communities In Schools
Photo by William Waybourn

From the time we’re children, it seems we’re fascinated by superheroes – human beings with superhuman powers who use them for good. And that fascination doesn’t go away when we grow up – just this year the movie theaters have featured a procession of superhero films – *Green Lantern*, *X-Men: First Class* and *Captain America*. It’s comforting to imagine a world where superheroes can swoop in, overcome evil and save the day.

In this issue of *Inside CIS*, we celebrate six “Unsung Heroes” – site coordinators on the front lines, day in and day out. In October, they gathered at the national office with family and colleagues to be recognized, and to take their message to Capitol Hill in support of funding for local Communities In Schools affiliates.

None of them wore tights or capes, no one flew around the room, no steel was bent, no bricks were smashed. Someone walking by would think these were completely ordinary people. And they’d be right. Across our organization, site coordinators, volunteers, program directors, support staff, executive directors and board members are all ordinary people who do extraordinary work every day.

Also in this issue, you’ll meet another terrific site coordinator, Cory Bennett, who as a high school student was served by Communities In Schools. Today he’s a proud college graduate and a new site coordinator determined to provide his students with the support and guidance that was given to him by his own site coordinator, Keith Cartwright. Keith says of Cory “I saw a little of myself in him …”

That vision, the ability to see oneself in another, is one of the “superpowers” that our heroes have, and that they transfer from one generation to the next. Seeing yourself in another, seeing your own children in the faces of the children you serve – that’s the moral and philosophical foundation of our work.

On 9/11, as part of the National Day of Service, Communities In Schools alumni around the country organized service projects in partnership with students currently being served by the organization. From cleaning up a beach in Jacksonville, Fla., to building a ramp for a disabled veteran in Tacoma, Wash., our students and our alumni came together to help, just as the community had come together to help them.

In Tacoma, after they finished building the ramp and were chatting with Robert Cohen, the disabled Korean War veteran they were assisting, he shared that he had actually graduated from their high school more than 50 years earlier. For the students and the alumni, it created a powerful feeling of connectedness and a recognition of their own “superpower” ability to give back.

Ordinary people doing extraordinary things – those are heroes. And across the Communities In Schools network, we’re surrounded by them. Their example proves that there is a hero within all of us and that we all have the power to be a hero in the life of a young person.
New Class of Baldwin Fellows to Focus on Strategic Topics

With more than 35 years of combined experience in the Communities In Schools network, the three new Communities In Schools Robert H.B. Baldwin Fellows are eager to apply their knowledge and leadership experience to the task of establishing best practices in nonprofit management and ensuring the sustainability of Communities In Schools for years to come. Recommendations from the Baldwin Fellows’ work projects will be used to inform and improve practices throughout the Communities In Schools network.

Jackie Pittman Curtis began her Communities In Schools career in 1999 as the program director for Communities In Schools of Laurens County, Ga. In July 2002, she became the executive director for the organization, a position she still holds. Her fellowship research will focus on successful practices for working with school districts.

Amy Hagen is the former co-director of elementary school services at Communities In Schools of Central Texas in Austin. In her nine years with the network, she has had the honor of holding several positions: site coordinator, site coordinator supervisor and manager of funding contracts. Prior to Hagen’s Communities In Schools involvement, she worked for the Department of Social Services and the Head Start program. Hagen’s fellowship will focus on effective site coordinator development and retention.

Malissa Martin is the state director of Communities In Schools of Kansas. During her 13 years in the network, she has worked with local, state, urban, suburban and rural affiliates in nearly every facet of operations. Martin has worked as both a volunteer and staff member with arts, community, faith-based, social service and political organizations in several states prior to and during her career with Communities In Schools. She has also worked with university-level programs that share the mission of meeting the needs of challenged and under-served young people. Martin’s fellowship will focus on creating a model for developing and maintaining effective regional affiliates in the Communities In Schools network.

Transition of longstanding founders and leaders, coupled with a growing demand for services, have placed ever greater demands on nonprofits. Through the Baldwin Fellows Program, core values of the organization are passed on to the next generation, while emerging leaders contribute their own vision and innovation.

The Baldwin Fellows Program is made possible through a generous grant from MetLife Foundation. For more information about the Baldwin Fellows, visit our website at www.communitiesinschools.org/our-work/fellows-program/

Bill Milliken Honored by Elfenworks Foundation

Communities In Schools Founder and Vice Chairman Bill Milliken was among a star-studded crowd in Burlingame, Calif., in September for The Elfenworks Foundation’s fifth annual In Harmony with Hope Awards. Milliken was honored in the ceremony recognizing innovators from across the country. In choosing the recipients, Elfenworks CEO Lauren Speeth and her team looked to seven criteria passed along to Speeth years ago during a mentoring session with President Jimmy Carter – including following one’s vision and having a long-term view. This year’s recipients also included Brenda Eheart, founder of Hope Meadows, a community where retired people live rent-free in exchange for raising foster children in a permanent home, and Jim McCorkell, who created Admission Possible to help low-income and often first-generation college students earn college admission. The event was emceed by actor and philanthropist Danny Glover, who recognized the work done by Milliken and the other honorees, saying, “These are the stories that become our collective stories. [They] reflect all the possibilities of what we can be and what we can do.”
Call it coming full circle or passing off a baton. Either is fitting for the route Cory Bennett took to go from Communities In Schools “student” to Communities In Schools site coordinator. As a sophomore at Garinger High School in Charlotte, N.C., Bennett got good grades but struggled with guidance and direction. That was until he connected with Keith Cartwright, a Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg site coordinator. Observing and listening so he could be a resource to those students who needed support to be successful in school, Cartwright was aware of Bennett from his behavior and found a way to reach out to him. Cartwright provided tutoring and mentoring help for Bennett, and soon found a different student emerge. It was this one-on-one relationship with a caring adult, one of the Communities In Schools Five Basics, that made the difference in Bennett’s life.

“I saw a young man who was eager and determined, and wanted to be a leader but didn’t know how,” said Cartwright. “I saw a little of myself in him, back when I was in high school. I know if it hadn’t been for guidance in my life, things could have gone differently. And I’ve always wanted to provide the same for others.”

By the 12th grade, Bennett was taking the lead with Senior Buddies, a program that involved partnering seniors with freshmen to help the younger students get oriented to their new school, and was instrumental in helping college-bound seniors stay on track with all of the deadlines required for admissions. Bennett won the Communities In Schools of North Carolina Student of the Year award in 2007 for his outstanding leadership.

He completed his undergraduate studies at UNC Greensboro this past May with a degree in public health education. It was while job searching that he happened to visit the Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg office in Charlotte. Someone asked him if he had a copy of his resume – fortunately he did – and two weeks later, he received a call that would begin the process that eventually landed him a job as site coordinator at Thomasboro Academy in Charlotte.

The students at Thomasboro can count on Bennett just as he came to count on Cartwright. He has made it his mission to listen and observe, so that he, too, can be there as a resource for students. In a few short months, Bennett has already started a Lunch with Lawyers career mentoring program for the seventh graders, a series of “Mirror Talk Seminars” that focus on self actualization and confidence, a leadership team and scholarly essay competitions. Bennett is certain it’s Cartwright’s mentorship that has helped him in life and helps him today understand his role as a site coordinator.

“He told me he saw a lot of potential in me. He put me in leadership roles and had me speaking in front of people. He took me under his wing and gave me a sense of confidence I had never had before,” said Bennett. “If it had not been for Communities In Schools, I would not have a college degree, I would not have found out anything about scholarships and financial aid. And I wouldn’t be doing what I do now.”

The student who was led has now become the leader. Bennett knows how important it is to open kids’ minds. “My site coordinator opened doors for me, and I will be proud to provide that experience for my students.”

Said Cartwright, “I think Cory is an excellent role model. He can really relate to the students and he knows the area because that’s where he grew up. I can’t think of a better person to be a site coordinator.”

And in surrounding students with resources so that they can be successful in school and in life, Bennett is on a path to give back and inspire another generation of students to achieve their full potential.
Communities In Schools Shines on National Day of Service

Serving in the Community:
On 9/11, Communities In Schools alumni from across the country participated in service projects. Students and alumni from Communities In Schools of Tacoma, Wash., built a ramp and handrail for Robert Cohen, pictured, a disabled Korean War veteran. “It’s amazing the impact that a small group of committed individuals can have when sharing the gift of time,” said Teresa Maxwell, executive director, Communities In Schools of Tacoma. The Communities In Schools Alumni Network is encouraging others to commemorate the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday on January 16, 2012, by getting involved in service projects in their community.

A Seat at the Table

Communities In Schools President Dan Cardinali participated in a panel discussion in September at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s 41st Annual Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. The topic was education issues affecting the African American community, and Cardinali’s presentation highlighted the work Communities In Schools does to help students stay in school and graduate.

Cardinali participated in an Education Braintrust panel discussion to present the Communities In Schools integrated students services model as one of the solutions to the dropout crisis affecting minority students. Legislative representatives and education advocates joined nearly 150 in attendance as the discussions centered on closing the achievement gap.

“There exists a strategy that can support teachers and principals and gives students what they need to be academically successful,” said Cardinali. “Last year we completed a five-year, longitudinal evaluation of our entire network. We asked, if you are integrating student support services into schools, and addressing all of a student’s needs, does it increase student achievement, does it lower dropout rates and does it improve graduation rates? And the answer is yes.”

The invitation for Communities In Schools to speak on education reform demonstrates our continued leadership role in the area of student achievement.

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Rebecca Stahl, Communities In Schools of Wilmington, Del. As the site coordinator of East Side Charter School, Rebecca has become that caring adult for many of the children she works with. Rebecca helps to sustain partnerships with local businesses and community members, allowing the school to continue providing integrated student services, including a mentoring program with approximately 100 mentors.

Xaila Lewis, Communities In Schools of Seattle, Wash. Xaila is the first-ever site coordinator at Rainier Beach High School, and in her role develops strong, connected relationships with all of the students, school administrators, community partners and parents. Xaila has persuaded many organizations to offer youth services at Rainer, has instituted after-school tutoring, supported the first Junior Parent Night, Latino Night and Somali Night events, started the monthly Spoken Word (poetry event) celebrations the last Friday of every month and spearheaded Viking Ventures to support seniors in their college application process.

In addition to the six Unsung Heroes, four Communities In Schools site coordinators received honorable mentions. They are – Marty Dreher, Communities In Schools of Tacoma, Wash.; Hillary Gramm, Communities In Schools of Bay Area, Texas; Janice Sargent, Communities In Schools of Greenville, S.C.; and Peter Sun, Communities In Schools of Puyallup, Wash.
In Appreciation

 Communities In Schools would like to thank the United States Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for its generous grant to help expand mentoring efforts. The Multi-State Mentoring Initiative will give Communities In Schools $2.5 million over the next three years to provide mentoring resources to more than 2,000 students in eight states.

In addition, our thanks go out to AT&T, for investing a total of $2 million from 2010-2012, allowing Communities In Schools to hire site coordinators and serve thousands of additional children. AT&T’s continued support of these site coordinators directly impacts the students most at risk of dropping out of school.

Q&A With Shavar Jeffries, National Leadership Council Member

This past August, Shavar Jeffries became the newest member of the Communities In Schools National Leadership Council. He is an associate professor of law at Seton Hall University’s School of Law Center for Social Justice, where his Civil Litigation Clinic assists students in pro-bono client representation in major public-interest and civil rights cases. The clinic focuses primarily on impact advocacy, seeking to empower urban parents with greater control of their children’s education.

In addition, Jeffries was elected to the Newark, N.J. Public Schools Advisory Board in April 2010. Inside CIS had a brief conversation with the Newark native to discuss the role education and a community of support has played in his life.

Inside CIS: As someone who has committed himself to working in public education and on behalf of children, how did your own education and upbringing influence your career path?

SJ: My parents were very young when I was born, and neither was really ready to raise me. I lived in a number of different places with relatives until I was eight, when my mother was able to take me in. When I was in middle school, my mother was killed as a result of domestic violence, so I went to live with my grandmother. She got me into a Boys & Girls Club, which is what really changed my life.

When it was time to go to high school, I was in the right place at the right time to get a scholarship to Seton Hall Prep. I was surrounded by a structure to succeed and graduate and the expectations of me were really high. I was expected to work hard and to fulfill my potential. After that came Duke University, and then Columbia Law School.

Inside CIS: Was it always your intention to return to work in Newark?

SJ: Absolutely. The kids I grew up with had the same dreams as I did, but not the educational opportunities. They didn’t have the chance to fulfill the entirety of their dream. I did, and I have to give back.

Inside CIS: Since your return, you’ve both advocated for kids through litigation and now you’re also a member of the Newark Public Schools Advisory Board. What have you learned about the city’s schools and the dropout crisis through these positions?

SJ: We have some tremendous problems in Newark. We’re still only graduating half of our kids. In high school, students can’t pass the tests to graduate. We’ve seen some improvements in the lower grades because of universal pre-school, but the upper grades are still failing. We need dramatic transformation, which means that every decision needs to be made in the interest of the child.

Inside CIS: How do you see Communities In Schools making a difference in cities like Newark?

SJ: Communities In Schools helps fill in the gaps. My mentor at the Boys & Girls Club, Gwen Corrin, is now the Communities In Schools of New Jersey state director so I’ve seen the work up close. Some of our kids come from unstable families, some need dental work, some need counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder – really fundamental needs. Communities In Schools can find the resources to provide all of that, even if the teachers can’t. Communities In Schools works with kids who are over-age and under-credited, and can provide supplemental services that schools can’t.

It’s a wrap-around web of love, care and expectations, pushing students into their full potential. We do this because kids can change the world, and we want to help them do it.
Spotlight on Success

News Briefs from the Network

In September, Communities In Schools of Southern Nevada presented Kit Carson Elementary School with 150 backpacks collected from the community. The month-long back-to-school drive took place at Walmart stores, as well as many other collection points. Communities In Schools partnered with Walmart, Sam’s Club and the Burn Foundation to collect and distribute the supplies. The affiliate has delivered more than $80,000 worth of school supplies to students in the Clark County School District over the past three years.

Students at Communities In Schools of East Texas partner school Robert F. Hunt Elementary spent a Friday afternoon in September honoring the nearly two-dozen heroes who saved their school, their homes and their community from the recent wildfires. The students, decked in red, white and blue, donated a total of $622 – two dollars for each student – to the Diana Volunteer Fire Department.

Communities In Schools of Rowan County, N.C., hosted 30 North Rowan County High School freshman at a 12-day camp. The camp was the culmination of Mission Possible: Graduation, funded by the North Carolina Department of Education and Dropout Prevention. The group of students started the program last fall with after-school tutoring at North Rowan Middle School. Through the camp, students gained information and decision-making opportunities in budgeting and time management, and explored college and career choices.

Communities In Schools of Marietta/Cobb County, Ga., partnered with The Kennesaw Dream Foundation Board to present Reality University to teenagers at the Kennesaw Teen Center. Reality U is an activity for students in high school and middle school with the goal of teaching them the correlation between financial responsibility and academic achievement. Reality U enables students to understand some of the real-life examples in preparing for future employment.

Communities In Schools of Nevada held its inaugural Scarecrow Festival in late October. More than 500 children and adults attended the event, held at the Sport Center of Las Vegas. The venue was transformed into a fall wonderland, complete with hand-carved pumpkins, scarecrows and fun Halloween-themed activities. More than $210,000 was raised for Communities In Schools.

In October, Communities In Schools of Richmond, Va., received a $200,000 unrestricted grant and a commitment to provide leadership training from Bank of America as part of the bank’s Neighborhood Excellence Initiative. Communities In Schools was chosen for the Neighborhood Builders program, which works with 92 high-impact nonprofits across 44 U.S. cities.

Communities In Schools of Houston raised more than $620,000 through their annual Stay-In-School Gala. The evening, hosted by sisters Kirby McCool, Lindsay Holstead and Courtney Hopson, paid tribute to their late mother, philanthropist and longtime Communities In Schools supporter Bobby Sue Cohn. The evening saluted Marathon Oil Corporation with the Corporate Honoree award, which was accepted by CEO Clarence Cazalot. Texas Lt. Governor David Dewhurst was recognized and accepted the Advocacy Award for his support of Communities In Schools of Houston. Communities In Schools national and local board member Linda Gale White concluded the evening with a personal call to action for all in attendance.

In October, Communities In Schools of Wake County, N.C., received a $10,000 dollar donation from RBC Bank. Executives from RBC Bank and Communities In Schools of Wake County also unveiled plans to launch a “Build-a-Backpack” school supply drive in all 20 of RBC Bank’s branches in the area.

North Rowan High School freshman Shareef Walker participated in a summer camp hosted by Communities In Schools of Rowan County, N.C., where students explored career choices.

Photo by Emily Yost

One of the “guests of honor” created by students of Reynaldo Martinez Elementary School, and auctioned at the Communities In Schools of Nevada inaugural Scarecrow Festival.

Photo by Keith Clark Photography
ATTENTION LOCAL AFFILIATES!

Help us tell your story to a national audience. Send story submissions to salamatm@cisnet.org or reavist@cisnet.org. Please include “Inside CIS Story” in subject line.

Accreditation Update

Ten Communities In Schools local affiliates and two state offices were recently accredited under the Total Quality System (TQS). Communities In Schools launched TQS in 2008, with the goal of promoting uniform quality and improved outcomes for students being served by the organization. TQS establishes a common set of operational and business standards adopted by the Communities In Schools national office. These standards, based on nonprofit best practices, define what it means to be a successful Communities In Schools affiliate and/or state office.

These organizations join the more than four dozen other Communities In Schools affiliates who have been reviewed and received their accreditation. There are 14 state offices and nearly 200 local affiliates in the Communities In Schools network, in 25 states and the District of Columbia.

Congratulations to the board of directors, executive leadership and staff of the following 10 most recently accredited affiliates and two state offices.

Communities In Schools of Brunswick County (N.C.)
Communities In Schools of Wilkes County (N.C.)
Communities In Schools of Lenawee County (Mich.)
Communities In Schools of the Coastal Bend (Texas)
Communities In Schools of Houston (Texas)
Communities In Schools of Baytown (Texas)
Communities In Schools of Palm Beach County (Fla.)
Communities In Schools of Catoosa County (Ga.)
Communities In Schools of Caldwell County (N.C.)
Communities In Schools of Durham (N.C.)
Communities In Schools of North Carolina
Communities In Schools of Kansas

Philanthropedia, a nonprofit aimed at helping donors give with a more strategic focus, has recognized Communities In Schools as a high-impact nonprofit, ranking alongside eight other nonprofits in the cause category of national, at-risk youth. The organization, a leader in nonprofit research, relied on a team of nearly 90 experts to classify Communities In Schools as a 2011 Top Nonprofit. The Philanthropedia rating gives Communities In Schools the potential to reach a national audience of millions of professionals, funders, advisors and individuals. In addition to this new recognition, Communities In Schools has already received a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, and is accredited by the Better Business Bureau’s Wise Giving Alliance.