



Rising

Issue 7
FALL 2022

building on experience

When Samantha Dunn started at Rising Ground as a Homefinding Specialist with our Family Foster Care program in 2019, it was the perfect next step in a career focused on strengthening families. She had previously worked as a foster care case planner. She had also been working as a parent advocate in NYC schools for the past five years. She wanted to pursue a Master's in Public Administration program at Metropolitan College of New York and was attracted to Rising Ground's staff tuition assistance program.

Samantha finished her degree and found her calling, as she was recently promoted to Director of Homefinding. "I never thought I would be in this role with an ability to influence as I now can, but Rising Ground has a way of doing that," she said. "You walk in through that door with one goal and see all they offer and the impact they are having in people's lives. The work I am doing now is my passion – I want to bring others in."

As Director of Homefinding, Samantha leads a team that recruits and trains foster parents. Her own experience as both a foster and adoptive parent gives Samantha a special gift for identifying who will make a great foster parent. "She is very enthusiastic and brings others along in the work," explained Debra McCall, Vice President for Family Foster Care. "She is very invested in us helping families as best we can. That comes from her own experience as a foster parent. She understands the needs and frustrations of the parents, foster parents, and children."

Samantha has lots of lived experience. Her expertise in foster care stems from a long personal history that started by happenstance one day in 1995.

[Read more inside](#) ►



Samantha Dunn, Director of Homefinding, shares her personal story and the mission of our Family Foster Care at our Fall Benefit on September 14, as Debra McCall, Vice President of Family Foster Care, looks on.

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- Funders invest in program expansions
- Fall Benefit brings donors and friends together for children and families

continued from front

Samantha grew up in Brooklyn. By age 30, she already had two children. She lived and worked in NYC Housing Authority housing. One day, a friend stopped by with her newborn baby and asked if Samantha could watch the baby while she ran an errand. Samantha agreed and waited for the woman's return. "That night, I went out to buy diapers and stopped by her family's house," Samantha recalled. "As I was walking away, her sister said 'welcome to the family' because she knew mom wasn't coming back."

Samantha just made room in her home and took care of the baby. It wasn't until she took the child to the doctor that she learned about foster care. A social worker spoke to Samantha and opened a case for baby Janelle.

Samantha was cleared to be a foster parent. She developed relationships with foster care staff. For the next three years, the mother who left on the errand had another baby each year. The city asked Samantha to care for each, wanting to keep siblings together. She agreed. She adopted those four children. Later, Samantha welcomed another newborn boy and his sister into her home. She fostered them for 15 years until they were reunited with their mother.

Samantha brings almost three decades of lived experience to every aspect of her work finding and supporting foster parents. She has seen firsthand the impacts of mental health challenges, drug addiction, poverty, abuse and neglect, and poor educational supports on parents, families, and children. She understands well the role of the foster parent in providing a safe and supportive space for children who are removed from difficult circumstances and the psychological toll that separation can cause on both parents and children.

She brings these experiences to her work with the foster parents she recruits. She connects them with the many supports and programs Rising Ground offers. Samantha is



Left: Samantha and three of her adopted children. Above: Samantha's children and grandchildren, who live all over the country, together in 2014.

- impressed by the evolution of foster care and the increased supports for parents and foster parents since her first experience caring for a child.

- "There's so much we offer today," she said. "Through our Co-Parenting program, we bring parents and foster parents together, so they can build relationships. When I would take the children in my care to see their parents, there was little focus on strengthening those connections, even when there were challenges."

- With the six children Samantha fostered or adopted, Samantha learned a great deal about children's mental health and educational challenges. While she was left to find resources herself, she can now point foster parents and parents to in-house therapeutic supports, the connections we have with many community providers, and the educational resources of our Educational Advocates and Fair Futures programs. "My children had many significant needs she recalled. "I'm not a psychologist, but I know that people are not acting out for nothing. I learned that every child is not going to go to college, but they each have skills and can make a path for themselves. They can still grow and be phenomenal people, and my children did just that."

New program connects families to health and education resources

Earlier in 2022, Rising Ground launched our Community Education and Health Care Navigators program. Made possible with the support of the Mother Cabrini Foundation, the program reduces inequities in health and wellness for vulnerable families by helping address and assist in connecting to resources. This includes connecting families to healthy and affordable food, food stamp (SNAP) benefits, transportation, clothing and furniture, free nutritional cooking classes, and employment and training opportunities. The health navigators have assisted families and individuals who are also supported by our Family Stabilization and Family Foster Care, Trafficking Victim Assistance Program, Relationship Abuse Prevention Program, JustUs, ParentChild+, Family Resource Center, and other Early Childhood programs.

Health Navigator Irene Akomeah joins Rocky Castro, Family Resource Center Outreach Coordinator, to share community resources with families at the FRC Back To School Backpack Giveaway on August 22 in the Bronx.



Your support is vital as we create positive paths for New Yorkers in need!

Dear friends,

New York families and communities experience a wide range of challenges, including those presented by poverty, lack of resources, mental health concerns, disability, and systemic racial, gender, and sexual bias. Rising Ground's life-affirming work is as crucial as ever and so too is the support we receive from generous friends as we continue to evolve and grow to meet the many needs of our neighbors.

In this newsletter, we highlight one member of our 1,500+ staff who are making a difference in the lives of New Yorkers. Samantha embodies well our organization values of accountability, connection, tenacity, and service as we provide our neighbors with the skills and resources they need. Like many of our staff, Samantha is from the community she supports and brings lived experience and real-life understanding to our work.

As we also highlight in this newsletter, our supports have earned Rising Ground a reputation as a "go-to" organization for meeting community needs. As a result, we are able to expand, evolve, and grow with the investment of government and private funders. Our work would not be possible without the generosity and commitment of our donors, foundation and corporate supporters, volunteers, and community partners.

Thank you for your commitment to our work on behalf of the 25,000+ New Yorkers who seek assistance from Rising Ground.

Alan Mucatel
Chief Executive Officer



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RISING NEWSLETTER

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Thomas-Copeland brings decades of marketing experience to Board

Justin Thomas-Copeland was elected to Rising Ground's Board of Directors in September. Justin brings three decades of experience in marketing and will contribute to Rising Ground's efforts to bolster awareness of our work.

In his current role as President and Chief Executive Officer of DDB North America, Justin leads a dynamic team working in a significant and active region. For almost 30 years, Justin has worked in the precision and integrated marketing industry across several sectors including technology, financial services, automotive, fashion, health and wellness, and pharma. Justin's fuel is his family. When not on a plane or studying a new language, Justin spends time with his wife and three children.



With your help, we're getting NYC children ready to learn!

With successful Backpack Drive, donors provide school supplies for a thousand NYC students

Thanks to our many incredible partners and donors, we helped just over 1,000 children start the new school year off right. At events held across Rising Ground's various locations in the Bronx (below) and Brooklyn, we were able to distribute bookbags, school supplies, and duffel bags, as well as provide education and other resources for parents and children. More than 20 community partners and corporations donated backpacks and supplies, while other donors made financial contributions so we could buy a full complement of school supplies so that children and youth begin the school year equipped for a success!



BACK-TO-SCHOOL BACKPACK DRIVE



EARLY HEAD START

Early Head Start celebrates another year of fostering growth for young children

Families in our Early Head Start program attended our annual Transition Picnic at Pelham Bay Park. The day included a graduation ceremony for 3-year-olds completing the program (above), as well as lots of activities for children and families. These included puzzles, books, Lego, and science tables; games, toys, and prizes; face painting; a barbecue; and a clown performance. Early Head Start bridges the achievement gap, so children from low-income families can start school with a solid educational foundation. We help parents with home visiting and child care services, as well as access to services like job training, assistance with housing, health and mental health services, and educational supports that many families need.

NY Liberty basketball partners with JustUs program to end girls' incarceration

Rising Ground's JustUs program launched a partnership with the WNBA's New York Liberty, joining together to explore the impact of mass incarceration on young women and end girls' incarceration. The partnership began at the NY Liberty's June 12 game, where the team welcomed several young women who participate in the Rising Ground program committed to supporting female identifying and LGBTQIA+ youth at risk of criminalization.

The partnership continued when several participants attended a practice on June 29 (right) and met with a group of players, who shared their experiences of how mass incarceration has impacted them and their communities. In August, a panel of five young women supported by Rising Ground's JustUs shared their own experiences with the NY Liberty and discussed ways the WNBA team can advocate to end girls' incarceration.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



Funders recognize quality of service with expansion to programs

The Federal Office of Refugee Resettlement awarded Rising Ground a 200-bed expansion of our **Passage of Hope** Unaccompanied Migrant Child program. With 169 new beds added for youth living in our residences and 31 in foster homes, our total capacity will be 439 children. Passage of Hope is among the largest program areas in our organization's extensive array of services.

Recognizing the effectiveness of our Parents Supporting Parents pilot program during the past two years, the New York City's Administration for Children's Services awarded Rising Ground a new contract to build a **Parent Advocates** program adding to the many supports in our Family Foster Care program. In Brooklyn and Queens, Parent Advocates who themselves have had their children placed in foster care will work with parents first entering the foster care system at the time of their Initial Child Safety Conference and through an initial investigation. Parent Advocates help to inform and support parents during a time of crisis and help them to navigate the child welfare system. Rising Ground is adding to its Foster Care staff 15 full and part-time Parent Advocates.

NYC's Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) selected Rising Ground to take on five additional **Transitional Independent Living** (TIL) programs for homeless and runaway youth, adding to the two we already run. At the five new sites in the Bronx and Brooklyn, we will add housing and supports for 84 young adults from 16–20 and 15 more reserved for those 21–24. Across all TIL programs, we will provide vital support for 139 young people in need.

New faces at Rising Ground

Three new members of our senior leadership bring decades of experience in administrative and program leadership

Laura Grossfield Birger GENERAL COUNSEL

Laura Grossfield Birger, J.D., joined Rising Ground as General Counsel in May, bringing 13 years of experience as a federal prosecutor with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York and 11 years of experience as a business litigation partner at Cooley LLP. "It's a painful reality that thousands of children and others face the kinds of challenges that often land them on the doorstep of the criminal justice system," she said. "Anything that we can do to alter that path is a good thing."



Shanikwa McIntyre-Ligonde VICE PRESIDENT, RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMS

Shanikwa McIntyre-Ligonde, MSW, was named as Vice President of Residential Programs after serving as Assistant Vice President of Justice for Youth & Families since 2020. McIntyre-Ligonde has been with Rising Ground since joining as Director of our Mother Child program in 2012 already with more than a decade of experience in social work. She will oversee our Residential Treatment Center, Mother Child program, and Transitional Independent Living programs in her new role. "Over the course of my career, I've had the benefit of working with young people and families across various systems and programs," she said. "I am excited to bring my practice knowledge to the residential programs to continue pushing the already great programs forward."



Oneida Perez SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, HUMAN RESOURCES

Oneida Perez, SHRM-SCP, SPHR, joins Rising Ground as SVP of Human Resources in November. She brings more than 15 years of experience in program development and human resources, contributing to workforce engagement, talent recruitment, and workplace culture at United Neighborhood Houses, the YMCA of Greater New York, and Phipps Community Development.



SPECIAL EVENTS

Donors and friends celebrated Rising Ground's work at our 2022 Fall Benefit

Thanks to those who joined us at the Bowery Hotel on Wednesday, September 14, to celebrate our work helping New York City children, adults, and families overcome adversity. We rely on donors like you to create effective programs that create a lasting impact in the lives of New Yorkers who face a wide range of challenges.

Guests were delighted to hear an update of organization achievements from CEO Alan Mucatel and to learn about the important work being done in our Family Foster Care program from Vice President Debra McCall and Director of Homefinding Samantha Dunn. The event also features a service auction and silent auction of artwork created by people supported across various programs. The Greg Ruvolo Quintet set the musical mood in this iconic venue!

A special thanks to our 2022 Fall Benefit sponsors **Mohawk Insurance Services, Inc., Mutual of America, USI, PharMerica ChemRx, and Lamb Insurance Services.**

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Top: New York Junior League members Rasheeda Davis, Mariella Castro, Sabrina Ortega, and Hilary Hamburg. Middle Left: CEO Alan Mucatel with Board Secretary Brigette McLeod-Williams. Middle Right: The Greg Ruvolo Quintet plays on the scenic terrace of the Bowery Hotel. Bottom Left: Artwork by people supported sold in our silent auction. Bottom right: Justin Riccio of Sponsor Mohawk Insurance, Board Treasurer Carol Chen, and Board President Matt Del Percio.



72+? An IRA distribution charitable gift could reduce your tax burden

There are many ways to donate to Rising Ground. If you are age 72 or older, IRS rules require you to take required minimum distributions (RMD) each year from your tax-deferred retirement accounts (IRA). You can turn that distribution into a charitable gift.

The amount distributed as a qualified charitable gift each year can be excluded from your taxable income, thereby reducing the amount of tax you must pay. You can give a gift of up to \$100,000 to Rising Ground directly from an IRA without paying any income tax. Ask your financial advisor about taking a qualified charitable deduction this year. If you have any questions about the benefits of using RMDs to make charitable gifts, contact us at 833-916-2006.



Paths to positive change since 1831

Driven by the belief that each of us can thrive when life has hope and opportunity, Rising Ground provides caring support and proven paths to positive change, helping New York City area children, adults, and families rise above adversity. Founded as an orphanage in 1831, Rising Ground is a leading nonprofit human services organization that has been at the forefront of evolving community needs and is a leader in utilizing results-driven, evidence-based practices. Today, the organization's work is a positive force in the lives of more than 25,000 individuals annually across more than 55 programs at more than 50 sites.

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