

Missoulian

Long-vacant Mount Jumbo Elementary sees new life with mentor program

By ALEX MITCHELL

June 11, 2023

On one of her last days of first grade, 7-year-old Kylee got a tour of a building long empty of students: Mount Jumbo Elementary.

In her purple T-shirt emblazoned with “girl boss” on the front, Kylee hinted she wanted to open the front door, repeating first to her mentor and then to the executive director: “I know how you put the key in.”

Commended for showing responsibility, she was given the key, opened the door and led the group inside the East Missoula school. Inside were the leftovers of a school closed in 2006. A couple dozen old practice cars for Driver's Ed sat on their backs in the hallways. One classroom was filled to the brim with a pile of chairs, desks and shelving. Nonetheless, Kylee was excited to see and show it all, from the leftover hangers in closets to a still-functioning water fountain attached to a classroom sink.

“This works perfect,” she exclaimed. Kylee is the first of many children who will soon be regulars at the school as youth mentoring program Friends of the Children moves into its new home at Mount Jumbo Elementary.

It's a needed move as the western Montana chapter expands the number of kids it can mentor. Currently, according to Friends of the Children Executive Director Ben Davis, mentors and others are doubled, tripled and quadrupled up in the bedroom offices in the current “clubhouse”



Kylee, 7, who is enrolled with Friends of the Children, a nonprofit youth mentoring program that serves around 32 kids and more than 100 caregivers and other family members in the Missoula area, hugs program mentor Brittnie Heffner outside the vacant Mount Jumbo Elementary School campus on Thursday. The nonprofit will lease classrooms in the former school. ANTONIO IBARRA OLIVARES, Missoulian

where they've been working. The Mount Jumbo school gym they plan to use regularly is likely larger than their old place itself, he said.

“It wasn't going to work to find another house,” Davis said. “It just doesn't provide the same opportunities for activities as a school does. We love the homey, intimate area of our current clubhouse, but we can make this our home and make a really safe and vibrant place for the children.”

Since starting in Missoula in late 2021, Portland-based nonprofit Friends of the Children has helped provide regular one-on-one support for children across Missoula's schools.

Children are often in the foster care system or face adversities like extreme poverty and single-parent homes, and are recommended to the program by other local organizations or schools. Enrollees like Kylee are often in vulnerable situations, hence the use of only her first name. Full-time professionals known as “Friends” regularly spend about four hours in and out of school every week with the children. They go on field trips together, play games at the clubhouse, and attend school with them, too.



(Left) Ben Davis, executive director of Friends of the Children, said that with the leasing of the classrooms, the program will aim to serve more youth and their families as well as expanding its operations throughout western Montana. ANTONIO IBARRA OLIVARES, Missoulian



(Right) Brittnie Heffner, left, and 7-year-old Kylee explore the empty gymnasium at Mount Jumbo Elementary School. Friends of the Children will begin moving into the old school campus around mid-June. ANTONIO IBARRA OLIVARES, Missoulian

"I have a lot of girls with sensory issues, so those loud, chaotic times are really hard for them like with PE, recess and other things," professional mentor Kinley Pope said. Like other mentors, Pope works with eight students every week from three separate Missoula schools.

"We try to talk to the teachers about what areas they really need the most support in," Pope said. "They might need me to come in at math, or lunch might be a hard time for them because it's pretty unstructured, or they might need help in those structured times."

Friends of the Children currently serves 32 children with plans to enroll 16 more next school year.

Kids selected for the program are paired with a Friend around kindergarten. The mentor will stay by their side all the way to high school graduation.

"There's not an organization that provides that sort of deep, long-term support for children who have experienced multiple, complex traumas early in their lives," Davis said. "So, we are really focused on helping foster resiliency and empowering children to pursue their hopes and dreams."

Davis describes himself as a "recovering lawyer" who found himself disappointed with much of the prosecutorial work he did and how it affected families. He started volunteering with another local youth mentoring program: Big Brothers Big Sisters. "I really enjoyed that experience, but there were times as a volunteer where I couldn't

be present and I wasn't emotionally trained to help with some of the traumas that he faced," Davis said of the boy he worked with.

Davis sought out a career change to do work that was firmly rooted in the community and proven to disrupt cycles of trauma and generational poverty.

"When I found out about *Friends of the Children*, I knew this was an organization I wanted to be a part of," he said, "because of the evidence-based proven outcomes that the organization has been doing for 30 years now."

The organization states that 92% of youth go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve the country, or enter the workforce, and 83% of youth earn a high school diploma or GED diploma.

Mount Jumbo Elementary was closed in 2006 after a declining student population led MCPS to vacate the school. Elementary-age students now go to Rattlesnake Elementary or Bonner Elementary instead.

In 2019, the *Missoula County Public School District* said it would consider reopening the school if there were at least 200 youth in the area and they had a compatible partner that could co-occupy the building.

According to MCPS Communications Specialist, Tyler Christensen, there are no plans to reopen Mount Jumbo Elementary in the future.

MCPS conducted a demographics study on Missoula youth just this year. Missoula County Schools Board of Trustees unanimously approved a two-year lease May 23 for Friends of the Children to

use the majority of the school. The only other renter of the school is Missoula's first responder teams who use the building intermittently for crisis intervention trainings.

"We've been looking for a compatible use of Mount Jumbo for quite a while," Trustee Grace Decker said at the May meeting. "Friends of the Children is doing really phenomenal things for several kids who have been identified as being able to benefit from their particular set of support. It's exciting to see them grow their programs and it's exciting to see us partner with them."

Friends of the Children's lease started this June. The organization is planning to fully move in June 19. Soon, they will start to make cosmetic updates to add more vibrant colors, and finish moving out what was left behind in the hallways and classrooms.

In the meantime, 7-year-old Kylee is already envisioning plans in the space, including where to serve food in the main office, restoring the library, and which small classrooms will soon be the office space for Friends of the Children. In one such office space, Kylee quickly replaced an old phone laying on the ground back on its receiver. Her mentor, Brittnie Heffner, praised her as they planned to make a stop at McDonald's for lunch after the school tour.

On their way out, Kylee asked about getting ice cream for dessert. "We can't now, but we will sometime soon," Heffner promised after helping Kylee climb a tree outside Mount Jumbo Elementary.

With Friends of the Children, they'll have 10-plus years to get ice cream together.