Grant brings hope for a promising future to homeless babies, children

Each year, nearly 2.5 million children in the United States experience homelessness, making children the majority of the homeless population. Here in Summit County, dozens of families face this same plight, including more than 100 children and babies.

Statistics show that children in homeless families are more likely to have low birth weights and develop chronic illnesses like asthma. But thanks to programs like the Well Babies Initiative of Family Promise of Summit County, infants and toddlers in homeless families are safer and healthier than ever before.

This year, a $2,000 grant from the Millennium Fund will help the agency serve homeless parents and children from birth to age 2. This critical initiative addresses all aspects of a baby’s physical health, including childhood development, nutrition and safety.

“The project’s goal is to meet the health and wellness needs of homeless children ages 0-2 through parent education, community resource referrals, provision of baby health essentials, and financial assistance for well-baby check-ups and vaccinations,” said Jeff Wilhite, executive director of Family Promise.

Through this program, parents who receive services through Family Promise can learn baby care basics, including feeding, bathing, sleeping and other important safety issues. They also receive essential supplies like diapers, wipes and car seats.

“When parents know the basic daily needs of their children are met, they can focus on concrete and future-minded steps toward sustainable independence,” Wilhite said.

Dancing jumpstarts love for learning

It’s time for recess, and physical education teacher Mary Breiding watches as her students play outside at McEbright Community Learning Center. Soon, she realizes they’re not just playing – they’re dancing.

The kids are practicing the dance moves they learned from Art Sparks, a movement and music enrichment program that uses dance to teach students about core academic subjects like health, science and math.

“It’s amazing because I’ll see the kids in the hallway or outside at recess, and they’re doing some of the dance moves they learned,” Breiding said.

The program reinforces teachers’ curriculums by integrating lessons about healthy eating, anatomy and even geometry into catchy jingles and fun dance moves.

“They’re getting academic content in a kinesthetic way,” said Kara Stewart, executive director and founder of Art Sparks.
Grants totaling $41,900 support children’s programs

In 2016, the Millennium Fund awarded grants totaling $41,900 to 32 nonprofits, bringing its cumulative grant-making total to $665,822. The following grants were awarded this year:

- Akron Children’s Museum, for free tickets for disadvantaged children, $1,500
- Akron Rotary Camp for Children with Special Needs, to replace the camp’s water trampoline, $1,000
- Alchemy Inc., to purchase books, journals and backpacks for students in the agency’s storytelling workshops, $1,500
- Art Sparks, to expand the Fabulous Fitness dance program to special needs classes, $1,000
- Battered Women’s Shelter, to purchase diapers to families in need, $2,000
- CASA Board Volunteer Association Inc., to provide warm winter pajamas for children in foster care, $1,500
- Center for Applied Drama and Autism, to support arts-based social events for children with autism, $1,000
- Central Summit County Choral Society, for the Children’s Choir Program, $1,000
- Christ Child Society of Akron, to provide essential newborn items to mothers of at-risk babies, $1,000
- City of Akron Police Department, to support the Do the Right Thing Program, which rewards students who are positive role models in their community, $1,000
- Community Pregnancy Center, to provide formula and baby food for infants in disadvantaged families, $1,000
- Crown Point Ecology Center, for the Summer Farm & Science Camp, $2,000
- Dancing Classrooms Northeast Ohio, for the annual Colors of the Rainbow Team Match event, $1,000
- Family Promise of Summit County Inc., to provide parent education programs and essential baby supplies to homeless families, $2,000
- Kent State University Foundation Inc., to support a skill-building program for youth in juvenile detention, $2,000
- Medina Community Police Activity League, to support after-school field trips that foster positive relationships between police officers and students, $1,000
- RePlay for Kids, for a toy adaptation workshop for kids with disabilities, $1,000
- Residents Improving Goodyear Heights Together, to create “Little Free Libraries” throughout Goodyear Heights, $1,500
- South Street Ministries, to support an enrichment program for students in the Summit Lake neighborhood, $2,000
- Stow-Munroe Falls City School District, to create a “21st century classroom” where students can move freely and work collaboratively, allowing students with learning disabilities to excel, $1,000
- Students With A Goal, to support a mentoring program for young adults in the Summit Lake neighborhood, $2,000
- StockTransfers. to ensure year-end processing. For detailed instructions, please visit www.akroncf.org/StockTransfers.
- SmartGiving or call Margaret Medzie, vice president and chief development officer, at 330-436-5610.

Ways you can give

The Millennium Fund is nearing $1 million in assets! With an endowment of $1 million, we could grant $50,000 to children’s programs every year. Your gift of any kind can help reach that goal:

Stock: Gifts of stock offer you a twofold tax savings: avoiding capital gains tax and getting a deduction for the full fair market value of your stock. Initiate transfers by Dec. 19 to ensure year-end processing. For detailed instructions, please visit www.akroncf.org/StockTransfers.

Cash/Check: Postmark your gifts by Dec. 31 or donate online before midnight at www.akroncf.org/give/Millennium.

Learn more at www.akroncf.org/SmartGiving or call Margaret Medzie, vice president and chief development officer, at 330-436-5610.
It was the 1999 Thanksgiving issue of the Akron Beacon Journal that first drew Jane Palmer’s attention to the Millennium Fund for Children.

Editors at the newspaper had taken advantage of the holiday weekend to announce the establishment of their new endowment fund, which they created to improve the lives of children in the paper’s five-county circulation area. They included a donation coupon with the announcement and asked readers to give their last hour’s pay of the 20th century to benefit children in the 21st century and beyond.

Jane, a retired executive assistant living on a fixed income, went above and beyond the newspaper’s call. She mailed the donation coupon back with a check for $3,000, becoming one of the Millennium Fund’s first — and largest — donors.

“She loved the Millennium Fund,” said Marilyn Schultz, a longtime friend of Jane’s who cared for her during her later years. “She felt it was important that kids get an education and whatever help they needed.”

Over the next decade, Jane continued to give to the Millennium Fund every year, ultimately donating more than $27,000.

But it wasn’t until Jane passed away in October 2015 that her greatest gift would come to fruition. As a widow with no children of her own, Jane selected three charities to benefit from her estate. One of those charities was the Millennium Fund, and in July 2016, the fund received her generous bequest of $81,883.44.

“She spoke very strongly about the Millennium Fund, and she thought it was the appropriate vehicle for that,” said William Sremack, Jane’s attorney and executor.

Jane’s bequest represents the largest single gift in the Millennium Fund’s history and will enable the fund to increase its annual grant-making to vital children’s programs in Greater Akron.

It’s a fitting legacy for a woman who devoted her life to caring for others.

“She volunteered everywhere — at her church, the Salvation Army, Stan Hywet,” Schultz said. “She was very kind and well-liked.”

Born in January 1922, Jane grew up in Pennsylvania before moving to Akron. She married Roland Palmer and made a career at Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, where she worked as an executive assistant for 35 years. When she retired in 1987, she was known and beloved by nearly everyone at the company.

With no children of her own, Jane spent countless hours volunteering for causes she was passionate about, particularly children and animals. She was a member of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Salvation Army and a volunteer at Akron General Medical Center.

In her final years, Jane struggled with dementia, but her caring nature continued to shine through. She developed close relationships with her neighbors and brightened the day of everyone who crossed her path.

“She’s going to be missed by a lot of people — people who directly knew her and people who may have never met her (but will benefit from her generosity),” Sremack said.

In addition to the Millennium Fund, Jane also left her church and Furnace Street Mission in her will. Her goal, in Sremack’s words, was to “bring a great deal of benefit to children and people that need it.”

Thanks to Jane’s gift to the Millennium Fund, the lives of children throughout our community will be enriched year after year, preserving her legacy for generations to come.

You, too, can leave a greater legacy than you ever thought possible with an estate gift. Plan now at www.akroncf.org/MillenniumLegacy.

Babies, continued from page 1

That was exactly the case for Jasmine McCroskey, a 22-year-old mother of two young children who came to Family Promise for help finding housing. In addition to housing support, she also received car seats, diapers and wipes for her kids, Joseph, 2, and Mylee, 1.

“I have two kids, and they’re both in diapers and they both need wipes,” she said. “It’s expensive, so that helps a lot. Their whole program is just very helpful. I love it.”

The Well Babies Initiative also offers financial assistance for well-baby doctor visits and vaccinations, ensuring parents are able to keep their children healthy and access basic medical care.

With this support, Wilhite said at least 90 percent of families graduate from the program with secure housing. And 95 percent of parents and children they serve remain together throughout their homeless journey — a crucial piece of the puzzle that often gets overlooked.

“Family Promise is the only organization in Summit County that allows homeless families to stay together,” he said. “This greatly increases children’s stability and eases their transition between homes.”

Thanks to this year’s grant from the Millennium Fund, at least 25 homeless babies and 15 parents like Jasmine will receive these critical services and take their first step toward permanent housing and a promising future.
“Many times they’re able to understand the concepts better that way than through pen and paper, which doesn’t work for all students.”

Last year, a grant from the Millennium Fund brought Art Sparks programming into second- and third-grade classrooms in Akron Public Schools. This year, another grant will expand the program to include students with special needs.

Stewart said students with special needs can uniquely benefit from dance because the combination of movement and music strengthens their sequencing skills and improves impulse control.

“Dance is a wonderful vehicle to practice controlling the body and its responses,” she said. “There are all sorts of built-in components of the class that reinforce those concepts.”

With the help of the grant, students in special needs classrooms will have the opportunity this year to participate in the Art Sparks Fabulous Fitness program, which uses dance to teach kids about the importance of physical fitness, balanced nutrition and healthy lifestyle practices.

The rising rate of childhood obesity makes this program particularly timely, Stewart said.

“In this age of iPhones and TV, we know most children are sedentary when they go home,” she explained. “We want to teach them that joyful movement can be fun and healthy.”

Breiding agreed, saying, “I always challenge them to go home and show one or two dance moves to their mom and dad. Or, when they’re at the grocery store, ask, ‘Can we have a banana today?’”

But the long-term impact of the program goes far beyond physical health, Breiding said, adding that it also opens students’ eyes to new opportunities.

“They see that teaching and dancing is something you can do for a career and a lifestyle,” she said. “It broadens the kids’ horizons and shows them there are other options in the world.”

It also gives them a boost in confidence and self-esteem, something that they don’t always get at home, she said.

“(Art Sparks) makes the kids feel successful and encourages them,” Breiding said. “I can’t say enough about this program – it is just off-the-charts amazing. They are phenomenal.”

Art Sparks offers fitness-based dance programs that combat obesity by teaching kids about nutrition and healthy lifestyle practices.