



Discovering Home & Creating Belonging

The Legacy of Donna Fisher at The Potter's House

In my conversations with donors, I often mention that about six months after a global tragedy, we typically see students from the affected countries arrive at our school. This has been true for students from Syria, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo, among others. These students often arrive having faced significant trauma and are faced with the challenge of learning a new language, adapting to different weather, culture, clothing, and food. While some arrive with their families, many come as unaccompanied minors, usually at the middle or high school level.

At the high school level, their first step is joining our English Language Learning (ELL) program. Here, they start with the basics, learning to articulate English sounds and understanding the connection between letters and sounds.



For many years, Donna Fisher was their first contact in the ELL program. She not only taught students with little to no English through the Spaulding program but also provided them with relentless love and support. Many students saw her as a second mother, often expressing gratitude for her efforts to make them feel welcomed, loved, and capable.

There are numerous success stories of students who arrived in ninth grade without speaking English and have since gone on to attend prestigious universities like the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, Grand Valley State University, Calvin University, Kuyper College, Cornerstone University, Grand Canyon University, and others.

Through her dedication and love for the students, Donna significantly altered their life trajectories. She brought hope where there was none, instilling confidence and love. However, in the past 18 months, Donna faced a difficult battle with brain cancer. Despite her desire to live and the fervent prayers for her recovery, she passed away on November 5.

Her service was attended by Potter's House students from around the world whose lives she impacted. In her honor, a staff member initiated the Donna Fisher Scholarship Fund, supported by donations from friends and relatives. This fund will assist ELL students in their college pursuits and provide financial support for those attending The Potter's House.

We are deeply thankful for the nine years Donna Fisher spent with us at The Potter's House. The impact she had on our students and in other youth programs will undoubtedly be felt for generations to come.

As you delve into this newsletter, you will discover inspiring stories from students and staff who have found a sense of belonging at The Potter's House. We extend our heartfelt gratitude for your generosity, which plays a vital role in making our school a welcoming and supportive community. Enjoy reading about the remarkable journeys and experiences your support helps create.



Your partner in education,

John Booy

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A Look Back at First Semester

We have so many exciting things happening every school year and want to share them with you! Look at just a handful of the interesting and fun things our students participated in.



High schoolers performed "Peter and the Starcatcher". Our theater was packed with guests excitedly hearing the origin stories of all the characters who make up the beloved classic tale, Peter Pan.



Pie, pie, pie! Impressively, students made 1,950 pies for our annual pie sale fundraiser! The proceeds will help fund our class trips, including visits to Washington D.C. and May Term excursions. Thank you for supporting our students!



The PK-8th grade campus is enjoying newly remodeled gym floors and new bleachers, enhancing our students' sports experiences. We are excited to host many basketball games here. Go Pumas!



Seeing our elementary school students dressed as characters from their favorite books during Book Day was exciting. Even the teachers and our Superintendent, Mr. Booy, dressed in costume and performed skits!



Students enjoyed connecting with their partners at Partner Day! The support and mentorship provided by our community partners play an integral role in enriching student lives. We are so grateful. Check out page 15 to read more about the Partner Program.

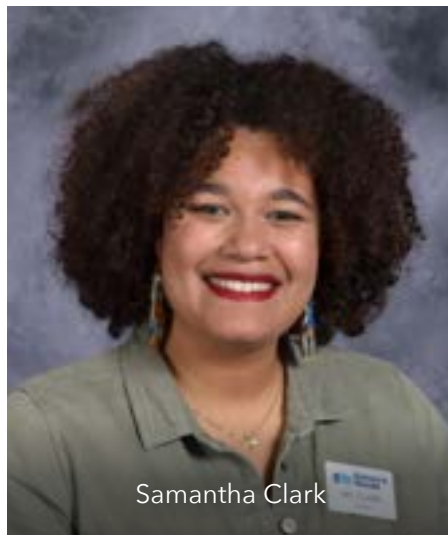


Our annual Christmas concert is always a joyous time to celebrate the true reason for the season. The choir, strings, and band all shared beautiful music, with those filling every seat available!

Creating a Sense of Belonging in Early Childhood Education

Since adding an early childhood education program 20 years ago, families at The Potter's House have repeatedly asked for more Preschool schedule options. Space and staffing have been an obstacle until this year. Thanks to renovations made possible by our donors, we launched a full-day preschool program this past fall, allowing us to better serve our families. Under the leadership of experienced teacher Joy Larson and alumna-turned-teacher Samantha Clark, we are now enabling more children to embark on their educational journey in an environment that deeply values faith, culture, and personal growth.

Samantha Clark vividly recalls her first encounter with the school's diverse beauty in fourth grade. It wasn't until her time at a local university, where she often found herself as one of the few people of color in most classes, that she truly appreciated the rich diversity TPH offered. The experience at TPH, where students and staff act as the hands and feet of Jesus in a loving environment, profoundly impacted her. Determined to pass on this legacy, Clark returned to The Potter's House as a preschool



Samantha Clark

teacher, embracing and promoting an environment where truth and love coexist in harmony.

At TPH, early childhood education transcends the basics of shapes, letters, numbers, and colors. Here, the curriculum is embedded with lessons of patience, respect, self-advocacy, independence, and, most importantly, the teachings of Jesus. **Clark emphasizes the importance of integrating Jesus into every aspect of learning, from leaving an open seat for Him during circle time to finding joy and wonder in**



Joy Larson

His creations during nature lessons. These daily teaching moments are opportunities to celebrate the unique masterpiece God has created in each child.

Joy Larson, a founder of The Potter's House's early education programming and a current preschool teacher, shares these sentiments. Celebrating her 40th year in teaching, Larson's career took a significant turn 20 years ago when she joined TPH to initiate the early childhood program. With a personal connection as a parent of four TPH alums, Larson's





“As teachers, we support each other in prayer. It’s very common to see staff and teachers praying together for each other and for our students. Each day, I remember that without Christ, I can do nothing.”


- Joy Larson

role at TPH felt like a homecoming. Her approach to teaching is deeply rooted in speaking truth, praying with students and their families, and supporting them through the challenges of parenting.

Larson’s empathy and understanding stem from her own experiences as a parent, including facing challenges with a child’s mental illness. This personal insight allows her to offer genuine support and encouragement to parents, assuring them of their capabilities and strengths in their parenting journey.

Together, educators like Larson and Clark exemplify TPH’s mission to create a nurturing environment where every child feels a sense of

belonging and is equipped to thrive academically and spiritually. Their dedication to integrating faith and compassion into early childhood education sets a foundation for a community that celebrates every individual’s unique gifts and talents.

As we continue fostering this enriching and welcoming learning environment at The Potter’s House, we invite you to join our community. **Open enrollment for TPH Preschool begins in February 2024, offering an opportunity for your child to start their educational journey in a nurturing and inclusive setting.** To enroll your child and to learn more about what makes TPH a unique place for early childhood education, visit tphgr.org/education/admissions. 



“In every day, there are a million little teaching moments where we emphasize how God created each of us as a unique masterpiece.”

- Samantha Clark





Josiah Gemmen

Discovering 'Home' in the Fine Arts Program

In the vibrant corridors of The Potter's House High School, Josiah Gemmen, a junior, has found a unique sense of 'home,' especially within the school's Fine Arts Program. As a Missionary Kid who has traveled to various corners of the globe with his family, Josiah has developed a broad perspective on what constitutes home. For him, returning to Grand Rapids and The Potter's House always feels like coming home, a place deeply cherished and loved.

Josiah's life journey is a rich tapestry that spans three states, six cities, and twelve houses. He redefines 'home' as more than just a physical space; it's a feeling of belonging. This sense of belonging has been deepened through his involvement with the school's theater program. Since his first role in "Peter Pan," directed by Mrs. Dean, he has been an active participant in the world of theater, including roles in "The Crucible," "Babette's Feast," and recently, "Peter and the Starcatchers."

Theater at The Potter's House has been a transformative experience for Josiah, filled with the thrills of auditions, the challenges of character development, and the tight-knit camaraderie of play week. It's a place where lasting bonds are formed, and memories are cherished. To Josiah, the theater is more than a stage—it's a home where relationships are deeply valued.

Josiah speaks highly of Mr. Grell, the former director, and Mr. Cain, the current director and drama teacher, for their incredible support and mentorship. Their dedication to creating a safe and



nurturing environment has helped forge a family-like bond among the theater students.

Moreover, Josiah appreciates the cultural diversity in the theater program, reflecting the broader school community's rich tapestry. Josiah's own family, with siblings adopted from Haiti and Ethiopia, including one with Down syndrome, resonates deeply with the Potter's House community.

At The Potter's House, every student is cherished, no matter their background. For Josiah Gemmen and others, the school, especially its Fine Arts Program, is more than just a place of learning; it's a beloved home where everyone is valued and celebrated. 🏠

"Home. Everyone has their own image, their sights, their sounds, and their people that bring "home" to life," shared Josiah. "Yet, it's such a vague term. Home is different for everyone, so there's no one-size-fits-all definition. The dictionary defines home as a house, apartment, or other shelter that is the usual residence of a person, family, or household. But this seems so insufficient; it needs to capture the full essence of home. **In search of a more fitting description, I found the word 'beloved' - defined as 'greatly loved, dear to the heart.' This, I believe, truly encapsulates our feelings of 'home' in six words.**"



Daniel Baez's Journey of Growth through Discipleship

Daniel's journey within The Potter's House community began when his parents enrolled him in the Pre-K program.

"Mrs. Larson, the teacher and founder of TPH's Preschool program, introduced my mom to this community. I've even brought some of my cousins here," Daniel recalls. He appreciates the loving and caring environment at TPH, likening it to a family.


Prayer and spiritual guidance have been integral to his experience at TPH. **"Our teachers often pray with us, helping us stay focused on Christ," Daniel notes.** He is an active participant in chapel and discipleship activities, which strengthen his connection to God and the community.

"Daniel appreciates the chapel sessions at The Potter's House, where speakers address contemporary topics through a Biblical lens. He recalls a speaker's impactful statement, 'We are collectively bearers of God's image,' which deeply resonated with him. Reflecting on this, Daniel comments, **"At The Potter's House, our varied cultures and experiences are seen as a beautiful reflection of God's creation."** The unity at TPH has significantly influenced Daniel. "I believe our school is a wonderful embodiment of God's character. I have grown as a leader in this environment, which embraces diverse cultures and perspectives. It's a place where I feel safe to explore my interests and strengths," he shares."

Marcie Rower, who leads the discipleship program at TPH, highlights its focus: "Our program is centered on nurturing resilient followers of Jesus. We emphasize spiritual growth and character development through weekly gatherings for prayer,

scripture study, and journaling. These activities foster a deep understanding of and connection to faith among our students."

Daniel's confidence has also grown through his involvement in extracurricular activities like TPH athletics and fine arts programs. **"These activities create smaller communities within TPH. Our coaches and teachers engage us in a fun, loving way, acting more like mentors than simply instructors,"** Daniel explains.

Looking to the future, Daniel is filled with optimism. **"The confidence and skills I'm gaining at TPH are preparing me for a future where I can make a difference. I've been blessed and want to bless others,"** he asserts. With plans to attend college and possibly study psychology, Daniel is ready to apply the values and lessons he's learned at The Potter's House. 





Turning Points: Aaliyah Hausler's Journey of Faith and Resilience

I am profoundly grateful that my parents chose The Potter's House (TPH) for my siblings and me. As an adoptive family, they viewed it as a nurturing Christian community where we could grow and learn to live for the Lord," shares Aaliyah Hausler, a senior at TPH, whose two brothers are also TPH alumni.

Faith plays a central role at TPH, a sentiment that Aaliyah echoes. "It truly is a Christ-centered community," she shares. Her journey at TPH began in preschool, and she has cherished every moment since.

Aaliyah recalls a defining moment in her faith journey during 4th or 5th grade. "Mrs. Smith, my teacher, once said, 'If you choose to, you can give your life to Christ today.' That day, my best friend and I decided to follow Christ," Aaliyah recounts. This decision was a turning point for her, igniting a passion for reading the Bible, attending church, and engaging in faith-based conversations.

Her faith was further tested toward the end of 8th grade when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. "It changed my perspective on life, reminding me of its fragility," Aaliyah recalls. A year after her mother's successful treatment, the family celebrated her being cancer-free, a testament to their resilience and the support of the TPH community. **"Everyone at The Potter's House was incredibly supportive, constantly checking in on us and providing meals and emotional support," she adds.**

Aaliyah's experience at TPH has been more than academic. "Mr. Clark, our high school principal, often says, **'The Potter's House is more of a family than just a school.'** I've felt that, especially as an upperclassman," she explains. As a discipleship leader, Aaliyah has had the opportunity to mentor younger students on their faith journeys, leading discussions based on chapel speakers' topics.

Her involvement in athletics, particularly the Track and Field team, has been another significant aspect of her TPH experience. **"Initially, I was hesitant to try out," Aaliyah admits. "But TPH is a place where you can take risks and be yourself."** Her junior year presented a personal health challenge - thyroid cancer. "I kept my diagnosis private at first, but the team, led by Coach Koster, was incredibly supportive throughout my recovery," she says.

The team's journey to the state competition in the 4x1 relay was a highlight for Aaliyah. "It was another milestone that reminded me to live fully, follow God, and make the most of my high school experience," she reflects.

Through these turning points, Aaliyah has learned valuable life lessons. "You never know what someone else is going through. I've learned the importance of kindness and not taking anything for granted," she shares. **"Being adopted into a loving family was part of God's plan for me, and I've seen how each experience shapes who I am."**

Aaliyah Hausler's story is one of faith, resilience, and community, embodying the spirit and values of The Potter's House. 🏠

Staff Spotlight: Azalia Sanchez's Family's Journey of Healing

Azalia Sanchez's story with The Potter's House (TPH) is one of hope, healing, and finding a sense of belonging.

"I first heard about TPH about 20 years ago when my nephew Tony attended," Azalia recalls. However, life took her to San Antonio, Texas, where she pursued education, started a family, and faced the challenges of being a single mother.

Years later, in the spring of 2023, circumstances led Azalia and her two sons, now in sixth grade, to move to Grand Rapids to care for an aunt. With her background in education and her concerns about the changing landscape of schools, she longed for a different path for her sons. **"I wanted a place that didn't just follow the latest trends," she says.**

Azalia's friend suggested applying to TPH, but as a private school, she worried about affordability. "I hadn't even found a job yet, but I applied, hoping for a school that would guide my boys to follow Jesus, teach the Bible, and offer Spanish," Azalia shares. To her surprise, the admissions director reached out

with an offer of financial assistance. **"It was such a blessing. Not only did TPH meet my needs, but they also offered everything I prayed for, including Spanish classes!"**

Azalia's journey with The Potter's House took another turn when she began volunteering as a volleyball coach. Soon, Kara Haskill suggested she apply for an administrative assistant position at TPH Middle School. "It was perfect, especially since I am bilingual," she mentions.

From her first day, Azalia felt the warmth and support of The Potter's House community. "I was greeted with a big hug, and this job has been everything I ever wanted," she says. **"The people here are not just coworkers; they are family."**

Azalia reflects on the transformative experience TPH has been for her and her sons. **"I spent many lonely years questioning my worth and worrying about my boys coming from a broken family. But The Potter's House has been a place of healing and peace."** She firmly believes that TPH is a ground of healing, not just for her family but for many others seeking hope and a nurturing community.

"The Potter's House is truly a healing ground - for me, for my boys, and for so many other hurting families who are looking for hope," Azalia concludes, grateful for the journey that led her to The Potter's House. 🏡





Gifts Given in Honor and Memory

In Honor Of:

**Anna Bult, Leul Bult
and Marie Bult**

John and Nancy Bult

In Memory Of:

Alberta Hoekwater

Anonymous
Denny and Diann DeRuyter
Ward and Myrna Stienstra
Marilyn R Burman

Donna Fisher

Christa Thornton
Daryl and Janice Vriesenga
Duane and Gloria De Jong
David and Janice Luyk
John Booy
David and Debra DeJong
Larry and Phyllis Guindon
Paul and Deborah Lindemulder
Jack and Tracy Groot
John Fisher
Sheri Cutter
James and Jayne Quist
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James and Shirley DeJong
Carl and Emma Butenas
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Calvin and Mary DeVries
Thomas and Sharon Begerow
Kenneth Termeer
Wes and Chris Mepyans

Millie Rickers

Mary Jane Vangura

Romeo Arroyo

Paul and Lynnette Reidsma



Help Transform Lives Through The Potter's House Partner Program!

We are excited to share updates about The Potter's House Partner Program, a significant initiative that empowers our community to profoundly impact students seeking a Christ-centered education.

Our Partner Program enables individuals, families, churches, businesses, and small groups to support and develop relationships with Potter's House students. **As a partner, you play a vital role in fostering an environment where students can excel spiritually, academically, and personally.** Partners have the opportunity to invest their time, talent, and resources, becoming an integral part of our students' educational and spiritual journey. Your commitment helps equip students to serve God and society to their fullest potential.

In addition, by sponsoring a student, you make education more accessible and affordable for all. Your support bridges financial gaps and is essential in achieving our mission of offering a Christ-centered education to students from various ethnic backgrounds and financial circumstances.

Join us in making a lasting positive impact! Together, we can create a ripple effect of transformation that reaches far beyond the classroom walls. **In 2024, we aim to welcome 23 additional partners this school year.** Will you be one of them?

To learn more about The Potter's House Partner Program and to get involved, please visit tphgr.org/get-involved/partner-program/.



Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs)

Did you know that if you're over 70 ½, you can donate from your IRA to charity and get tax benefits? Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCDs) are convenient, tax-efficient, and ensure your entire gift support your favorite ministries.

Here's how you can qualify!

- Must be 70 ½ or older
- Donate directly from your IRA to a charity (donor-advised funds are not permissible)
- Distributions made only from traditional IRAs or Roth IRAs, with up to \$100,000 per year for singles or \$200,000 for couples. Other retirement accounts are not eligible.

If you have questions about making a Qualified Charitable Distribution to The Potter's House School, **please reach out to Tim Swiney at 616-818-3745** or via email at tswiney@tphgr.org. Your continued support is invaluable as we strive to meet our 2023/2024 goal of \$4.8 million, which is crucial for advancing our school's mission.



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tphgr.org

SAVE THE DATE: New Friends Banquet

April 25, 2024

JW Marriott Downtown Grand Rapids

Mark your calendars and join us for our New Friends Banquet! We invite you to bring a friend and celebrate the blessings we've received this school year. This special event is a celebration and an opportunity to support our fundraising efforts. We look forward to sharing this joyful occasion with you.

