



JUNE 2026

WATERFORD COUNTRY SCHOOL

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS NEWSLETTER

REMEMBERING BILL MARTIN: HONORING A LIFE OF SERVICE AND LEGACY



Bill Martin was a cornerstone of Waterford Country School. Beginning his career as a child care worker, he rose through Waterford Country School's organization for over four decades, ultimately serving as Executive Director and later as a member of the Board of Directors. His recent passing has been deeply felt throughout our community, but his legacy continues to live on in the children, families, staff, and friends whose lives he touched.

Every once in a while, you meet someone who leaves a lasting mark on your life. Their kindness, wisdom, and example stay with you long after they are gone. For many of us at Waterford Country School, Bill Martin was that person.

Bill loved Waterford Country School and everything it stands for. He made it a point to know people by name, welcome new staff on their first day, and take a genuine interest in their lives and families. Those who worked closely with him know that he cared deeply about people and built meaningful connections wherever he went.

Bill was the kind of leader who saw potential in others and encouraged them to grow. He believed in giving people opportunities to develop their talents, build confidence, and reach their goals. He valued the Schacht family legacy and worked tirelessly for 16 years to ensure the success of our annual golf tournament, helping to honor and carry forward the legacy of Gary Saunders, another cherished member of the WCS family whose impact continues to be felt throughout the organization. Bill also seemed to possess a special gift for arranging beautiful weather on tournament day, year after year and happily took credit for it.

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PLEASE JOIN US IN WELCOMING OUR NEW CEO, ELISE JOHANSEN



We're excited to welcome Elise Johansen as our new Chief Executive Officer, beginning June 29!

Elise brings more than 20 years of experience leading nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting children, youth, and families facing challenges such as trauma, disability, poverty, and system involvement. Throughout her career, she has led a wide range of programs, including residential services, education initiatives, healthcare partnerships, and crisis response programs—all with a focus on helping people and communities thrive.



She's known for bringing people together, building strong partnerships, and leading with both compassion and purpose. She brings a proven track record of growing programs, securing critical funding, and expanding services that improve outcomes for children and families who need them most.

Outside of work, Elise enjoys the things that help us feel connected—to each other and to the world around us. She has been with her wife for more than 17 years, and together they share their home with four rescue dogs—Sigi, Ginsburg, Otter, and Rico—who keep life lively, entertaining, and full of love.



A lover of nature, animals, and the outdoors, Elise values meaningful connections and finding joy in everyday moments. She also enjoys thrifting, reading, exploring the arts, listening to music, discovering great food, and, as she'll happily admit, watching a little Bravo TV.

As Elise gets ready to join Waterford Country School, we're excited about the experience, energy, and heart she'll bring to our organization. We look forward to getting to know her and to the exciting work ahead.

Please join us in giving Elise a warm welcome!



A NIGHT TO CELEBRATE OUR INCREDIBLE STAFF



In April, WCS staff gathered at Little Neck Restaurant for our annual Staff Appreciation Dinner, an evening dedicated to recognizing the people who make our mission possible every day.

The staff enjoyed a delicious dinner while celebrating the accomplishments and commitment of their colleagues. Throughout

the evening, staff members were recognized for important professional milestones, including promotions, degrees earned, and certifications achieved.

We also honored employees for their years of service, with anniversaries ranging from 5 years to an incredible 35 years.

One of the things that makes WCS so special is the dedication of our staff. In a field where the work can be challenging, many of our employees choose to build long and meaningful careers here because they believe deeply in our mission and the children and families we serve. Their commitment creates stability, fosters trusted relationships, and ensures that those who depend on our services are supported by experienced and caring professionals.

The evening was a wonderful opportunity to reflect on all that our staff accomplish and to express our gratitude for their hard work, compassion, and unwavering commitment. We are proud to celebrate their achievements and honored to have such an exceptional team carrying our mission forward every day.

Thank you to all of our staff for the difference you make in the lives of children, families, and communities.

WATERFORD COUNTRY SCHOOL

Longevity Awards

Nikki Allen	5 years
Laura Gordy	5 years
Rebecca LaCroix	5 years
Nikauris Batista	10 years
Lucas Flood	10 years
Cassie Hein	10 years
Melinda Kennedy	10 years
Shelby Patton	10 years
Jessica Rice	10 years
Carmen Sands (board mbr)	10 years
Marisol Santiago	10 years
Kevin Shea	10 years
Elena French	15years
William Luna	15 years
Rachel Newer	15 years
Sara Hunter	20 years
Janet Hyslop	20 years
Darryl Miles	35 years

Special Achievements

Ethan Alexander

Promotion to Supervisor II

Jenna Baerlocher

Promotion to Clinical Director

Else Burgess

Promotion to Supervisor I

Javielly Del Valle

Promotion to Lead Childcare Worker

Ryan Foley

Promotion to Supervisor I & TCI Trainer

Britni Gagne-Fox

Promotion to Director of Residential Services & Licensed Clinical Social Worker

Laura Gordy

Master's Level Social Worker Degree

Miami Ho

Promotion to Supervisor I

Nick Hodges

TCI Trainer

Rebecca LaCroix

Promotion to Supervisor of QPC

Ryan McKee

Promotion to Maintenance Coordinator



STAFF SPOTLIGHT: Johnny Burns

With more than 16 years at Waterford Country School and decades of experience working with children and families, Johnny brings a strong blend of leadership, knowledge, and dedication to his work each day.

Johnny's journey with WCS began in 1997 in our Shelter Program as a childcare worker. After one year, he was promoted to Lead, a role he held for seven years. Following time away and a return to Connecticut, he later joined WCS's pilot Chaplaincy Program in 2005 before spending over 12 years as a social worker with DCF.

He returned to WCS in 2018 as an all-call worker, later working in SFIT (Short Term Family Intensive Treatment) program, and then transitioned into the Education Program in 2021 as an Instructional Aide. His leadership quickly led to promotions to Lead, Day-Shift Supervisor, and most recently, Assistant Program Manager for the STTAR (Specialized Trauma-Informed Treatment Assessment and Reunification) Program.

The move to STTAR reflects a natural progression in his career. During his time with DCF, Johnny often collaborated with programs like STTAR and helped place youth in similar settings. Reflecting on his experience, he shares, "I feel I've had a well-rounded journey. I have been fortunate to work with many strong leaders."

Johnny notes that supervising the day shift in the Education Program is both dynamic and rewarding, with students who keep staff engaged throughout the day: "They keep us on our toes from start to finish!"

Family remains central to Johnny's life. He and his wife have five adult biological children, two adopted children, and two more in the adoption process, along with a growing number of grandchildren. Faith and church community are also important to him, with strong family ties to church leadership.

His commitment to young people extends well beyond his professional role. Johnny spent over 20 years coaching youth football, served as a league president supporting more than 300 athletes, and was Head Football Coach at New London High School. Across every role, mentoring and investing in youth has remained a constant.

When he finds a little free time, Johnny enjoys family trips South and attending Patriots games with his wife.

We are grateful to have Johnny on the WCS team. His experience, leadership, and deep commitment to young people continue to make a meaningful impact on the children and families we serve.





WCS EDGES WATERFORD POLICE IN ANNUAL BASKETBALL GAME



For the fourth year in a row, the Waterford Police came to WCS for a friendly basketball game against our students and staff.

With lots of energy from the staff and students alike, the game was close one from start to finish. The score was tied with five minutes left before WCS pulled out a 22-20 win.

More than just a game, the event gave students and officers a chance to connect in a fun, positive way. The relationships built on the court can carry over into the community, helping strengthen the bond between our kids and local law enforcement.

After the game, the Norwich Police Department brought their ice cream truck to treat everyone to ice cream. Officer Hodges, our favorite Waterford police dog, was disappointed there were no pup cups, but he made up for it with plenty of belly rubs from students and staff.

Thank you to everyone who helped make this annual tradition another great success



We welcome the chance to speak with you about opportunities to support WCS through a legacy gift.

860-442-9454 x4105 
development@waterfordcs.org 



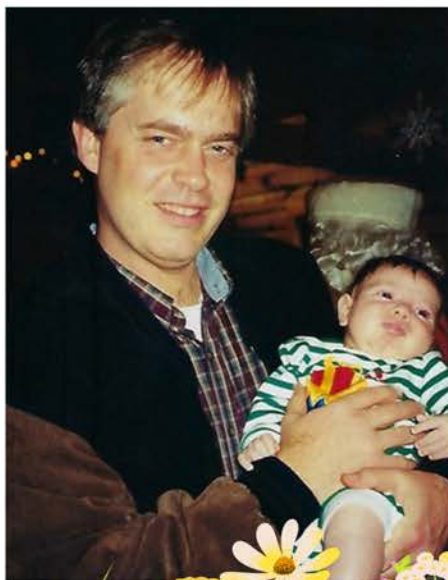
REMEMBERING BILL MARTIN, cont. from page 1



A true team player, Bill never hesitated to lend a hand wherever it was needed. He was a mentor, a friend, and a steady presence across our campus. Whether greeting staff, chatting with children and families, celebrating graduates, or congratulating award recipients, Bill's pride in Waterford Country School was always evident.

Summer held a special place in Bill's heart. He loved seeing children arrive each day for summer camp, eager for new adventures, friendships, and experiences. He especially enjoyed the camp cookouts—not only because they brought everyone together, but also because they meant he could enjoy his favorite meal: hot dogs. By all accounts, Bill considered them an essential part of any proper summer celebration.

As we remember Bill, we also celebrate the values he championed throughout his life—community, opportunity, compassion, and a belief in the potential of every child. In our work every day with our children and families, we will continue to carry forward Bill's enduring legacy of caring for others and investing in the lives of future generations.





FOUNDERS FUN DAY - A DAY OF FUN AND COMMUNITY

Founders Field Day was filled with great food, fun activities, and plenty of smiles from start to finish. Students and staff enjoyed a delicious barbecue featuring hamburgers, chicken, watermelon, and ice cream treats. Throughout the day, children had opportunities to get creative, have fun, and spend time together with friends and staff.

Some of the day's highlights included decorating picture frames, creating colorful sand art, showing off temporary tattoos, and competing in a spirited game of tug-of-war. The inflatable slides were a crowd favorite, while a variety of other games and activities kept everyone entertained.

Most importantly, Founders Field Day provided a chance for students and staff to relax, connect, and create lasting memories together. Thank you to everyone who helped make the day such a success. We're already looking forward to next year!



COMING: EXCITING VACATION HOME AUCTION BENEFITING WCS



Mark your calendars for an exciting online auction featuring a variety of vacation homes—many within driving distance and others in sought-after destinations farther away. The auction launches in early August and runs through the end of September, offering great opportunities to bid on memorable getaway experiences.

Don't miss this unique event and the chance to support the mission of WCS: doing Whatever It Takes for children and families. Stay tuned for more details and be ready to bid!



2ND ANNUAL BRUNCH IN THE BARNYARD: A SOLD-OUT SUCCESS

Our 2nd Annual Brunch in the Barnyard was a tremendous success, and once again, our community showed up in a big way. We sold out the event, expanded our seating with a larger tent, and then sold out again! On Saturday, June 7, 140 friends and supporters gathered under a big white tent overlooking our pasture for a morning of great food, inspiring stories, and a shared commitment to the children and families we serve.

FOX61 Meteorologist Matt Scott served as emcee, guiding guests through a program that highlighted the impact of Waterford Country School. One of the morning's most memorable moments came from alumni speaker Lucas Flood, who arrived at WCS at age nine, graduated from our programs, attended college, and later returned as a staff member. His heartfelt reflections on the role WCS played in his life moved the audience before he lightened the mood with a few of his signature dad jokes.

Honorary Chair Kim Kalajainen shared her experience as a WCS parent, while keynote speaker Dr. Tracy Espy, President of Mitchell College, spoke about the importance of supporting young people with diverse needs and the value of the work being done every day at WCS. Board Chair Ray Currier introduced incoming CEO Elise Johansen and honored the legacy of Bill Martin, whose decades of service and commitment to our mission helped shape Waterford Country School into the organization it is today.

Guests also learned about the therapeutic impact of animal-human interactions from our Director of Outdoor Education, Ben Turner while meeting several of our animal ambassadors, who play an important role in helping children heal, grow, and thrive. As he spoke, guests had an opportunity to meet some of our animals up close and learn more about the role they play in our programs.

A highlight of the event was our Fund-a-Need appeal benefiting summer camp scholarships. Thanks to the generosity of our guests, more children will have the opportunity to experience the life-changing benefits of camp, regardless of financial circumstances.

Of course, no brunch would be complete without great food. Our kitchen staff prepared much of the meal and local restaurant partners contributed favorite dishes. Guiliano's Bakery provided Italian cookies for dessert, and Travelin' Tom's Coffee Truck kept guests fueled throughout the morning.

A heartfelt thank you to everyone who attended, sponsored, donated, volunteered, and supported this year's Brunch in the Barnyard. Together, we celebrated our mission, strengthened our community, and raised critical support for the children and families who count on Waterford Country School every day.



Come see us at CELEBRATE NEW LONDON on July 11th

Families looking for a day of family fun, entertainment and community celebration won't want to miss "CELEBRATE NEW LONDON on July 11 in the heart of downtown New London. Bank Street will be closed from Tilley Street to State Street to all vehicular traffic. Festivities will take place the entire length of Bank St with artisan tents strung from one end to the other. Live music will be performed from noon to 9:00 PM on both the Parade and Custom House Pier. Thames River Gallery will open the festivities at 10:00 AM. A fireworks extravaganza starts at 9:00 PM to close out the day.

This year's celebration features an exciting line up of kid friendly activities, live entertainment, local artisans and community organizations.

Waterford Country School will be on-site at the Thames River Gallery tent with fun carnival games and a variety of four legged furry & fuzzy creatures for children and families to enjoy. Sponsored by the Custom House, Shaw Mansion and TRG, visitors are encouraged to stop by their tent to learn more about the organization's vital child welfare programs including its special education school, foster care services, working farm, and wildlife rescue efforts. Bring your kids to play fun games, win prizes, and get to know some of the animals.

Throughout the day visitors can enjoy live music at the Parade, Custom House Pier and in the restaurants and galleries on Bank Street. Local artists, word carvers, and wood turners will be showcasing their talents and their finished works. Featured musical entertainment includes a three-hour performance from 1:00 – 4:00 by Ken Atkins & the Honky Tonk Kind Band all under the TRG tent.

"CELEBRATE NEW LONDON" is a wonderful opportunity for residents and visitors alike to come together, support local organizations and artists, and enjoy a full day of family friendly entertainment along New London's historic waterfront. We are excited to be a part of it this year!

Event Details:

What: Celebrate New London

When: July 11, 10:00 AM – 10:00 PM

Where: Bank Street & Custom House Pier, New London, CT

Admission: Free and open to the public.





A SPOOKTACULAR MUSICAL PRODUCTION OF THE ADDAMS FAMILY



Friday the 13th in March was the perfect day for our drama students to bring *The Addams Family* to life!

The auditorium was filled with proud parents, family members, and friends who gathered to celebrate the hard work and talent of our students.

From the opening scene to the final bow, the cast captivated the audience with their energy, confidence, and outstanding performances. Students of all ages played an important role in the production—from elementary school students appearing as the Addams Family's spirited ancestors to older students taking center stage in the show's leading roles.

The performance showcased not only the remarkable talent of our student actors, but also the creativity, teamwork, and dedication that brought the entire production together. From imaginative props and impressive staging to memorable musical numbers and plenty of spooky fun, every detail reflected months of hard work and collaboration. The laughter, applause, and enthusiastic support from the audience made the day even more meaningful.

We couldn't be prouder of our drama program and the students who make it shine. Experiences like

these help young people build confidence, develop new skills, express their creativity, and discover talents they may not have known they possessed.

What many people may not realize is that opportunities like our annual school musical are made possible through the generous support of our community. Funding for our drama program comes directly from proceeds raised through our annual Bring Your Mojo Golf Tournament, helping ensure that students continue to have access to enriching arts experiences and creative opportunities throughout the year.

We're already looking ahead to this year's tournament on September 17. Sponsorship opportunities are still available, and we invite community members and local businesses to join us in supporting programs that inspire growth, creativity, and success in the lives of our students.

Congratulations to our entire cast and crew on a fantastic production of *The Addams Family*, and thank you to everyone who helped make this memorable event possible!

SAVE THE DATES

COMING
SOON
AUG. 3-SEPT. 30

ONLINE VACATION AUCTION

WIN A FUN VACATION STAY AT A VARIETY OF LOCATIONS, NEAR & FAR - THERE WILL BE SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE! **STAY TUNED!**



SEPT
17

16TH ANNUAL BRING YOUR MOJO GOLF TOURNAMENT

THE #1 CHARITY TOURNAMENT IN SECT!
LUNCH, RAFFLES & AUCTION, GOLF, DINNER



OCT
10

FAMILY FUN DAY

FREE FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!
HAY & CARRIAGE RIDES, FACE PAINTING,
CRAFTS, WILDLIFE DEMOS ... AND MORE!



FOR SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES & MORE INFORMATION:
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