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Rose Center Welcomes Kelli Sexton



Sexton takes on role as arts education coordinator

The Rose Center welcomes Morristown native, Kelli Sexton as she steps into her role of Arts Education Coordinator.

Sexton, who grew up in the area, is not new to the art programs here in the community.

“I have lived in Morristown my entire life. My dad is a dentist here, my grandfather was a dentist before so we were pretty established in the community for a long time,” she said. “My family and I started doing shows with Encore when I was 9. It started as a family affair which was so much fun.”

“When I was 12 I first was ingrained with Rose Center when I was in their Summer Players Pro-

duction and the following year I did another production. That was my first introduction to the Rose Center and all the great things it does for our community.”

“As I got older I did some productions with Legacy Theater and with several churches in the area. I also loved to help out with music camps during the summer and help kids fuel their passion for theater.”

Sexton attended All Saints’ Episcopal School from Kindergarten through eighth grade. She completed two years at West High School and finished her high school career being home schooled. She attended Walters State Community College and was a member of the choir there.

She applied to the position at Rose Center because it aligned

with her passion and goals she had in place.

“When I heard about the position opening up, it was no brainer. It so perfectly suits my interest and where my heart is so I had to apply,” Sexton said. “I was drawn to the position because it is exactly what I imagined for myself going into adulthood and thinking about what I want to do, what my life will look like and where my passions lie.”

“I have also loved helping with the community, the arts and bringing the arts to the children in our community. The schools do a great job about giving kids the opportunity to participate in the arts, but there is so much more that could be done.”

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Special to WINK

Pictured above is Kelli Sexton performing in a variety of local productions and shows in the area.

Sexton will oversee all art educational programs for youth offered at the center.

"I will oversee most of our children's educational opportunities here at the center," Sexton said. "I will oversee our summer camps, our summer programs which have been put on hold for the last few years especially with COVID."

"We will have a relaunch of the summer programs which can include visual arts, music and the-

ater, and we're even looking into a baking camp."

"We are also relaunching our Summer Players Program which is something that is dear to my heart, because that was my introduction to Rose Center. It's super exciting to bring back the program that hasn't performed a play since 2018."

However, summer isn't the only time classes and camps will be offered.

"Summer is a busy time for us, but we also work throughout the school year as well," she said. "We will have several after school camps for students to enjoy and be able to learn about the arts."

Stepping into the position, Sexton has several goals and plans she wants to bring to Rose Center.

"I have a lot of ideas that I want to bring to the Rose Center but I really want to bring diversity to the center," she said. "I want a

diversity of talents and mediums brought to the center. Which includes just more than visual arts. The center has done a spectacular job of highlighting the visual arts in the community but I want to see even more different mediums like baking or sewing.”

She also mentioned bringing the community together is a goal she wants to achieve as coordinator.

“I would love to see poem readings or movie screenings be held at the center; just a variety of mediums to bring the community together,” Sexton said. “Obviously spreading the arts is incredible, but I would also love to see the community engaged and excited to do these things as a community and as friends.”

However, her biggest mission is making arts accessible to all the kids in the area and helping them find their passion for it.

“My biggest mission is to make arts opportunities accessible to those who may not be exposed to the arts,” she said. “I would love for the Rose Center to be a place where kids can be exposed to art mediums they’ve never heard of and they can find their lifelong passions at the center.”



“I grew up loving music, but I would not have been exposed to theater if I had not participated with some of these local organizations.”

Sexton encouraged kids in the area to find local organizations that will help them refine their talents and to also take a chance on themselves.

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"I encourage kids in the community to research and see what this community has to offer them. A lot of things get overlooked and some people don't think we have certain things because we live in a small community, but there are so many different opportunities in the area that may be hidden. There are so many talented people and organizations in this community do go find them."

"I also encourage kids to take a chance. Whether that be doing an audition, taking a class or learning an instrument, put yourself out there and challenge yourself because in the end it will be worth it."

"Art is so beautiful because there is no right or wrong way to do it, it's all about expression and about getting to know yourself and others and making those connections. It's not just about performing or being perfect; it's about loving what you're doing and having fun."

- Deven Salazar, WINK Writer.



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Rejes mentors in her role at Girls Inc.

Girls have the right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes,” Daphne Rejes said. “Girls have the right to express themselves with originality. Girls have the right to take risks, to strive freely and to take pride in success.”

Now, imagine those words being chanted by 70 girls that are six to 18 years old.

“This was my childhood, Daphne said, “And little did I know that those phrases would impact my way of liv-

ing.”

Daphne joined Girls Inc. Executive Director Lise Bender in a recent conversation about the various ways in which the agency serves the younger female population of Hamblen County.

The upcoming Summer Camp is the agency’s program with the most impact on girls right now, according to Lise.

“We have the most time to spend with them, we are literally there for a 10-hour day,” Lise said. “Daphne will live there this next summer.”

Daphne’s role at the agency in-

cludes responsibilities as a tech lab coordinator, web mistress and social media guru.

“She is all things tech for us and we very much appreciate the job she does, but in addition to that, she is an outstanding mentor and terrific role model,” Lise said.

There’s a good history behind Daphne’s skillset that directly relates to the agency.

“As an only child, my parents wanted me to be around other girls my age and come out of my shell. They chose Girls Inc., as it fit the values they wanted me to learn and hold,”

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Christy,' who quickly became a mentor and friend.

"She watched me grow up and was like a big sister to me. I knew I could always count on her. She taught me to be an independent girl that would always stand up for others. Christy would always remember important things going on in my life and would ask about them. She would ask me how my

cheerleading days were going, how my tests at school went and even asked about my parents. She was the definition of a mentor. After years, I was sad to see Christy go, but little did I know in a year I would be stepping into her shoes as a Girls Inc. staff," Daphne said.

Strong, smart and bold are three words that were repeated to Daphne over

and over again.

"These words are ones that I live by and try to teach the girls every day. As a staff member, my job is to guide, support and mentor our girls," she said.

"Girls Inc. has been more than an organization or a job for me. It's been home. It has been a place where I have grown, learned and changed. It's a place I see me as a 7-year-old girl, a

high school graduate, and even a college graduate today. It has been a place that helped me come out of my shell as a shy girl and to where I now teach the girls the 'Girls Bill of Rights.'

"It's been a place where I know I can talk about my problems and Misty always has a listening ear and is ready to give me advice. It has also been a place where my room is now a

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July 7	3rd "Live on the Lawn" Concert & Night Market
July 28	Family Movie Night on the Lawn
Aug. 4	4th "Live on the Lawn" Concert & Night Market

Sept. 1	5th "Live on the Lawn" Concert & Night Market
Sept. 23	Morristown's Craft Beer Festival
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safe space for the girls to discuss what happened at school or at home. It has been place that has seen me dream, make mistakes and do better for my girls. It's a place that I laughed and came back to with even more appreciation and love for than the first time I stepped in. It has been influential to my morals, my ideology and my ethics," Daphne said.

Daphne is able to look back on her days as a Girls Inc. member and use those lessons today with the girls.

"There have been countless times where Misty, our program director, has had an idea and I've been able to stand up and say, 'Oh, we did that when I was a member!' and have been able to add the member perspective to our program," she

said.

One day in particular during summer 2022 was special to Daphne.

"It reminded me of why I have proudly worked at Girls Inc. all these years. I had just wrapped up my two internships after graduating from Carson-Newman University and I was struggling with hearing the comment, 'Oh, you're still at Girls Inc.' - as if it

were a bad thing. The last day of the summer program I saw two of our longest members leave. One had moved counties and one had just grown up."

One of the girls was a six-year-old when she started attending Girls Inc. programs and slowly turned into a 5th grader. She participated in Daphne's Homework Help program every day and the two had





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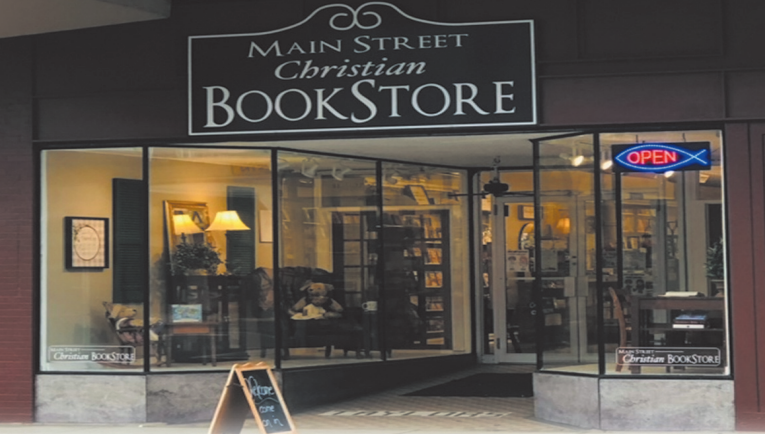
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a tradition of saying 'Peace Out' at the end of the day. The two cried and hugged just before the fifth grader headed for the door. As she left, Daphne called to her, 'Peace Out!'

"As she turned around my voice cracked, and I said 'It's our final peace out.' It was a heartbreaking feeling, but in a strange way it was also a moment that I realized she had grown up into a strong girl."

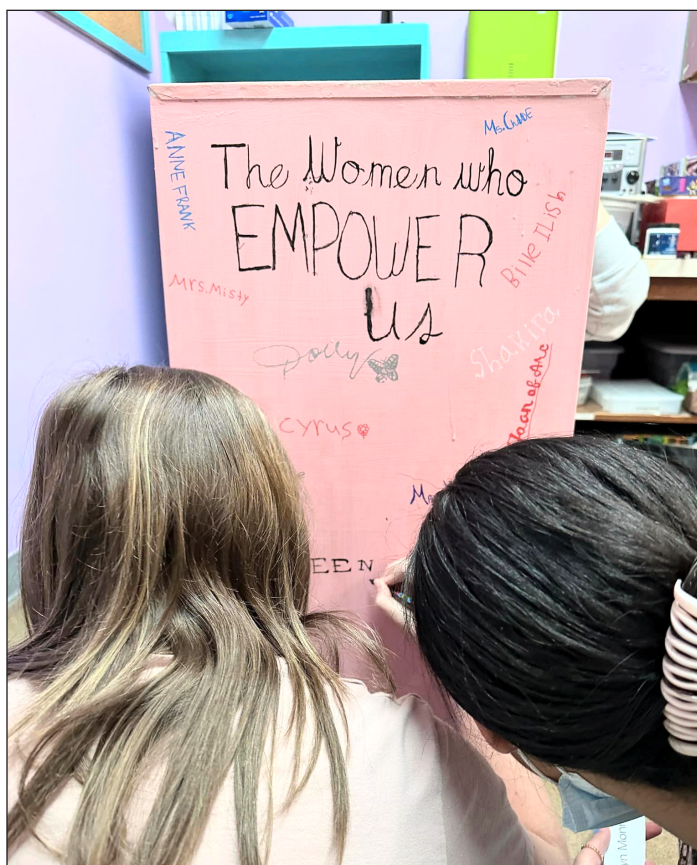
The second girl started attending Girls Inc. as a 7-year-old and said goodbye to staff and friends as an 8th grader.

"I avoided the conversation of her leaving the en-

tire day until I saw her car pull in," Daphne said. "I said, 'It's time' and I gave her hug. We cried together and I told her to let me know if she ever needed anything ... I think the closest thing I can describe that as is of a proud parent who sees their child move on to college. I was so sad to realize how many years had passed by, but I knew we had taught them to be strong girls. It was the most rewarding, yet bittersweet moment at Girls Inc. for me."

The bittersweet moment gave Daphne encouragement to continue as a staffer at the agency.

"It reminded me of why



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The 'secret sauce' to the Girls Inc. experience is no judgement.

"I know we are a place where they can speak to adults freely and feel heard. We want to show them that all the pressures they have

around them due to society are nothing," Daphne said. "Rarely does the media show the pressure to be smart, it's always about the image and never about the inside of the girls. That's why it's important to teach the girls how to be strong, smart and bold. The girls know that there are many challenges in the world, but in the end they can overcome them.

"The girls are taught lessons that help them in the real world, where there are challenges stacked against us as women in society. With the lessons and relationships made at Girls Inc., the girls know how to overcome and achieve whatever they put their

mind to. I directly see the impact that we're making on the girls every day. There is no better feeling than walking into the building and hearing, 'Hi, Miss Daphne!' I call them 'my girls' because that's what I see them as; my girls that I want to protect and watch grow up – the girls of today and the women of tomorrow," she said.

The influences of social media, especially the overwhelming popularity of Tik Tok, are a focus of the Girls Inc. staff.

"I think the biggest thing is just kind of educating them on that," Daphne said. "We definitely always focus on internet safety, but also try to relate to

them. Yes, I am older than them, but I still understand what is going on with the middle schoolers and high schoolers.

"We recently just wrapped up a media literacy program where we spoke on that: how social media, magazines and ads show women. It led to great discussions on, for example, you don't have to compare yourself to everyone you see on social media because you always see this perfect image which, let's be real, that's not true. Everyone posts what they want you to see of their life. Just listening to them is a big thing, I think, understanding them but also teaching them how to be

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safe and to not be blindsided by certain things on social media,” she said.

“With the media literacy program, we focused on pro-girl ads: lots of different brands and their campaigns. The girls got honestly so excited about it. I had it planned for only one day, but we kept pausing every ad to talk about it – that went on for two days. Next week, the girls are making their own ad, and I’m very excited about it,” Daphne said.

Earlier this year, Girls Inc. put together a ‘Selfie’ project that promoted girls accepting and loving themselves just the way they are.

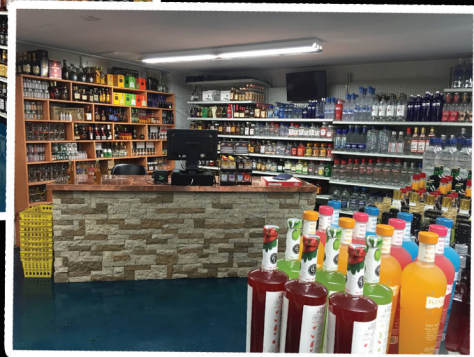
“One thing that really struck me was when one of the young girls told us that she started hating her body at 8-years-old. They are such vulnerable conversations, so being able to have the chance for the girls to feel open and comfortable with you, to tell you their insecurities and their feelings was a great thing. But also being able to teach them it’s not about comparison and just really showing them the reality of social media. I feel that it really had a good result.

“The girls were able to take makeup-free, filter-free selfies. Even the staff did. When the girls first heard about it, they were



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like ‘Oh, no’ I’m taking a picture without makeup? I told them, ‘I’m doing it too. I would never put you in a position where you would be asked to do something I wouldn’t do.’” It was very interesting to know how young they started having these body image issues,” Daphne said.

The COVID Pandemic had an impact on many organizations in the area, as well as individuals. Staff at Girls Inc. noticed different impacts on different age groups within participants.

A change in communication was a noticeable impact.

“I would definitely say I see it from the social media side with our older girls, middle school and high school,” Daphne said. “There are times they tell me stuff going on in the home and I ask them, ‘Have you talked to your mom, have you talked to someone about this? And they say ‘no.’ There’s like an immediate shutoff, like, ‘I can’t tell them this.’ I think it’s social media, at least with the older ones. They’re just used to looking down and not having to verbally say it to someone. Yes, unfortunately yes,” she said.

Lise reported that, especially with the younger girls, a big challenge was the rule about no physical contact.

“They would just start to-

ward each other, with arms out, and our staff would intervene. When I would ask the girls, ‘Are you enjoying yourself? Are you having a good day today?’ they would answer, ‘I would have a better day if I could hug somebody. I’d have a better day today if I could touch my friend. When will that happen again?’” she said.

The unique environment at Girls Inc., however, actually safeguarded against losing, during COVID, one of the most important social skills for girls: making friends.

“Our girls are conditioned a little differently,” Lise said. “Because we pick up, for our after school program, from about every school in Hamblen County, our girls have made friends from across the spectrum. So, I think some of those bonds have transcended some of that. We may be a little insulated. We don’t really see that. There are girls waiting down the hallway for the next bus to come in so that their friend from ‘X’ school, they can see finally at the end of the day.”

Girls Inc. has received praise for its newsletter.

“Daphne and Lauren work so hard to get information out, Lise said. “One of the nicest things we’re able to do is gather stories. I can talk to you about the

See **GIRLS** page 23



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Horsin' Around



Ridin' High offers a horse training summer camp

Kayla Hudson, equine manager/instructor for Ridin' High, earned a Master Horse Certificate in April from the University of Tennessee.

The Master Horse program included significant training and information on newest (and best) practices for managing horses. The program, led by professional veterinarians and specialists in the horse industry, covered many aspects of caring for horses, based on current scientific studies.

"At Ridin' High we are big advocates for our wonderful therapy horses and for providing them with a high quality of life. The information gained by Kayla through this program will help to ensure that our horses continue to receive the best care possible," agency representatives said in a social media post.

"Finally, we want to thank our generous donors who sponsor horses and pay for many additional therapies to keep the horses comfortable and happy (such as acupuncture, chiropractic care, specialty shoeing,

saddle fitting, custom tack, and physical therapy exercises). We - and our horses - appreciate you all!"

The Ridin' High 2023 Summer Camp is a ground-work program designed to build confidence and relationship skills, focusing on relationship building with horses and humans, learning unmounted training skills, and horse care/horsemanship. The program does not include riding.

Learning opportunities with the camp include: Horse behavior/psychology (and how that keeps you safe), Relationship building with horses; ground-

work training skills; how a horse thinks; horse terms, breeds, colors and parts of the horse; horse care (feeding and nutrition for horses, bandaging, medicines and diseases) and a horse treasure hunt with awards.

Session dates are June 6, 13 and July 18, 25. Times are 10 a.m. to Noon for each session. Cost is \$90 per student.

For more information, visit ridinhigh.org. If classes are full, there will be a waiting list. A possible second session is in the planning stages, if staffing becomes available.

Girls

(Continued from page 20)

bones of the operation, but Daphne can share these front line stories by seeing the girls, having that direct contact with them. That helps us translate to the community in better ways than in the past.”

The Girls Inc. Summer Program is a five-day-per-week experience for the girls, providing educational field trips, recreational opportunities, hands-on learning and “just good outdoor fun,” Lise said. “Because we are such a close-contact and mentor-

ing program, it is our opportunity to make the biggest and the most lasting impact on a girl.

“I feel we really focus on everything about the girl: self-esteem, homework, being outdoors, being active,” Daphne said. “I feel we try to cover every single point of focusing on what we want the girls to take out to life. We talk to them, early on, about what they want to be when they grow up. We focus on their dreams and setting up goals.”

The Summer Program

involves around 100 participants and costs the agency an estimated \$55,000 per summer.

The classes will include STEM education, including science experiments and science projects and lots of art for the “littles.” New to summer 2023 is the Makers Space that staff is “very excited” about.

Girls Inc. is a proud United Way of Hamblen County agency – “We could not do what we do without their support,” Lise said.

“And we depend on indi-

vidual donors; we depend on business sponsorships and just the goodwill of our community to keep going because I will tell you, one-third of the girls we have are on some form of financial assistance; 60 percent of them are probably on free and reduced lunch at school,” Lise said.

This story was compiled from a recent presentation/Q&A at Rotary Club of Morristown (Glenna Howington, WINK Assistant Editor).



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