



The SEED

SPRING 2024

★ BLESSED ★ SHEILA BARNES

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT Fifty-four-year-old Sheila is easy to spot in the Seeds West classroom. She's the one in the bedazzled *Blessed* ball cap and her story makes her a perfect fit for a Student Ambassador role at Seeds.

THE CHALLENGES

The youngest of five, Sheila dropped out of school when she was just 13 to take care of her mom, a chronic alcoholic. "My brothers were in the drug world and I was the one left to care for the house – shopping, cleaning. I dropped out in the 7th grade to be a parent my mother," she said.

Just three months after her mother passed away, Sheila learned she was about to become a mother herself for the first time. She had 8 children between then and 1997, including a set of twins.

It was father of her twins who first introduced her to crack cocaine, sending Sheila on a downward trajectory that spiraled for well over a decade.

To keep them safe, Sheila gave her children to foster care. "It's hard to admit, but if I'm being honest, I chose my addiction over them," she confessed.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that Sheila tried to get clean, but it was short-lived. The more she said she wanted to stop, the more her partner brought into the home, the more temptation was there.

"The longer I was on drugs, the more he was able to control me," Sheila said. The nightmare continued when he sold their possessions to get more drugs and abused her even more.

Sheila finally broke free and has been making positive changes ever since.

A NEW LIFE

After an unsuccessful attempt at another GED program, Sheila saw a flyer for Seeds at her friend's house and hasn't looked back.

"Seeds is the best thing I have done for myself," she said. "Because it's for me, for myself. I'm not letting anyone else dictate what I'm doing."

On Halloween 2023, Sheila celebrated ten years of hard-earned sobriety. She's also eight-years cancer-free.

She recently moved into her very first apartment by herself and couldn't be more excited. "It's the first place all to myself, sober. And it's been hard to find a safe place," she said. "Most places in my price range just weren't safe."

She now has a relationship with her children, five of whom were placed in the same household. "The woman who took them in still let me be in their lives. She took excellent care of them."

As a Student Ambassador for Seeds, Sheila is in the community, talking to others who have lived hard lives.

"If my story can help someone, I'm glad to tell it."

"Today, I am loving myself and I love my life," she said, pointing to her ball cap.

Blessed. ◀

► [Read more about the Student Ambassador Program at Seeds on the pages that follow.](#)

Dear Friends,

In the last issue, I shared my 20th Anniversary with Seeds of Literacy (September 2023).



**BONNIE ENTLER,
PRESIDENT & CEO**

What I treasure most is knowing how many students Seeds has helped since I started. It's humbling knowing what an impact a little organization in Cleveland, Ohio can make on the future of entire families.

In this issue, you'll learn about our Student Ambassador program. Now in its second year, it empowers students to share their stories, builds confidence and public speaking skills, and represents Seeds in the community. What better spokespeople for our program than those that feel its positive power?

Six years ago, we retired a crowd-favorite event: The Sowing Seeds of Hope Brunch. This year, we have reimagined it, selected an incredible venue, and we're excited to have you join us. At this event, we'll also present the Cultivator Impact Award. You'll find details on the back cover.

Sadly, this fiscal year has been one of loss. Six members of the Seeds Family are no longer with us and we will continue to feel their absence for years to come. Their loved ones are in our thoughts.

As always, thank you for everything you do to make Seeds grow & blossom! ~ BE



2ND TRIVIA TIME TRIUMPHS

Following the success of the 2021 Trivia Time, held virtually due to the pandemic, Seeds brought trivia game night back to Cleveland at the Market Garden Brewery last November.

Held downstairs in the Ohio City Room, the event hosted more than 70 guests, some playing solo and others forming powerhouse teams with fun names like Anna&TheStache.

Trivia Master Chris Richards stepped away from his day job as Seeds West Site Coordinator to host three lively rounds of Cleveland general knowledge questions, literacy facts, and Seeds history.

Observant guests had a leg up in the competition as hints were shared during various speeches, videos, and even the slideshow running before the event officially began. Even so, Chris offered plenty of hints.

Players had the opportunity to win up to \$500 from Trivia rounds, bid on raffle baskets, and buy into a 50/50 raffle.

The event attracted a new, younger audience to learn about Seeds. It was a good chance for Volunteer Coordinator Kit Wilson to recruit new tutors, and for Virtual Site Coordinator Todd Seabrook to share the hidden costs of a free education with new donors. He tied his financial call to action to student Iris, who was featured in one of the event's video clips.

You can watch those videos on our event blog recap.

WWW.SEEDSOFLITERACY.ORG/BLOG

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Carnegie Management & Development Corporation,
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AWARDS

2024 Ohio Success
Award from Ohio
Business Magazine
Seeds of Literacy

2023 OAAE Instructor
of the Year
Kara Krawiec

2023 OAAE Support Staff
of the Year
Cindy Rodriguez

2023 Crain's Cleveland Business
Notable Nonprofit Board Member
Mark Yanochko



IN LOVING MEMORY

Henry Chisholm
Seeds East Tutor, Donor

Theresa Daye
Seeds West Student

Demetrius Haywood
Seeds West Student

Sister Mary Schrader
Congregation of St. Joseph,
Board Director, Tutor

Jack Sterling
Seeds West Tutor, Donor

Connie Weixel
Brunch Volunteer, Seeds West Tutor, Donor



Seeds of Literacy **AMBASSADOR** Program



SHAPING SEEDS & THEMSELVES

2023

“A teacher a long time ago destroyed my dreams – she took away the importance of education,” said Student Ambassador Melissa Hill Nance (pictured left of Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb). “But everything she stole from me, Seeds has given back, and more.”



SEEDS WEST
Sheila Barnes
Miranda Bridget
Melissa Hill Nance
Denise Sanders
Lenora Wilson

SEEDS EAST
Barb Driscoll
Shakeiya Edwards
Shawanda McWilliams
Hannah Sankan
Chanel Sims
Kathy Taylor
Rosie Walker



Seeds is so much more than tutoring. That's the message that Melissa and fellow Seeds Student Ambassadors shared with hundreds of people at summer resource fairs. They told their own stories of adversity so others could see how Seeds could help them too.

But there was a time when these Seeds students, not yet Ambassadors, were ashamed and afraid to share, not realizing the important impact their experiences would have on others.

"Our mission is one of empowering adults," said Bonnie Entler, President & CEO of Seeds since 2003. "And a big part of that is owning their stories and having the confidence to share them with the community. It can be as great and as important as earning a GED."

THE BEGINNING

The Student Ambassador program was born in Fall 2022 with the dual intent of raising awareness about Seeds of Literacy's tutoring program and building confidence of the Ambassadors themselves.

Becca Huntington, Ambassador Coordinator, set a plan in motion. Knowing Ambassadors would be paid for their time, she worked with the program staff to thoughtfully identify students who had inspiring stories and showed the potential to develop leadership skills.

To start, Ambassadors provided feedback on the overall tutoring program and reviewed marketing materials during their meetings. They brainstormed the excuses people make about not getting their GED, excuses like "I would, but...I'm too old.... It's just a piece of paper...." Together, they refuted each excuse, resulting in powerful student recruitment messages.

"Though the goal had been to improve and market Seeds, this initiative took on an amazing life of its own," Becca said. "Students really embraced the opportunity to grow personally and share their experiences at community events."

SHAPING SEEDS & THEMSELVES

Ambassador training meetings focused on a variety of topics and workshops intended to grow soft skills. Becca led discussions on self-care, motivation, loving/appreciating oneself, personal identity, mental health, leadership, and effective communication in public.

"The feedback on these topics was really positive," she said. "Ambassadors shared that they felt like each discussion helped them grow in a different way and gave them a new perspective."

Soft-spoken Denise Sanders learned about the importance of eye contact, even though it made her uncomfortable at first. The Ambassador program gave her the confidence to talk to strangers with poise and purpose.

At a recent outreach event hosted by District 9 Councilwoman Turner, Denise found herself among doctors, lawyers, sorority sisters and other powerful women. She was proud to say she fit right in. And when Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb visited the classroom, she and fellow Ambassador Melissa Hill-Nance confidently spoke with him about their time at Seeds.

"I'm not ashamed of myself now," she said. Denise admits she's still a little nervous sometimes, but her confidence continues to grow because she knows what she is doing matters.

PREPARING TO SHARE

"Our students have experienced some pretty terrible things like chemical dependence; sexual, physical, and emotional abuse; homelessness; and various legal battles," explained Becca. "These deeply personal and poignant stories can be really difficult to talk about, especially the more delicate issues."

Part of their Ambassador training involved learning how to talk about those uncomfortable experiences within the framework of recruiting new students.

Before they came to Seeds, the Ambassadors all mention feeling alone in their troubles.

"That's an important message to share with people at these resource fairs, who might be experiencing similar feelings of isolation," Becca said. "For the Ambassadors, Seeds became their community. And now they welcome others into it."

For Sheila Barnes, telling her story allowed her to not only forgive herself, but to inspire others.

"Talking to people —That's my favorite part of being an Ambassador," she said. "Lettin' them know that there are alternatives to gettin' in trouble, doing drugs, going to jail. By going back to school, you can really change your life. Just like me. Today I love myself and I love my life." Sheila credits Seeds as one of the best things she's ever done for herself.

PRACTICE RUNS

The second part of the Ambassador initiative prepared students for the logistics of presenting at resource fairs. But like Denise, most of them had only ever gone to events as attendees, not as representatives of Seeds expected to share their stories with strangers.

To prepare, some Ambassadors started a little closer to home, making practice appearances at Tutor Trainings (both virtual and in-person) in the classroom. During these sessions, they explained what brought them to Seeds and provided a student's perspective on what makes a good tutor.

"They found this so rewarding," Becca explained. "It gave them the opportunity to impact how new tutors work with our students."

Several of the Ambassadors, including Denise, applied this experience to welcoming not just new tutors, but new students. "I want to encourage someone because someone else encouraged me," Denise explained.

According to Becca, the change in Denise's self-esteem is visible. "As soon as Denise sees a new face, she goes over to them, welcomes them, helps them get started. She's a ray of sunshine in the classroom."

MANNING THE BOOTH

Where to go, how to get there, what to bring, what to do, what to say — To even the most seasoned outreach person, the logistics of a resource event can be a little overwhelming.

Fortunately for the Ambassadors, Becca brought in the best to show them the ropes: The Original Ambassador: Margo.

Literacy advocate, tutor, and Seeds Class of 2012's Margo Hudson spoke with the group.



In the beginning of Margo's long journey with Seeds, her self esteem was low and she felt she had nothing to offer. A decade later, she's no longer shy and quiet, and she feels she's found her purpose helping others. Margo is now the face of literacy in Cleveland, with her own business cards and her image on the side of city buses.

"Students really enjoy their time connecting with Margo, seeing what's possible, and learning from her," Becca said.

Initially, Ambassadors were paired with Margo or a member of the Seeds staff for resource fairs. After a few events, they took the lead. Eventually they gained enough experience and confidence to set up and work tables on their own.

"This was especially helpful when Seeds had more than one event to attend in one day. We didn't have to choose where to go," Becca explained. "Seeds was able to reach so many more people in the community, in a much more impactful way."

THE NEXT CHAPTER

After more than 70 events collectively, Denise, Sheila, and other Ambassadors can see the results of their efforts. People they met during outreach events continue to come through the doors at Seeds. The Ambassadors are always there to help with first-day jitters.

"I just tell 'em, it's harder to survive without a GED than it is to earn it. I have all the resources and support system here, so there's no limit to what I can do, and what they can do now, too," Sheila said.

Being part of the Ambassador team is an honor, Denise shared. "I feel grateful that I'm needed and acknowledged, and trusted, and I'm so appreciative that you think that much of me."

Becca welcomed a new cohort of Student Ambassadors in the fall, but we haven't seen the last of Denise, Sheila, and the others. They're now mentors, inspiring the new Ambassadors to welcome even more students to Seeds. ◀



2024

SEEDS EAST

Karen Brown
Ernestine Farris
Karen Florence
Aliyia Jackson
Mike Legrone
Shanta Moore
Cookie Phillips
Danyale Vaughn
Siera Walters

SEEDS WEST

Carol Baraga
Sheila Barnes
Iris Guilfu
Charise Mayfield
Amanda Murphy
Lenora Wilson





TUTOR SPOTLIGHT: **DEAN KNAUSS**

"It's warm in the winter, cool in the summer, the coffee is free, and once in awhile, someone brings donuts," joked long-time tutor Dean Knauss. Those things are true, but it's actually the progress of the students that keeps him coming back.

Echoing what many tutors tell us, he loves it when "a student gets it, when the light bulb flashes, the *A-Ha Moment*." Explaining that he wasn't the best student himself, he knows there's levels of curriculum at Seeds that he doesn't feel comfortable tutoring and he isn't shy about telling the students "You're going to get to a point here where you're smarter than me."

"That's the goal. That's why they're here," he continued. "I want to have even more of those moments. Bigger moments."

After 20+ years working with adult learners at Seeds, he's seen students with all kinds of challenges. Just like people talk to their hairdressers and bartenders, they talk to their tutors, too. "It's touching, and sometimes I don't know how they handle it all. But if they can make it here, I can too."

THE SEEDS DIFFERENCE

Dean sees literacy as a real need in the community, something with the power to

break the cycle of poverty. Adults without a GED face a real handicap, he said.

Dean knows Seeds is something special. "It's free, and very comprehensive. All-inclusive, lots of materials," he said, noting that Seeds has grown and matured since it began.

When Dean first started tutoring, the program was spread through multiple locations in the city. "The Sisters of St. Joseph really got the ball rolling with Seeds of Literacy, and then it grew to the point where more specialized educational and administrative professionals needed to be brought in. Locations are more consolidated now, and we have a higher quality and quantity of materials"

He also sees more formalized tutoring taking place. "There are more periodic assessments to determine if the student is making progress, where the weak spots are, where they need work. I've learned a lot helping other people learn," and that includes relearning algebra!

Like other tutors, **Dean believes he gets**

as much, if not more, out of tutoring than the students do.

"When I first started at Seeds, I called it a birthday gift to myself," he explained. Then 55, his work was flexible enough to allow for time to tutor. He said it felt like a good fit and was something he wanted to do.

"Tutoring feels good. I have the time. I see positive results. And the rewards are great. I enjoy doing this."

"It took me a while to realize it, but I can't solve every problem," he said, adding that he's going to keep working at it.

If you or someone you know is considering becoming a tutor at Seeds, visit WWW.SEEDSOFLITERACY.ORG/VOLUNTEER to learn more and select a training date. ◀

▶ To read more about Dean, his background, and the traits he believes are important for new tutors, visit SEEDSOFLITERACY.ORG/BLOG



Graduation to be held on a Saturday afternoon, end of June.
Live stream event details to be announced soon!



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OUR MISSION

To provide free personalized education that empowers adults to thrive in our community.



Brunch **AMONG THE** Blooms

CULTIVATING KNOWLEDGE, NURTURING FUTURES

The Seeds of Literacy Brunch returns after a 6-year hiatus!

Join us at the Cleveland Botanical Garden for a tantalizing brunch experience in a serene setting with vibrant flowers where we'll recognize this year's Cultivator Impact Award Winner.

As you sip your mimosa, munch, mingle, and bid on a wine pull, know that your attendance isn't just about enjoying a fabulous morning – it's about making a difference fighting adult illiteracy in Cleveland.

The fun continues after the event is over. From the glasshouses to various gardens, the Geis Terrace to the topiaries, guests will have unrivaled access to all that the Botanical Garden has to offer until closing time.

QUESTIONS? donations@seedsofliteracy.org or call Kathleen at 216.661.7950

NOON · JUNE 15, 2024 · SATURDAY
CLEVELAND BOTANICAL GARDENS



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