



*“We empower women through education that will improve health outcomes for their children and decrease child abuse and neglect. We are living out those SSND values of going to the greatest need and opening wide our arms.”*

*- Sister Anne Francioni, WKO co-founder & executive director*

## *Families gather skills and strength at* **WHOLE KIDS OUTREACH**

Mallory Sharp travels down a long dirt road to her first appointment of the day. When she pulls up to the trailer, a young mother with a toddler on her leg and an infant in her arms peeks out the door with a smile and small wave. This family knows Mallory well. They have been welcoming her into their home every week for the past two years, developing a relationship that has helped mom, Kylie, adjust to the rhythms and routines of motherhood and supported 2-year-old Jaxon and 4-month-old Willow in reaching important milestones.

A staff nurse at Whole Kids Outreach (WKO) in Ellington, Missouri, Mallory is part of WKO’s Visiting Nurse Program which provides a safety net for families, helping to prevent infant mortality, child abuse, and neglect. Mallory visits pregnant women to provide prenatal education that aims to produce healthy, full-term births, then returns weekly to the homes of new moms to support breastfeeding, assess for post-partum depression and anxiety, educate moms on newborn care, and make sure babies are safe and thriving. Mallory also serves as a liaison between parents and pediatricians, encouraging the mothers in her care to make and keep doctor’s appointments.

Nursing visits are just one piece of a constellation of services provided to mothers and children by Whole Kids, an affiliated ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Central Pacific Province. Started by Sister Anne Francioni in 1999, the ministry serves 11 counties in rural southeast Missouri, where the average yearly income for a WKO family of four is \$22,500. The program is designed to make sure



*In response to referrals from medical centers, physicians’ offices, clinics, social service agencies, and direct requests from families, WKO sends trained nurses to the homes of pregnant women and parents of young children.*



*Since starting Whole Kids Outreach in 1999, Sister Anne Francioni has served as its executive director and as an agent of change in the southeast Missouri region, helping families work toward better futures for their children. She says that some of the most important advice she gives WKO staff members is also the most basic. "Don't give up. Stay in relationships. And listen, listen, listen."*

everybody has somebody to look out for them, a lifeline for those who might otherwise be forgotten.

In an area where isolation is endemic, that connection is critical. For many Whole Kids moms, WKO team members are the only adults they see or talk to for days. Fifty percent of WKO families don't have cell service or internet. Many don't have reliable cars, and those who do are often limited by the cost of fuel. The nearest pediatrician is 60 miles away and there is no public transportation.

In addition to the Visiting Nurse Program, Whole Kids Outreach provides outreach specialists and parent educators who accompany parents on their journeys until their youngest child is 3 years old. The ministry also hosts events that bring families together for play and connection-building, including "Moms Day Out" experiences where WKO provides care for children and programming for moms. "We empower women through education that will

improve health outcomes for their children and decrease child abuse and neglect," said Sister Anne. "We are living out those SSND values of going to the greatest need and opening wide our arms."

For school-aged children, summer can be a particularly precarious time. Without the structure of the school day and the reliability of school meals, kids can find themselves without adequate stimulation and nutrition. Whole Kids works to address this issue with four one-week camp sessions for children aged 4-12. The camps run from mid-June through mid-July. Each week features a different theme, but all include breakfast, lunch, crafts, horseback riding, swimming, and a host of other fun and educational activities.

Mallory is enthusiastic about encouraging families to participate in camp, in part because of her own experience with the program. A "Whole Kids Kid" herself, she started camp when she was 4 years old, eventually working her way up to a position as camp counselor. Her story isn't unique. Many campers become counselors, and some, like Mallory, eventually end up as full-time members of the Whole Kids staff.

Rosy Williams—a former "Whole Kids Kid" who serves as the administrative support and IT manager at Whole Kids Outreach—has been involved with the



*Counselors at Camp Whole Kids are chosen with great care. All of them display the skills needed to keep campers safe and engaged, the desire and ability to mentor young people, and a positive and playful spirit.*

ministry since she was 5 years old. She is adamant that Whole Kids has had a major impact on her life and insists that many people she grew up with feel the same way. "I don't know where I would be if Sister Anne hadn't come down here to start Whole Kids," said Rosy. "I don't know where a lot of us around here would be. WKO has touched so many lives. It has been a real game-changer in the area."

As transformational as Whole Kids programs are, Sister Anne is quick to point out that change doesn't happen overnight. Although the services WKO provides are vital, it is only by addressing the systemic barriers to child well-being that real and lasting change can take place. Despite the abundant love that Whole Kids parents have for their children, the life pressures they face coupled with a lack of adequate support keep the odds stacked against them. They are desperate to do better for their children, but sometimes they just don't know how.

"The issues we are dealing with are transgenerational," said Sister Anne. "Many of our moms have experienced trauma and have not seen a good parenting style modeled. We are asking these

moms to choose a whole new way of being, new values, a system that is different than the one they grew up with. That is very difficult for people, and it is why it is so important that we stay with these families."

With support from Whole Kids, families begin first to hope for something better and then to reach goals that make that hope a reality. "What we see with our families is a standing taller, a belief that 'maybe I could be one of those people who is successful, maybe my children will have a better life.' We see them not just begin to believe that they might be able to do this, but to actualize that and to see that they can. They get there. We save lives." ●



*(Left) WKO is home to a wonderful herd of horses. The program offers individual and group riding lessons for children from elementary through high school age throughout the school year. During summer camp, campers enjoy both riding and learning to care for these gentle, four-legged friends. (Above) Campers develop connections with camp counselors throughout the summer. As they get older, many former WKO campers become counselors themselves.*