



the
ANCONA
SCHOOL

Spring Equinox

THE ANCONA SCHOOL GALA



Table of Contents

GALA SPONSORS	4
THIS EVENING'S PROGRAM	5
2025-26 GALA COMMITTEE	6
LETTER FROM THE CO-CHAIRS	7
ANCONA SCHOOL TRUSTEES	8
ANCONA SCHOOL FACULTY & STAFF	10
ABOUT ANCONA	11
2026 GALA HONOREES	12
SPECIAL THANKS	22
AUCTION GUIDELINES	23
TRIBUTES AND ADVERTISEMENTS	25

Thank You to Our Gala Sponsors

Gustavo Bamberger and Martha Van Haitsma

Austin Bartlett & Emily A. Chen

Todd Connor & Andrew Tourney

The Dodson Family & Weusi

Haven Dental Studio

Cari & Sims Hulings

Meliora Real Estate Group LLC

Susan Rogers & Richard Stephenson

Joshua Schwartz

Program

6:30 PM

COCKTAILS & HORS D'OEUVRES

7:15 PM

WELCOME FROM THE GALA CO-CHAIRS

AWARD PRESENTATIONS

- *Teaching Excellence Award to Yolita Ray*
- *Spirit of Ancona Award to Marsha Stewart*

PADDLE RAISE

7:45 PM

DINNER OPENS

8:30 PM

DESSERT AND DANCING

9:30 PM

AUCTION CLOSES

9:45 PM

CHECKOUT BEGINS

10:00 PM

HAVE A WONDERFUL EVENING!

2026 Gala Committee

Linda Chavez and Naomi Tesfamikael
COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

Lucila Espedido and Nanette Harris
HONORARY CO-CHAIRS

Maria Luna-Duarte
ADVISORY CO-CHAIR

Hannah Adegoke

Genesis Bencivenga

Megan Calhoun

Cindy Flemming

Natasha Fletcher

Fallon Goodrich

Leah Hope

Martha Itulya-Omollo

Arianna Jamerson

Aremu Mbande

Darilyn McClain

Christina Walker

Leslie Browne

Angie Martinez

Special Thanks: Liesl Shurtliff, Laura Staley, and Dai Turner

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the season of renewal! As the first signs of spring begin to emerge, we are reminded that the Spring Equinox marks a moment of balance and new beginnings. In that spirit, we are delighted that you're joining us tonight to celebrate the people and values that make Ancona so extraordinary.

The Gala plays a vital role in sustaining Ancona's commitment to accessibility and inclusion. An Ancona education is transformative. Our students are encouraged to ask tough questions, think critically, and engage meaningfully with the world around them while learning to lead with empathy and equity. Funds raised from this event support our tuition assistance program and help ensure that an Ancona education remains available to families from a wide range of backgrounds. Today, 45% of Ancona students rely on tuition assistance, making the Gala one of the most important ways our community supports one another.

Ancona continues to flourish because of the generosity of our amazing community. Tonight, we hope that you eat, drink, be merry, and bid early and often. Thank you so very much for your support.

With gratitude,

Naomi Tesfamikael, Linda Chavez, and Maria Luna-Duarte
2026 Gala Co-Chairs

2025-26

Board of Trustees

Radiah Smith-Donald

Board President

Sibyl Day

Board Vice President

Kapil Kumar

Board Treasurer

Eric Schneider

Secretary

Tabitha Watts

Committee on Trustees Co-Chair

Jerome Weidner

Committee on Trustees Co-Chair

Gustavo Bamberger

Austin Bartlett

Keith Bevans

Eliza Bryant

Andrew Chipman

Lucila Espedido

Nanette Harris

Cari Hulings

Stefani Lumen

APC Chair

Elisa Reliford

Carmen Sallay

Lisa Scruggs

Paul Watford

2025-26

Honorary Trustees

Joshua Schwartz

Honorary Trustees Chair

Ina Burd

Renetta McCann

Patricia Cornelius-Woods

Blanche Roberts

Evan Freund

Susan Rogers

Norman Harelik

Jonathan Silverman

Stanley Hill

Alisa Starks

Nancy Jacobson

Christine Tompsett

William Lowry

2025-26

Ancona Faculty and Staff

Melanie Ahmad

Zaheer Ali

Zacharyiah Austin

Yaritxa Banuelos

Heather Black Alexander

Tayé Brown

Leslie Browne

Jessie Buckley

Desmond Cain

Ebonie Cannon

Brenda Castillo

Ayrianna Coleman

Jennifer Coleman

Ernestine Cotton

Alex Dembowski

Devenia Doss

Breyana Drew

Rachel Esser

Ainsley Fleetwood

Marc Furigay

Tony Gleason

Breanna Gray

Janet Gray-McKennis

Rachael Gruen

Levatino Harris

Jenny Hempel

Jennifer Hernandez

Heidi Holladay

Toney Howell

Liz Iverson

Awazi Jaafaru

Kait Kumar

Valerie Lowder

Isabela Marques

Angie Martinez

Deandre Miller

John Niemyjski

Mary Nwabueze

Esther Okuro

AJ Poremskis

Luca Prazeres

Yolita Ray

Ivan Rice

Jose Rodriguez

Rene Sanchez

Brittany Slater

Nick Smicklas

Kurt Spieles

Marsha Stewart

Jeff St. Hilaire

Jon Stoper

J Swain

Eleanor Sweeney

Alysia Tate

Ronda Tolbert

Kristal Torres

Chris Weber

Delia West

Stephanie Williams

Karmin Wright

In the summer of 1962, a visionary group of parents—Bruce Sagan, Charles Custer, Jeanne Bamberger, Ann von Hoffman, and Henri Zetter—banded together, rented a storefront on 53rd Street, and famously ran the ad “**Montessori, Anybody?**” in the *Hyde Park Herald*. That simple question founded The Ancona School, named after Dr. Maria Montessori’s hometown of Ancona, Italy.

In its early years, Ancona was home to a teacher training program and the nation’s first Montessori Head Start program, establishing early on our commitment to an economically and racially heterogeneous student body.

Underlying Ancona’s exceptional educational program is a concern for social justice and for imparting to children a sense of their own agency in the world. Ancona has long been a home for Black teachers and an incubator for culturally responsive practice. This inclusive, humanistic vision proved very much in demand in Hyde Park, and Ancona flourished.

After expanding to our current building on Dorchester Avenue, and with the steady advocacy of South Side luminaries and Ancona parents including Dick Gregory, Carole Mosley Braun, Toni Preckwinkle, and Jonathan Jackson, we are proud to continue Dr. Montessori's legacy, cultivating compassionate, lifelong learners who strive for equity.

We believe the Ancona School sits as a buffer for our students and our families from the increasing disorder of the world. This is not to cloister ourselves, but rather to give us the strength and power of community as we advocate and work for structural change.

We are dedicated to educating the whole child, nurturing not only our students’ academic growth but also their social-emotional wellbeing, and their sense of purpose as citizens of their local and global communities. Ancona graduates leave us as resilient, deep thinkers who are socially conscious, emotionally intelligent, and academically prepared for the next steps in their development.

Thank you to all of our current families, alum families, friends, and supporters celebrating with us tonight. Your unwavering dedication to Ancona helps us fulfill our mission: inspiring children to nourish their inner lives, find the power in their own voices, and strive for justice and peace.



Gala Honorees

Teaching Excellence Award



YOLITA RAY

Yolita Ray

Yolita Ray's 27-year career in education is a testament to the power of lifelong learning... though her journey at Ancona began not as an educator, but as a preprimary parent. Yolita fell in love with the Montessori philosophy, which mirrors her own: that school should be a natural extension of a student's home life. Inspired by this connection, she completed her teacher training in 1994 and officially joined the Ancona staff in 1998 as an Assistant Teacher in Ms. Ellen Cole's preprimary classroom. Over the following decades, Ms. Yolita and Ms. Ellen forged a legendary professional partnership—a bond built on deep mutual respect and a shared vision for the social and emotional development of their students.

Yolita's approach to teaching is intrinsically holistic, prioritizing active learning strategies that give children true ownership of their knowledge. Throughout her career, she has expanded her expertise through master's and doctoral studies, seeking new ways to challenge and support a diverse student population. In 2009, Yolita made Ancona history as the first assistant teacher to receive the Lorraine Reepmeyer Award for Professional Development. She utilized this honor to represent DePaul University in the International Scholar Laureate Program Delegation on Diplomacy and International Relations in Australia. There, she explored complex issues of environmental change, human rights, and globalization—passions she has integrated into her classroom to foster a sense of global citizenship in her youngest pupils.

In 2020, Yolita stepped into the role of Head Teacher, where she continues to model the values of fairness, compassion, and a genuine love of learning. Beyond her academic and professional accolades, Yolita is cherished by colleagues and families alike for her warmth and her welcoming presence. Outside of Ancona, she finds inspiration in the intricate beadwork of African art, the soulful sounds of Robert Glasper and Esperanza Spalding, and Chicago's vibrant culture. Yolita truly represents teaching excellence at Ancona!

Spirit of Ancona Award



MARSHA STEWART

Marsha Stewart

Ms. Marsha Stewart has served as Ancona's school librarian for nearly four decades, a journey that began in 1989—the same year as the legendary Mr. B. Throughout her 36-year tenure, she has been a constant, nurturing presence, serving under five different Heads of School and witnessing the growth of the Ancona community from a unique vantage point. Her connection to the school is deeply personal: she is a multi-generational Ancona parent whose daughter, Taylor, is an alum, and whose granddaughter, Amora, graduates this year.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Ms. Marsha faced education disparities growing up and did not learn to read until the fourth grade. Rather than letting this obstacle define her, she allowed it to fuel a lifelong mission: her dream to become a librarian. She went on to attend Northwestern University and earned her Master's Degree from the University of Michigan. Securing her position at Ancona was a dream come true and has been the honor of her life.

Ms. Marsha believes that books have the power to transform lives and is a fierce advocate for representation. She has spent her career ensuring that every child who walks through the doors of Ancona's library finds something in the collection that reflects their own experience, heritage, and journey. Her influence extends far beyond our school; as a leader within the Illinois Association of School Library Educators, she has served on the reading committees for the Monarch, Bluestem, and Caudill book awards, shaping the literary landscape for children across the state.

Ms. Marsha has impacted the lives of thousands of children. She connects deeply with students, fostering meaningful relationships that last long beyond their time at Ancona. As she prepares to pass the Ancona library to a new generation, we are honored to celebrate her tonight!

Special Thanks



**WITH IMMENSE GRATITUDE WE THANK
ALL OUR GENEROUS AUCTION AND RAFFLE DONORS**

Auction Guidelines

BIDDING AND WINNING

Ancona's auction process is now online! To place your bid, please use your smartphone and follow the link texted to you when you registered. If you have any questions, please visit the registration area. Announcements will be made prior to the silent auction closing.

When you leave at the end of the night, stop by the checkout table to collect any certificates or physical items won. All sales are final.

PAYMENT AND PURCHASE PICK-UP

At the end of the evening, any items won will be added to your account under the credit card number that was given. Your card will be charged the next business day, and an invoice will be sent via email with the details of the charges to your account.

If you prefer to pay by a method other than the credit card linked to your bidding account, please alert the event staff before 9:30 pm.

Auction Guidelines

ACCEPTABLE FORMS OF PAYMENT

We accept cash, checks (made out to The Ancona School), and all major credit cards.

CONDITION OF SALES

All property is sold "as-is," and the Ancona School makes no warranties or representations of any kind or nature, expressed or implied, with respect to the property. In no event shall the school be responsible for the conditions or warranty of description, authenticity, or condition of the property, and no statement in the catalog or made at the sale or in the invoice or elsewhere shall be deemed to be such warranty or representation or assumption of liability.

By their purchase, the winner waives any and all claims against the Ancona School, the donor of the property or services, and any agents or affiliates of the Ancona School and the donor relating to or arising out of their purchase.



Tributes & Advertisements



Thank You, Ms. Yolita Your nurturing spirit and encouragement helped Desmond grow with confidence and curiosity as he began his educational journey. Teachers like you leave a lasting imprint not only on students, but on the families who are grateful for the love and guidance you give their children. We feel truly fortunate that Desmond had you as his teacher. Congratulations on your retirement! May this new chapter be filled with joy, relaxation, and all the happiness you have given to so many. With sincere appreciation,

The Truite Family

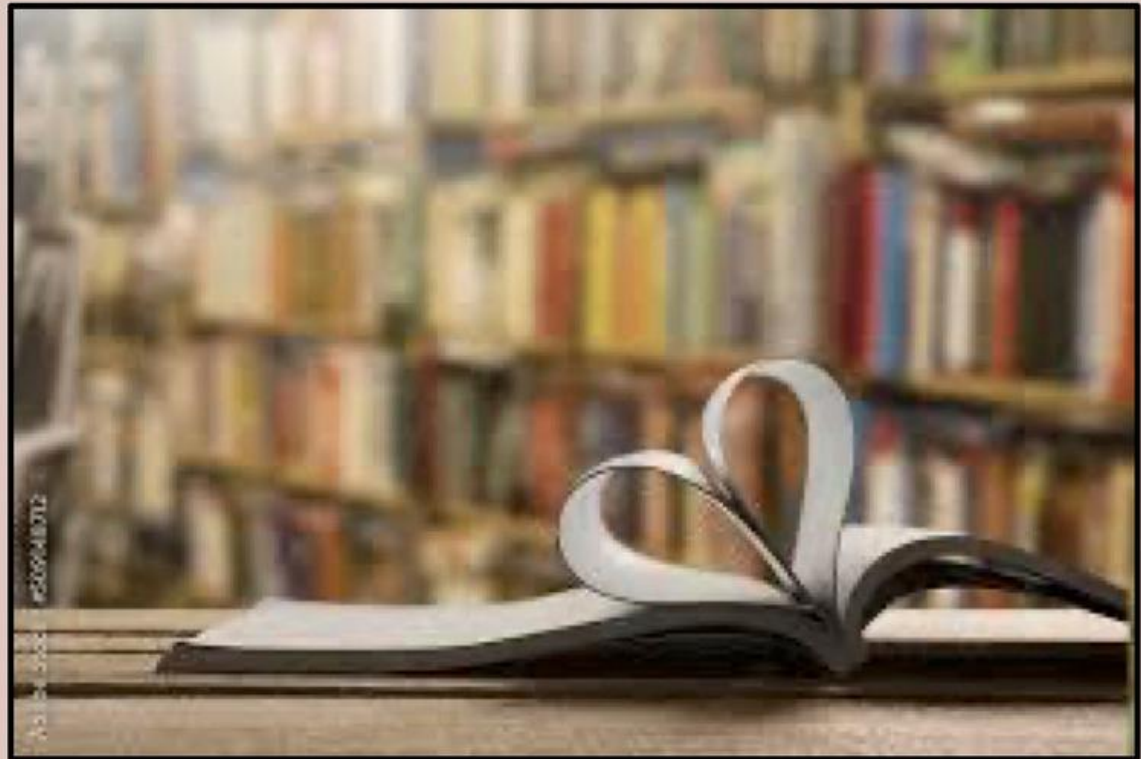
The Quiet Guide

A compass in a
sea of ink,

You give the world
the space to think.

The keeper of the
key and shelf,

Who helps a
reader find
themselves.



Thank you, Marsha, for ensuring our shelves were a true reflection of our world. You worked tirelessly to make sure every student found a book that served as both a mirror for their own identity and a window into others'. Your dedication to representation has left an indelible mark on our community.

CHEERS

To Ancona School's Magical Night

The Dodson Family



WEUSI

Changing The Way You See Squash

www.weusi.org

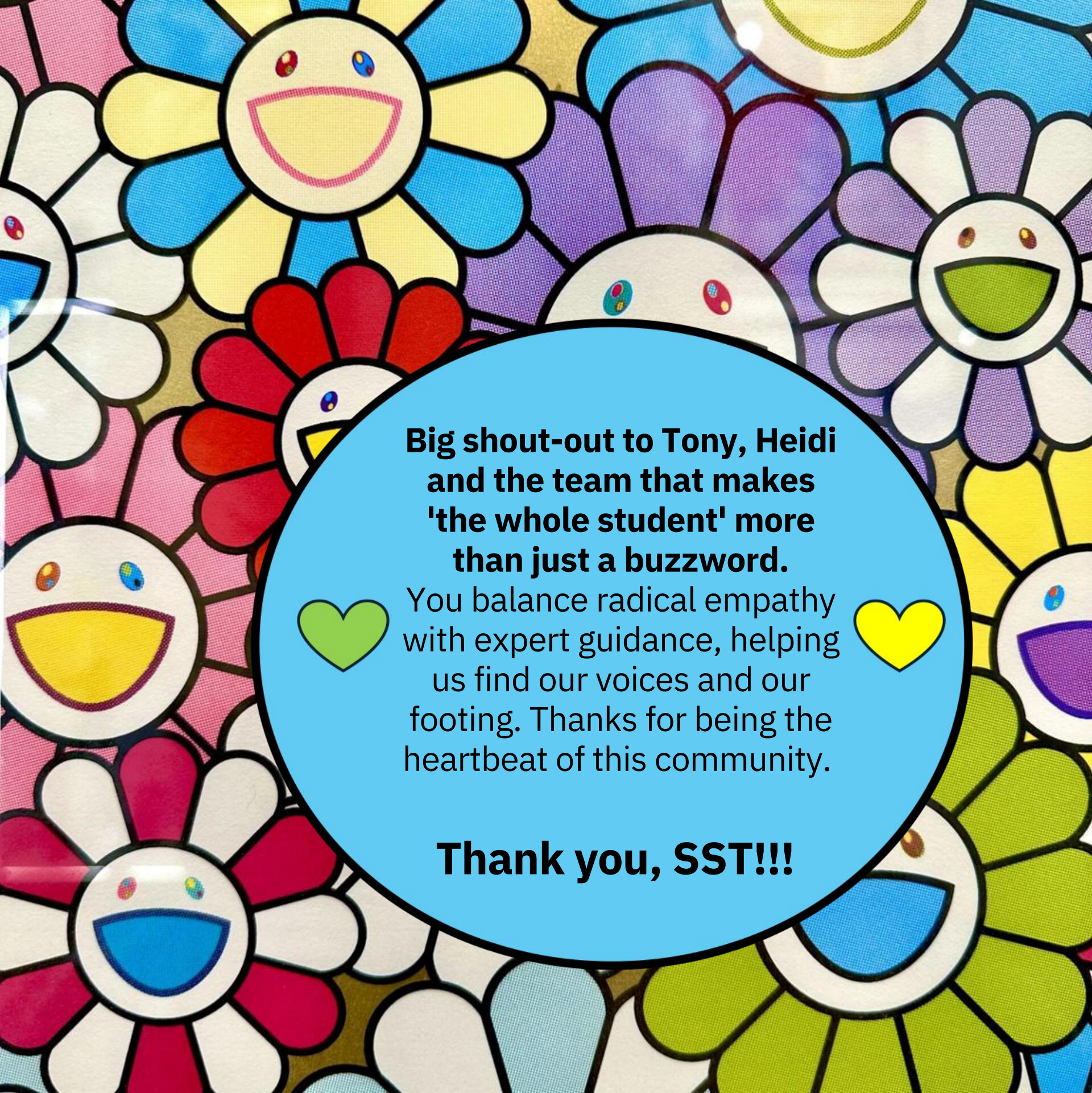


Thank you, Ainsley and Jessie,
for the care and joy you bring to
our children.



With gratitude,
Room 101 Families





**Big shout-out to Tony, Heidi
and the team that makes
'the whole student' more
than just a buzzword.**

You balance radical empathy
with expert guidance, helping
us find our voices and our
footing. Thanks for being the
heartbeat of this community.

Thank you, SST!!!



To our 5th & 6th grade team: Thank you, **Heather & Rachael**, for being the bridge. We see the way you honor student voice, encourage messy inquiry, and treat our 'tweens' as the emerging leaders they are. Your commitment to their autonomy makes all the difference.



-the Families of 5th/6th Grade

GATHER

WITH PURPOSE.

Whether you're hosting a school event, a corporate meeting, or a residential gathering, Kikwetu delivers warmth, flavor, and connection. Our offerings reflect the spirit of Kenyan hospitality, handcrafted right here in Chicago.



CHOOSE:

- || PUSH POT SERVICE FOR EASY ELEGANCE
- || LIVE BARISTA ACTION STATIONS
- || KENYAN PASTRIES, FOOD ITEMS, & TEAS

LET'S CREATE YOUR NEXT MEANINGFUL MOMENT!

✉ CONTACT@KIKWETU.COFFEE 🌐 KIKWETU.COFFEE



**KENYA BORN
CHICAGO MADE**

**SCAN HERE
TO BOOK
YOUR NEXT
CATERED
EVENT**



KIKWETU



six-seveeeeen

If learning were a superpower, Ivan & Luca would be running a full-time training academy for young heroes. Teaching 1st and 2nd grade is no small feat—it takes patience, creativity, humor, and the ability to explain the same thing six different ways... and still smile for the seveeeenth time. Luckily, Ivan and Luca have mastered the 6-7 magic!



Thank You, Ivan & Luca

Thank you for shaping young minds, boosting confidence, and proving that the best classrooms are built on care, curiosity, and a lot of fun.

You don't just teach grades—you create foundations.

And that's a 6-7-level impact if we've ever seen one!



Love, the Families of 111



Ms. Yaritxa and Ronda,
Thank you for the
beauty, joy and
learning you bring to
your students' lives,
and to all of Ancona!
We appreciate you so
much!



JASON O'BEIRNE

Jameson | Sotheby's
INTERNATIONAL REALTY



Proud Ancona Parent. Trusted Real Estate Partner.

With nearly 25 years in real estate and over \$675M in sales, I'm proud to help families at every stage of their journey. My team and I guide everyone from first-time buyers and sellers to those settling into their next dream home. Thinking about a move? Let's connect! **773-368-3421** or jobeirne@jamesonsir.com.



**"Thank you, Alysia,
for helping our kids
grow into capable
kindergarteners! We
appreciate you!"**

**From: The families
of Beatrice,
Brooklynn, Bryce,
Jasper, Julian, Leo &
Mei**



Teaching is not filling up a pail,
it is lighting a fire.

-William Butler Yeats

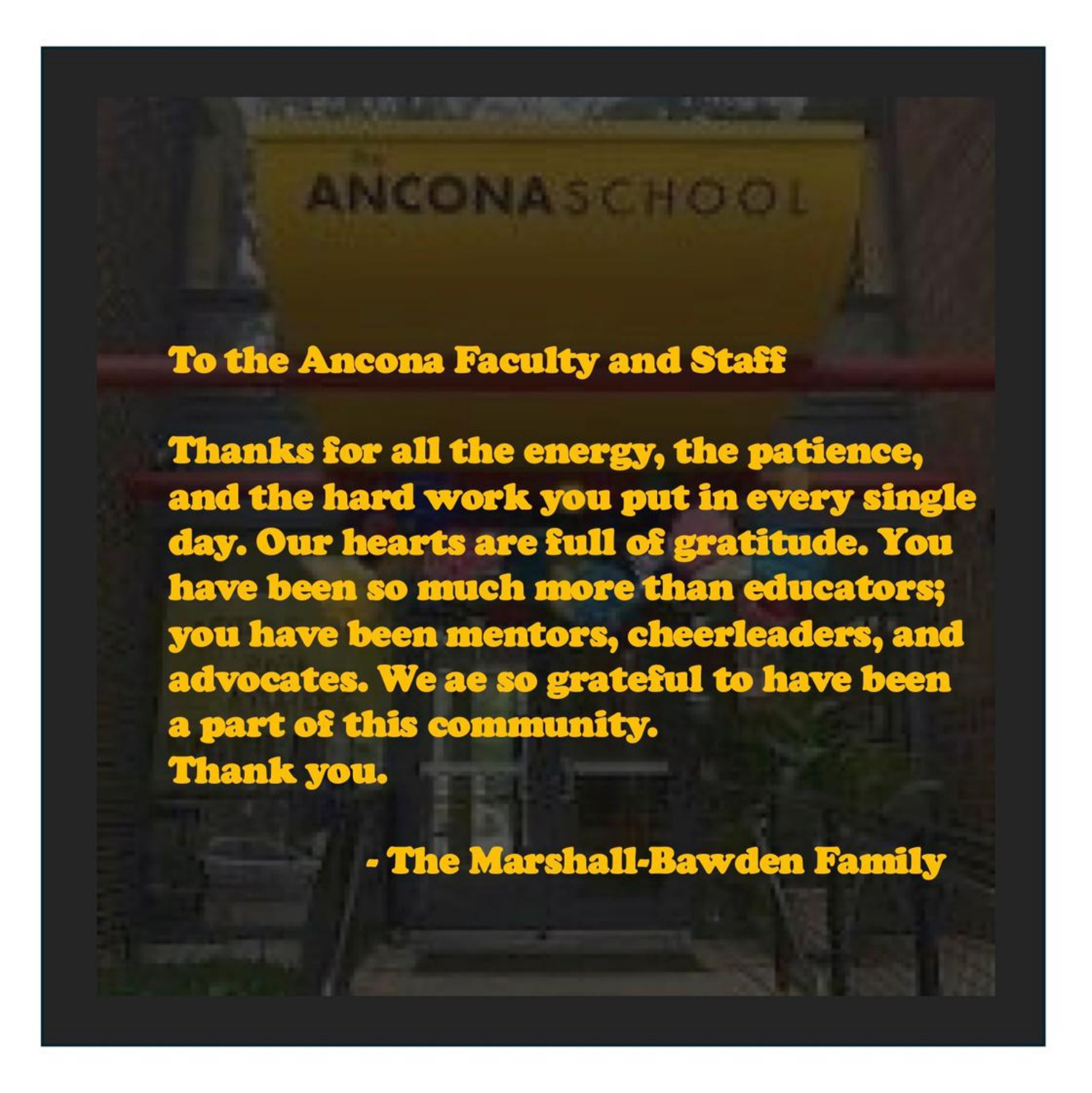


You create an inferno for
good books, social change,
and scientific inquiry!

Thank you
for your dedication to
Ancona and us.

— Room 210 Students
& Families



A photograph of a school building with a sign that reads "ANCONA SCHOOL". The sign is yellow with black lettering. The building is made of brick and has a set of stairs leading to the entrance. The photo is taken from a low angle, looking up at the building. The background is slightly blurred, showing some trees and a clear sky.

ANCONA SCHOOL

To the Ancona Faculty and Staff

Thanks for all the energy, the patience, and the hard work you put in every single day. Our hearts are full of gratitude. You have been so much more than educators; you have been mentors, cheerleaders, and advocates. We are so grateful to have been a part of this community.

Thank you.

- The Marshall-Bawden Family

Kurt & Marc

Thank you for your dedication, patience, and care. You make a difference every day in helping our children become their very best.

*Your grateful
7th and 8th
grade families*



**From the families
of Room 104**



**Thank you, Yolita and Kristal,
for all the love and care you
give to our students!**





**3rd and 4th grade: The
'magic middle' of
elementary school!**

**Thank you for the
endless patience, the
creative lessons, and
the way you champion
our kids every single
day. You make the hard
stuff look easy and the
fun stuff memorable.
You're our heroes!"**

**Devenia and Isabela,
you are the BEST!**

**THANK YOU for all that
you do for our children**

**LOVE, the Families of
Room 208**





NEW ANGLE
EVENTS

Services include:
Weddings
Corporate
Special Occasions
And more



Let's celebrate together!

Congrats to The Ancona School
on another year and many more
of servicing our little ones from
New Angle Events



Natasha Mickey,
Owner



[@newangle.events](https://www.instagram.com/newangle.events)

www.newangleevents.com

info@newangleevents.com



Thank you, Kait, for being the MVP of our school! Whether you're patching up a scraped knee or just offering a kind word to brighten someone's day, you make our school a happier, healthier place to be. We are so lucky to have your expertise, your energy, and your heart on our team.

Thanks for everything you do!



Ode to the Multi-Level Team

Oh, masters of paint and the rhythm of drums,
Who keep us all steady as energy hums!

From **Art** room explosions of glitter and glue,
To **Music** room melodies, resonant and true.
The **Library** guardians of stories untold,
With secrets and sagas, both brave and both
bold.

And **Spanish** maestros, who teach us to say,
"Hola!" and "¿Cómo estás?" throughout the day.
Then off to the **PE** floor, laces tied tight,
To run, jump, and dodge with all of our might!
And out in the **Outdoor Learning** space,
Where nature is teacher, at her own pace.

You bring us the color, the sound, and the
sweat,
The lessons that stick, that we'll never
forget.

You juggle the chaos, you handle the noise—
The heartbeat of school for the whole student
voice!

**THANK YOU AJ, Chris, Delia, Esther,
Jennifer and Marsha! We adore you!**

Dear Jenny and Awazi,



A huge thank you to both of you for the heart and soul you pour into your classroom. You don't just teach lessons; you build confidence and curiosity. We feel incredibly lucky that our kids have you as their foundation!

Love, the Families of Room 110

Meliora

Real Estate Group



Celebrate the butterfly effect
in real estate

Support an alumni-owned business!

CALL CELESTE: (773) 954-2401

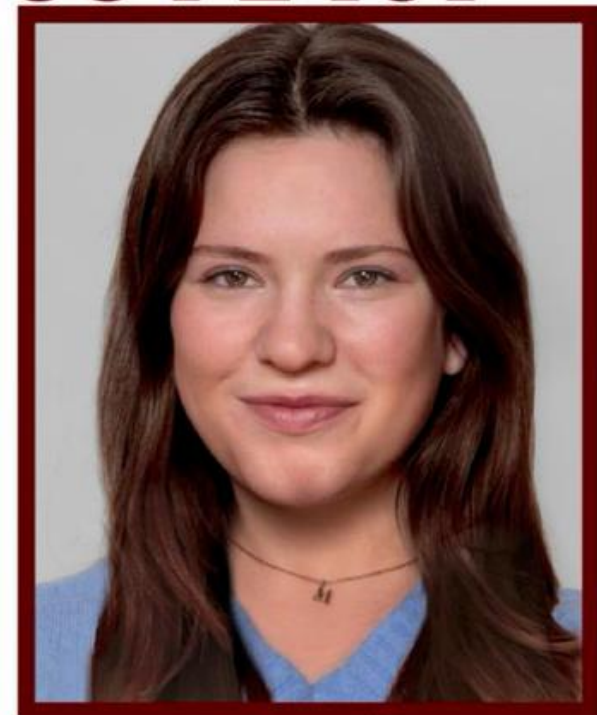
**Celeste Gerbaulet-Vanasse, class of 2016,
would love to help you with buying,
selling or managing real estate.**

Meliora Real Estate Group

Address: 6324 S Ingleside Ave #1

Email: Cgerbaulet@melioraregroup.com

Website: <https://www.melioraregroup.com/>





**A tribute to our Director
of Auxiliary
Programming:**

Part-time Logistics Ninja.

**Full-time Chaos
Coordinator.**

**All-time champion of the
progressive mission.
Thank you for making sure
that even when the kids go
home, the learning doesn't
stop. We'd be lost in a sea
of clipboards without you!"**

Thank you, Desmond!

Mr. "Bearis" Harris!



You make learning fun,
share your cooking talent,
take the time to talk,
and help us through our hard days.



– Room 210
Students &
Families



**Thank you,
Alysia,
Ariyanna
(and Raza!)
for all that
you do!**

**The Families
of 102**





A big shout-out to our **Leadership**, **Operations**, **Business Office**, and **External Affairs** teams—the dreamers, wizards, and bridges who make our progressive mission a reality! Whether it's steering our vision with empathy, keeping the gears turning behind the scenes, or sharing our story with the world, your work is the soil and the sunlight that allows our students to truly take root and flourish. Thank you for cultivating such an incredible environment for us all to grow!



Your New Dental Home in the Heart of Bronzeville



Meet Dr. Naana Mensah Coleman—founder and lead dentist of **Haven Dental Studio**. With a commitment to patient-centered care, she's redefining what it means to feel at home in the dentist's chair. From routine cleanings to advanced care, you're in expert hands with a team that puts your comfort first.

Personalized care. A welcoming approach. Dentistry, reimagined.

NOW ACCEPTING NEW PATIENTS

706 E 47th St, Chicago, IL 60653
(773) 915-0006



BOOK TODAY

Ode to Karmin and Dre...

No four walls can hold them,
no single desk their throne, The
hallway is their kingdom, the
entire school their home. With
a cart that hums a rhythm
and a spirit quick and free,
They turn a corner landing
into a place of discovery.

They are the "yes, and" experts,
the masters of the flow,
Planting seeds of wonder
everywhere they go. From the
Commons to the Garden, they
weave the hidden thread,
Keeping ideas moving where a
static room might tread.



To the Facilities Team: Thank you for all the heavy lifting you do behind the scenes! Our school is a much better place because of your dedication. We truly appreciate you.





THE ANCONA SCHOOL

ANCONA SUMMER CREATE & BECOME



CAMP 2026

PROGRAM DATES

June 22nd - August 21st.

FLEXIBLE WEEKLY REGISTRATION AVAILABLE

All-Inclusive Pricing:

Full Day of Camp
(8 am - 5:30 pm)

PLUS

Daily Lunch, Snack
& Fruit Options

Program Options

EARLY CHILDHOOD

3 years old - Rising K

PRIMARY

Rising 1st - 5th Grade

COUNSELOR -IN-TRAINING

Rising 6th - 8th Grade

Activities



- Weekly Themes
- Cooking
- Outdoor Learning
- Field Trip Fridays
- Beach Visits
- Spanish Immersion
- Partner Programming
- Swimming
- Soccer
- Arts & Crafts
- And More!

Information & Registration:

anconaschool.org/summer



summer@anconaschool.org

773-924-2356

Ancona educates students to become creative problem solvers, confident risk takers and independent, lifelong learners. Rooted in the Montessori tradition, our child-centered school stimulates the joy of learning and builds a strong academic foundation. We inspire children to nourish their inner lives, find the power in their own voices, and strive for justice and peace. In a community of cultural, economic, and individual diversity, Ancona cultivates understanding, care, and respect for others.



the
ANCONA SCHOOL



the
ANCONA
SCHOOL

anconaschool.org