THE LATEST NEWS
PUBLISHED FOR OUR
FRIENDS & FAMILIES

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

Dear friends,

Can you believe it has been two years since our world completely and totally changed? It is amazing to consider all the things we had to figure out once the pandemic began. Although it was unbelievably challenging at Gemma, I observed over and over again how amazing our team is! They are simply heroic. They kept Gemma going, providing much needed services to children, youth, and families throughout the pandemic, through the social unrest and racial reckoning, through variants, through changing rules and mandates, and they continue on today. I am so thankful to them for bringing their full selves to work every day to help children and families. Their work matters so much, and I am honored to call them my colleagues!

On these pages, you will read examples of their amazing work and also about some recent happenings at Gemma. We could not do this life-changing work without all of you, our friends and partners. We appreciate you!

With respect and gratitude,

Kristen E.M. Gay, Ph.D.
President and CEO

An Interview with Kristen Gay, President & CEO

The last two plus years have been full of change and challenge for Gemma Services. First, in 2019, we completed our merger of the Village and Silver Springs – Martin Luther School. Then the pandemic struck and like all in our communities, Gemma had to navigate the myriad associated challenges. Here, Kristen Gay, Gemma’s President and CEO, shares reflections on this time, including the struggles, highlights, and the hopes for Gemma’s bright future.

Many people may not realize that you have spent most of your career with this organization, first as Silver Springs – Martin Luther School and now as Gemma Services. Can you share a bit of your path here?
I served as a Clinical Intern in the Silver Springs Residential Treatment Program as part of the training I needed to complete my Ph.D. I also worked for four months in the Foster Family Care Program. After I earned my Ph.D., I became an Administrative Intern. I rotated through every department over the next 18 months to learn the ins and outs of the entire organization. It was a wonderful learning experience. Subsequently, I worked in various roles including Director of Family Resource Services, Development Director, Vice President, and then became President and CEO. I am honored to be here with amazing colleagues and to be a part of the very critical work that Gemma does to help children and families.

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We asked some of our dedicated team members to reflect on what they find most rewarding about their work with youth and families at Gemma. Here are some of their inspiring answers. To read more, please visit https://bit.ly/GemmaReflections.

**Therapist, Family Based Mental Health Services**

“I feel I was called to this line of work. After receiving my Master’s in Family Therapy, I was attracted to this position and the unique ability it gives me to meet families in Philadelphia where they are and help them in their process of true healing and change. The most rewarding part of my job is seeing a family interact with each other in a more positive way and seeing their growth. It is rewarding when you have seen a family put in the work they need to be successful, and they recognize the change in themselves.”

**Clinical Supervisor, Applied Behavioral Analysis**

“I was drawn to this field because I wanted to help make meaningful changes in the lives of children and families who struggle with behavioral challenges. I am very passionate about ensuring children have access to quality services that will help them live their most fulfilled lives.”

**Senior Foster Parent Recruiter, Foster Family Care Program**

“A favorite part of my job is meeting prospective foster parents and developing a rapport with them. It is so rewarding when a family whose home I licensed eventually adopts the foster children.”

**Reading Assistant, Martin Luther School**

“The most rewarding part of my job is when my students show me that they learned something. This shows that I did my job! My passion for helping people is what drew me to my position as a Reading Assistant. Ever since I was a little girl, I would say I want to be a nurse or a teacher when I grow up. Now Martin Luther School has given me that opportunity to teach and help children.”

**Recreation Therapist, Residential Treatment Program**

“As a Recreation Therapist, I am able to use the children’s interests as a treatment avenue. One of the favorite aspects of my job is modifying those interests that naturally evoke feelings of happiness and teaching the children ways to intentionally use their interests as a coping strategy. It is very rewarding to see the children learn to use the activities they find fun in ways that enhance their health and safety.”

**Case Manager, In Home Protective Services**

“The most rewarding part my job is when I can assist a family that has been struggling – being able to help them believe the services provided can stabilize the overall family dynamic and help the family remain intact or be reunified.”

**Case Manager, Adoption and Permanency Program**

“The most rewarding part of my job is when we finally get to the Permanent Legal Custody/Adoption Day and knowing that a child who entered into the child welfare system will now have a forever home and a consistent and stable caregiver to love them into adulthood. To know that no child is alone in this world is the most rewarding feeling and the “why” for all the work it took to get there.”
More than 175 friends of Gemma helped make the holidays bright for hundreds of kids and families we serve. Some donated presents, others contributed gift cards and made financial donations, and some volunteered to wrap gifts and stuff stockings. Thanks to these incredibly caring elves, we were able to spread holiday cheer to about 200 families and more than 400 children! Upon receiving the delivery of gifts for her child, one parent exclaimed, “My son always wanted a scooter, and you were able to get him one. I am so excited!”

We were able to give youth we serve in our Community Based Programs warm winter coats, gifts, and gift cards. One father told us, “My son had been wishing for a new coat! Thank you for making that happen!”

Our residential children had a cheerful holiday season as well. They enjoyed the annual holiday celebration in smaller groups playing games like pin the carrot on the snowman, and each child received a stack of donated gifts wrapped by caring friends. In keeping with a decades-long tradition, the stairway railings in the residence were lined with large stuffed animals. The children’s smiles were incredibly bright as each selected their new stuffed friend!

We are thankful to all who helped Gemma make these moments of joy possible for the youth and families we serve!
It is more than two years after the merger and two years into the pandemic, how is Gemma faring?
I am so impressed by my colleagues at Gemma. So many things have changed and continue to change. Yet, our staff have pivoted and shown their commitment to Gemma's mission in incredibly significant ways. Our educators shifted to provide education virtually; our therapists have been working with children and families via Telehealth; our staff in our Residential, Foster Care, and Prevention programs have continued providing uninterrupted services in person since the onset of the pandemic. Despite the challenges, everyone continues to work every single day to make the lives of children and families better. Some days, I am not sure where they get the energy and tenacity. Gemma is very blessed to have such talented, committed employees.

How are the children, youth, and families served by Gemma doing?
I think they're doing the best they can. Everyone's lives have been disrupted and for some, life is very hard right now. I remain grateful that Gemma is here to help the kids and families in our communities who already struggle so much during the best of times.

How are the Gemma staff doing during these challenging times?
Some employees have been personally and deeply affected by COVID, yet they remain committed to their work. We have extended support to staff in many ways, such as providing self-care dollars for departments so that we can find ways to take care of ourselves during these difficult days. I am happy we were able to give everyone a bonus last year. We have also sent gift cards and meals to staff to express our appreciation and support. Honestly, though, some days, nothing feels like quite enough, but we will keep trying!

What have been the most rewarding and challenging parts of leading Gemma during the last two years? What are you most proud of?
As we worked through the merger, it was rewarding to get to know the remarkable talent from the Village side - both colleagues and Board members. One of the challenges has been bringing the cultures of two long-standing organizations together, and the pandemic made this even more difficult. It has been particularly challenging to find ways to keep everyone connected and to keep morale up throughout the pandemic. Somehow, everyone has dug down deep and keeps showing up for the children.

One of the things I am most proud of out of the last 2+ years is our DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work. We still have a ways to go, but we are tackling such important issues and making good progress toward living into our value of being diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

Why was launching a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Initiative at Gemma important and what do you hope it achieves?
I have said often that DEI work is mission critical, and I wish we had begun it sooner. We were poised to begin our DEI work at the beginning of 2020 but paused because we really wanted to do it in person. With the racial injustices and unrest during late spring and early summer of that year, it became essential that we get started, even though we couldn't meet in person.

Working to create a diverse, equitable, and inclusive Gemma is heart and soul work. I am frustrated that we cannot do more to change the inequities and institutionalized racism in our county, but we can and will make change at Gemma. I am grateful for my colleague partners and for the Board’s commitment to DEI. The goal of our work together is to embed DEI relevant policies, practices, and behavior so deeply into Gemma that our organization will always be known as being diverse, equitable, and inclusive, even if the current DEI leaders leave.

A strategic planning initiative is underway at Gemma. How is the process going? What do you hope comes out of the effort?
I am so excited about this initiative. We will be working with consultants from a company called Froiland, who are guiding us through a visioning process that will define Gemma’s path for the future. Through this process, we will identify our “North Star,” a powerfully articulated purpose that will guide how Gemma makes decisions about our future. This initiative will include opportunities for conversation both within and outside of Gemma, with our devoted team, and with our supporters. We anticipate this work to be completed this fall.

What do you wish that people outside of Gemma knew about the kids and families we serve?
I wish people knew how amazing the kids and families we work with are! They are so strong and so resilient, often more so than even they realize.

Finally, what is your “why”? What keeps you inspired to do this work?
I believe every child should know that they are worthy of love, that they are loved, and that they matter. I also believe that every child should have the same opportunities that other children have. Every child deserves a bright future. That’s why I’m here.
"Children are naturally motivated by the things that interest them," shared Debbie Kubis, Recreation Therapist in the Residential Treatment (RT) Program at Gemma. "Recreation therapy helps the children discover activities they find enjoyable," Kubis stated, further explaining the focus of her work with Gemma's residential children who range from 6–14 years old. "This shows them how these activities can help them better manage their feelings and behaviors."

Recreation therapy uses leisure activities such as arts and crafts, physical activities, games, and more to help children build important skills. This therapeutic approach is one component of the holistic programming that Gemma's RT Program offers for youth in our care. Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy, skill building groups, and a healing milieu environment with clear behavioral expectations are examples of other aspects of the residential program. Recreation therapy along with art therapy complement these opportunities that children have to explore and express their feelings as they heal from traumas they may have experienced before coming to Gemma. Both creative therapies are provided weekly in groups, as well as individually for children as needed.

Art therapy, another creative therapy offered at Gemma, can be particularly helpful for a child who struggles to express themselves through language. "When words are not enough, we turn to art," shared Jacqueline Scheffler, Art Therapist. Utilizing mediums like drawing, painting, and more, art therapy helps children explore and process their emotions, express themselves, and build new skills. Scheffler is displaying the children's art in the residential building to help build their confidence as well. "In groups, we focus on building self-esteem and confidence, enhancing social skills, developing new coping strategies, and emotional regulation," said Scheffler. She continued, "In individual sessions, we go deeper to focus on a child's trauma."

Both recreation and art therapy will be moving outdoors as the weather warms. "We'll definitely be getting outside more," said Kubis. "I'll be encouraging the kids to do more with nature," Scheffler shared. "We will incorporate things from nature into the art they create."

Kubis and Scheffler are always planning engaging activities for the children in the future. On the horizon is the addition of trauma-informed yoga. "We're excited to soon have new support to offer," commented Kubis who hopes the restorative poses the children learn will give them yet another tool to help them better manage their feelings. As Kubis states perfectly, one goal of recreation therapy is to instill the importance of fun: "My hope is the children come to understand that having fun and doing things that make them happy is important for their health and well-being."

If you would like to make a gift to support creative therapies in the residential program at Gemma, please return a check in the enclosed envelope or visit www.gemmaservices.org to make a donation securely online.
TAPping into Martin Luther School’s Talented Team

“Martin Luther School loves to help people to grow,” says Eva Morrison, Vice President of Education at Gemma and Director of Martin Luther School. “It’s part of our mission as a school.”

Martin Luther School’s dedicated educators and team guide each K-12th grade student toward their educational goals. And now, with an exciting new program, Martin Luther School (MLS) is helping staff reach their own educational and professional goals. MLS’ Teacher Apprenticeship Program (TAP) provides a new pathway for career advancement to those interested in becoming teachers – and at the same time, creates a pipeline of qualified teachers from our experienced and dedicated staff.

The two- to three-year TAP program consists of a partnership with Cabrini University offering participants undergraduate courses provided on our Plymouth Meeting campus. Additionally, each TAPper shadows lead teachers and eventually has a co-teaching experience that culminates in a degree, teaching certification, and employment as a teacher at Martin Luther School. “Our TAPpers learn on the job both practically and theoretically,” says Morrison. “They are running small groups during the school day and over the course of their tenure, will take on more and more responsibility in the classroom.” The selection process for the TAP program consists of an application and participation includes a stipend.

In its inaugural year, the program currently has 10 participants. Classes take place weekly with time built-in for TAP participants to get together and support each other as they work to complete their coursework. “I think it is important for schools to be teaching institutions,” says Morrison. “We have high expectations and high support for everyone. There is a shared sense of commitment to the program on the part of all, and I do think our TAPpers are grateful for the opportunity.”

MLS leadership’s support of TAP participants has been an important aspect of the program. Sharronda Rainey, TAP participant and Reading Assistant, shared, “Our leadership team saw something in me that I maybe didn’t. I always enjoyed working with kids, but to be able to teach them is that much more meaningful.”

Another TAP participant, Darryl Epps shared, “I had a teacher in my past who made learning fun, made me want to go to school, and I want to be that for our kids. I know they are capable of so much… I want to better serve them.”

Morrison states, “This is a very talented group of Teaching Assistants who bring a lot of experience and skill to the table, and we appreciate their perspective and commitment to our students.”

The generosity of caring donors has made this program possible. “Without their support, we couldn’t do this,” says Morrison. “My hopes and dreams for our TAPpers are that they become teachers and spend time at MLS sharing their learning by inspiring our students,” says Morrison. “This program is a perfect way to live into our mission.”

Interested in supporting our Teacher Apprenticeship Program? Contact us at info@gemmaservices.org.
Get Your Tickets!
SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2022

FEATURING
Chef Chad & Hanna Williams
of Friday Saturday Sunday

Supporting Programs for At-Risk Children, Youth, & Families
Dinner and Auctions

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