



# HEALTH & WELL-BEING @ISSUE

A PUBLICATION OF THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION SPRING 2024

 THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION

## Read to Soar Program Reaching New Heights

### IN THIS ISSUE

- Read to Soar Program Turns Six | 2
- Malcolm Mitchell Spreads Love of Reading | 6
- Investments in Early Childhood Education | 8
- Students Explore Careers at SECO | 10
- CMAP Helps With Prescriptions | 12
- Cenla Boardbuilders Class of 2023 | 14
- CDW Announces Training Schedule | 16





# Read to Soar

*Photo above: De'Errika Scott took her sons, Aiden and Issa, to Read to Soar when they were 4 and 5. She said the experience set them up for school success. "It was extremely beneficial for all of us."*

*On the cover: Amelia Hirsh looks over her book with her mom, Catie Hirsh, during a read along at a Read to Soar workshop in Tioga.*



# READ TO SOAR

## Celebrates Six Years



Over the last six years, The Orchard Foundation – funded by The Rapides Foundation – has gifted more than 24,580 books to 1,108 children and their families through its Read to Soar program.

The free program, available in nine Central Louisiana parishes, is designed to help prepare children from birth to 5 for school success by cultivating a love for reading long before they ever set foot in a classroom.

“The program started in 2018,” said Jamila Farris, Early Childhood Program Coordinator for The Orchard Foundation. “It’s a free eight-week program that meets the same day and time each week. And it’s designed for young children and their caregivers as a way for us to bring literacy into the home.”

Research shows that children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn. And though Read to Soar was patterned after similar programs in other parts of the country, it was specifically designed by The Orchard Foundation for Central Louisiana.

“Many of the children who attend Read to Soar have not ever been in a classroom setting before,” said Danielle Marcotte, who has been a Read to Soar Literacy Specialist since 2020 and a Rapides Parish preschool teacher for 26 years. “We teach them how to hold a book, we teach them the difference between a picture and a word. We tell them about the different parts of a book and how to look at a book.”

The program also includes a snack each week, songs, dancing and crafts – which also helps

children work on their fine motor skills. Children leave each session with five new books for their home library.

“We do a lot of singing and dancing, a lot of movement and following directions,” Marcotte said. “The caregivers get to have fun, too, and we’re teaching them that they can have fun without technology. There’s no technology involved during the class. I think that’s my favorite part.”

Parents are included in the learning, too.

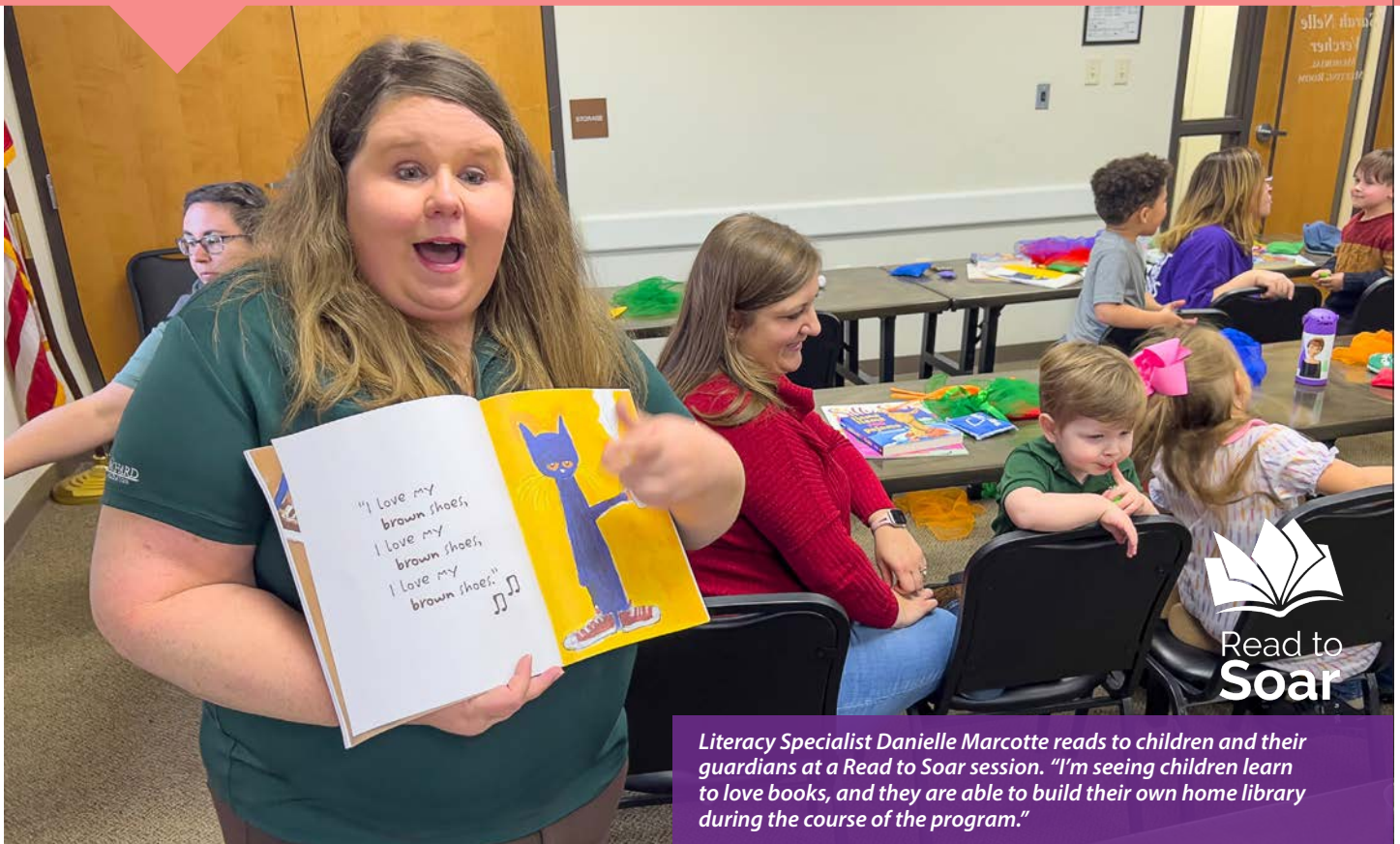
“There’s a five-minute parent lesson each week,” Farris said. “That’s when I talk to the parents and go over tips and teachable moments they can use at home. We talk about how they can point out street signs while driving, or point out words or letters while they are shopping at the store. What I’ve found is that some parents are already doing these things, and I tell them to keep doing that.”

Specific topics covered during the eight-week program include:

- Social and Emotional Development
- Proper Book Handling
- Meaningful Conversation
- Building Vocabulary
- Phonological Awareness
- Print Awareness
- Foundations of Reading
- Emergent Writing

The hope is that through these activities and classes, children and caregivers will develop and strengthen a culture of reading in their homes and have the tools they need for school success once they begin kindergarten.

“We got involved in Read to Soar when my boys were 4 and 5 years old,” said De’Errika Scott of Jena. “I saw it advertised, and I’m big on education



*Literacy Specialist Danielle Marcotte reads to children and their guardians at a Read to Soar session. "I'm seeing children learn to love books, and they are able to build their own home library during the course of the program."*

for my kids. My boys were already reading, but I wanted them to have some socialization skills because, at the time, they were staying at home with me.

"It was extremely beneficial for all of us. I told others how good it was and I told tons of people about it. I tell them, you will have absolutely no regrets. Your children will learn so many things that, as a parent, you may not even have thought about teaching them."

Today, Scott's son Issa is in the fourth grade and her son Aiden is in the fifth grade – and Scott believes Read to Soar set them firmly on a path for success.

"Issa is in the gifted program at school. He loves doing his best in school. His best means never getting in trouble, being involved in extracurricular activities and maintaining all A's (preferably all 100 As!)," Scott said. "Aiden is the type of student who is quick to help his schoolmates – share his canteen money, talk about Jesus ... he believes in being his best self at school and is serving as a 4-H officer this year."

Books covered in the sessions include popular favorites like, "Brown Bear, Brown Bear," "The

Kissing Hand," "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," and "Love You Forever."

"'Love You Forever' is my favorite," Scott said. "I still sing that song to my kids. I've passed along some of the books to other families because we had several copies, but that's one of the ones I've held on to."

Read to Soar classes are held in a variety of locations and on a variety of different schedules, depending on the parish and instructor.

"Sometimes the classes are on Saturday. Sometimes they are during the summer or after work," Marcotte said. "We've even done some classes at Head Start Centers at pickup time, because that works really well for our parents."

Read to Soar classes are limited to 15 families at a time, and registration is required in advance of the first session. At least one child must be 5 years old or younger and children must be accompanied by an adult.

"In the parents' mind, this class is for the children," Farris said. "But it is really for the parents, though we make sure the children have fun, too." As the program celebrates its sixth birthday in 2024, Read to Soar participants will be treated





*Ivy Guillot and her daughter, Avery Nolen, enjoy a book at a Read to Soar workshop.*

to a birthday celebration that includes cupcakes, noisemakers, decorations and the book, "How Do Dinosaurs Say Happy Birthday" – so children get an extra book to take home.

"I'm seeing children learn to love books, and they are able to build their own home library during the course of the program," Marcotte said. "The parents realize the importance of communicating and reading with their children at an early age. I tell my parents, 'You can still read to infants. Make it an important part of each day. Make it a routine.'

"Even though your child is an infant, or 1, or 2, or 3, Read to Soar is a program that is developmentally appropriate for all of those ages.

No matter how young your child is, they can participate," Marcotte said. "They will learn to have a love for reading."

Read to Soar is part of The Rapides Foundation's Education Initiative, which seeks to increase an individual's level of educational attainment and achievement as the primary path to improved economic, social and health status. Following the success of Read to Soar, The Orchard Foundation began offering Math to Build On, an early math literacy program that also consists of workshops for young children and their guardians.







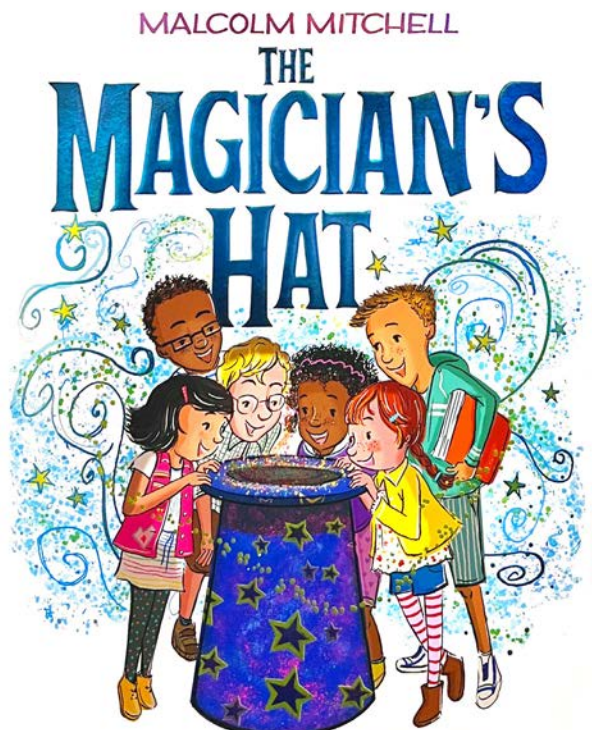
Super Bowl Champ Malcolm Mitchell

# Mitchell spreads love of reading to elementary students

**R**esearch shows there is a connection between a child’s motivation to read and their literacy skills. The Rapides Foundation witnessed the impact of that motivation during its 2022 Annual Symposium, when it partnered with Malcolm Mitchell and his Share the Magic Foundation to provide motivational Reading Rallies in nine Central Louisiana elementary schools in three days.

Seeing the impact and excitement around reading that it created in students and teachers, the Board of Trustees in 2023 decided to bring Mitchell back to Cenla to provide reading rallies for students at 64 elementary schools over a two-year period.

Mitchell, a Super Bowl 2017 Champion, created Share the Magic Foundation to transform children’s lives through literacy. His rallies include a read along and magic show, with each student receiving a copy of his book, “The Magician’s Hat.”



Illustrated by JOANNE LEW-VRIETHOFF





Mitchell's school visits began in 2023 and will conclude this fall. In all, he will bring his message to over 20,000 students.

"I've actually started to be recognized by some people at the airport. They'll say 'Malcolm you're back,' and I'll say 'I'll be back a few more times.' So it's become a home away from home, and I'm very happy every time I get to come."

Mitchell has received positive and inspiring feedback from students who have heard his message. "The kids have been very engaged. We had a lot of students reach out on social media, which confirms we have accomplished the ambition of getting them to find an interest in reading."

"We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for The Rapides Foundation. They saw a need and desire in their community and they trusted Share the Magic Foundation to deliver on that."



"I was texting you to tell you how much your story inspired me. I love to read but I'm honestly shy to read to other people, but when I heard what you were saying, I started to believe in myself a little. I just wanted you to know I loved your story and I also love football and hope to see you again one day."

6th grader from Rosepine Elementary School







## The Rapides Foundation, communities invest in early childhood education

**A** \$2.6 million investment from The Rapides Foundation and \$510,700 raised by local communities will provide free tuition for up to 600 children to attend a high-quality education program in the 2024–25 school year while their parents work or attend school.

The funding was in response to the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund's announcement that it would provide a dollar-for-dollar match on investments made to expand access to quality early care and education for children who need it most. Grant, Natchitoches and Rapides parishes elected to participate in the program based on their availability of childcare seats.

The Rapides Foundation in November awarded \$2.13 million to the three school

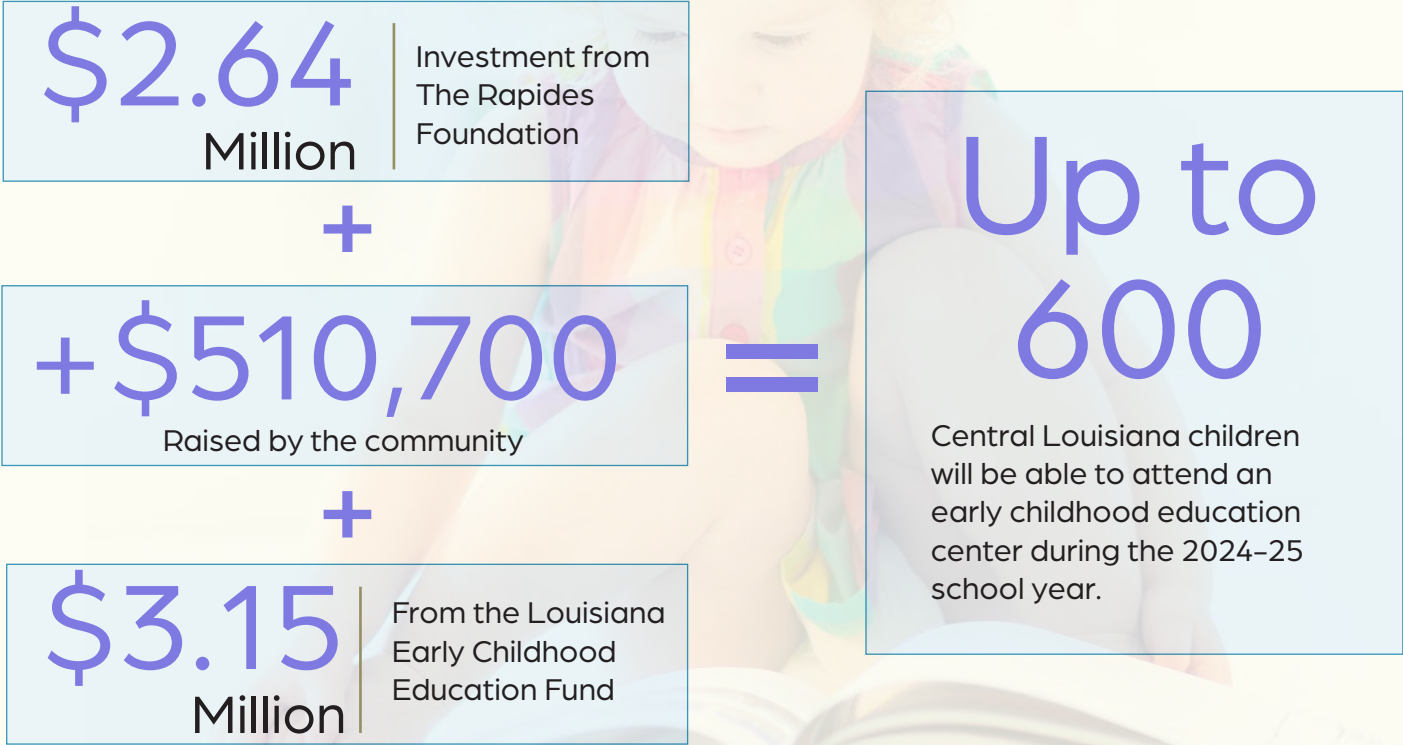
districts to provide their state match to fund childcare seats for up to 380 children. In addition, the Foundation pledged additional funding to match all dollars raised by local entities.

Communities stepped up, raising \$510,700 by the January 31 deadline set by the Louisiana Early Childhood Education Fund program. The community match, plus The Rapides Foundation's funding, plus the state's \$3.15 million match equaled a \$6.3 million investment in early childhood education.

"We appreciate local communities for recognizing the importance of providing children the opportunity to attend a high-quality early childhood education program," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. "Investing in early



# Community Investment Pays Off



childcare and education ultimately produces a stronger workforce, improves graduation rates and results in higher family incomes.”

**Community fundraising totals by parish were:**

- Grant Parish – \$6,000
- Natchitoches Parish – \$4,700
- Rapides Parish – \$500,000

The Rapides Foundation’s Early Childhood Education Access grants are funded under its School Readiness Initiative, which has the goal of increasing kindergarten readiness through the support, expansion or establishment of

high-quality early childhood programs, which support the teacher-child and family-child interactions.

“Research tells us that children who attend high-quality early childhood programs before kindergarten are more likely to complete high school and go through their school careers without repeating a grade, which sets them up for success beyond graduation. This project also allows parents and guardians to attend school or go to work while their children receive quality education in the daycare setting,” Rosier said.







# Students explore careers at 2023 SECO Event

**T**he Students Exploring Career Opportunities Expo, Central Louisiana’s premier career awareness event, was held on November 15 and 16 at the Randolph Riverfront Center in Alexandria. Over two days, nearly 2,670 students from 47 public and private schools across nine Central Louisiana parishes explored the many career opportunities showcased by 65 participating businesses and postsecondary institutions.

Designed to empower 10th and 12th graders with firsthand experiences, SECO featured

interactive demos and simulations that illuminated diverse career pathways, guiding students toward informed decisions about their educational and professional futures. Students not only explored potential careers but also gained insights into the financial implications of their career choices, equipping them with essential skills for navigating their journey beyond high school.

This was the eighth SECO event presented by The Orchard Foundation and The Rapides Foundation. SECO united industry partners, educational institutions and community groups to inspire and prepare the next generation.











*CMAP PAP Specialist Mindy Clingan, PAP and Office Supervisor Crystal Watts and Executive Director Wendy Roy help patients afford their medications.*

## Need help paying for your prescriptions? Cenla Medication Access Program can help

**T**he Cenla Medication Access Program doesn't want anyone to have to skip their medicine in order to make ends meet.

The Rapides Foundation created CMAP in 2001 in response to Community Health Needs Assessments showing that the high cost of prescription medications greatly impacted many Central Louisiana adults – creating a barrier to adequate and effective healthcare.

CMAP helps remove that barrier by offering free or reduced-cost prescriptions to eligible residents. The program also includes education for clients about the importance of appropriate medication usage.

"Every day in our offices, our clients tell us about the struggles they've faced," said Wendy Roy, CMAP Executive Director. "They're not able to purchase the medications they need. Or, at times, they're trying to stretch their medication longer because it costs so much."

CMAP adjusted its eligibility guidelines to help more people get the medication they need. The updated eligibility guidelines require participants:

- Must live in Louisiana.
- Must be uninsured or have Medicare.
- Must be 18 years or older.
- And income must be at or below 300% of the Federal Poverty Level.

Under the income guidelines, a family of four can have an income of \$93,600 per year/\$7,800 per month or less and qualify for CMAP. A two-person household can qualify if they have an income of \$61,320 per year/\$5,110 per month or less.

"If you do not have health insurance or if you have Medicare and meet the income guidelines, you are eligible for CMAP," said Crystal Watts, CMAP Patient Assistance Specialist and Office Supervisor. "We encourage you to call us to see if you qualify. The application process is easy. All you have to do is fill out an application, provide income





documentation and provide a copy of your photo ID.”

Once their application is approved, clients are eligible for CMAP services for one year.

Though CMAP administers additional Foundation programs, it focuses largely on medication access – and the program has continued to grow and evolve to meet the needs of the Central Louisiana community. Today, CMAP is available statewide, providing free medication to eligible individuals through its Central Fill Pharmacy. In addition, CMAP partners with Rapides Regional Medical Center to provide free or low-cost medications to patients who visit the hospital’s HP Long Outpatient clinic.

To date, CMAP has helped approximately 20,000 people across Louisiana get free or reduced-cost medications to help maintain their health. There are 950 active clients, with more than 1,500 physicians referring their patients to the program.

“Over the years we’ve seen patients experience frequent hospitalizations and frequent ER visits because they haven’t been able to regularly take their medication,” Watts said. “But, after they start the CMAP program, those hospitalizations and ER visits decrease.”

CMAP employs Patient Assistant Program Specialists in most Central Louisiana parishes to work directly with clients close to home, which helps reduce transportation issues, another common barrier to healthcare access. Those same specialists also work closely with rural clinics and primary care practices.

“We are able to offer CMAP services through

partnerships and contracts with several of the major pharmaceutical companies,” Watts said. “With their help, we can provide many of these medications free of charge.

“When talking to a patient, you see the relief that they experience when they find out we can help them get their medication – at little or no cost. It’s just indescribable. It’s just a joy to be able to help them.”

CMAP offers benefits to providers as well.

“Our specialists are trained to work with providers,” Roy said. “That means decreased wait time for medication delivery to clients and decreased paperwork for physicians.”

CMAP clients and their physicians also have access to centralized records that allow pharmacist counseling for drug interactions and dosing requirements, and patient-specific bottle labeling that helps with compliance.

“CMAP cares about its community,” Roy said. “We care about the individuals that we serve and we don’t want people to struggle with the high cost of prescription medications. We want you to know that we are here to help and we want to help relieve that burden if we can.”

For more information about CMAP, or to apply, call 1-888-443-7494 or visit [www.cmaprx.org](http://www.cmaprx.org).



## SCAN ME

QR Code: Get the CMAP application and income guidelines





# CENLA BOARD BUILDERS

## Cenla Boardbuilders builds effective leaders



**T**en individuals graduated from the 2023 class of Cenla Boardbuilders, a program that develops emerging leaders for service on boards of local nonprofit organizations. The program aims to strengthen the capacity of nonprofit boards by equipping their members with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to be effective leaders.

It is administered by The Rapides Foundation's Community Development Works program.

Cenla Boardbuilders is open to professionals identified by their employers as up-and-coming leaders with a desire to become involved in their

community, to nonprofit board members wanting an orientation to their new role on a board, and to individuals who are looking for higher-level volunteer opportunities.

Participants choose between two learning tracks. Track I is for newly seated board members with limited service experience who are only seeking training. Track II is for individuals with no previous board service who are seeking training in preparation for nonprofit board service and help to connect with local nonprofits.

The 2023 program ran from August through October and consisted of sessions about the roles



and responsibilities of being an effective board member, including: Nature of Nonprofit Board & Responsibilities, Fund Development; Fiduciary Responsibilities; and Leadership.

The program included a networking lunch and recruitment session that gave Track II participants and nonprofit leaders a chance to connect. These networking opportunities allowed participants to learn about different organizations that meet their interests, and it gave nonprofits the chance to recruit new, energetic board members.

"The community leaders who graduate from this program will immediately bring valuable skills to the table for the nonprofits they serve," said Joe Rosier, President and CEO of The Rapides Foundation.

**The following individuals completed the 2023 Cenla Boardbuilders Program:**

**TRACK I: CURRENTLY SERVING ON A BOARD**

- **Jessie Clark**, Administrative Assistant, Natchitoches Arc.
- **Jermaine Davis**, Purchasing and Storeroom Team Leader, Martco, LLC; Nonprofit Partner: United Way of Central Louisiana.
- **Jessica Difulco**, Payroll, Martco, LLC; Nonprofit Partner: Catholic Charities of Central Louisiana.
- **Andrea Miles**, Executive Director, Jordan's Boys and Girls Club.

**TRACK II: SEEKING BOARD SERVICE**

- **Annie Johnson Salazar**, Clinical Mental Health Therapist, Children's Advocacy Network.
- **Jay McCalmont**, Director of Business Development and Customer Solutions, Cleco.
- **Krissy McCrea**, Campus Director, Unitech Training Academy.
- **Michelle Reynolds**, Coordinator, Move Bunkie Forward.
- **Elizabeth Texada**, Executive Assistant, Holloway Investments.
- **Ross Williams**, Executive Director, Emma Robinson Williams Education Foundation & Williams House Community Family Learning Center.

The 2023 graduates join a group of 254 Cenla Boardbuilders alumni.

Felicia Walker, Training Specialist for CDW, welcomed the group at a graduation ceremony in November. "You selflessly have dedicated yourselves to bring about positive change that will resonate for generations to come. Your presence is deeply appreciated."

Guest speaker Jim Clinton, President and CEO of Louisiana Central, commended the graduates for their dedication to community and civic leadership. "The decision you made to join this program is a commitment to rebuilding the 'we' in Central Louisiana and America," he said.

To participate in the 2024 Cenla Boardbuilders program either as a participant, nonprofit partner or employer partner, visit [communitydevelopmentworks.org/boardbuilders](http://communitydevelopmentworks.org/boardbuilders) or call 318-443-7880 or 800-803-8075.







# Community Development Works

## CDW Announces 2024 Training Schedule

**C**ommunity Development Works, a program of The Rapides Foundation, announces its complete 2024 training schedule for 31 free, skill-building training classes.

The calendar serves as a professional development resource for nonprofit staff, volunteers and for anyone interested in improving the Central Louisiana community. You do not have to work at a local nonprofit to take advantage of this training.

In-person workshops are held at The Rapides Foundation Building in downtown Alexandria. Webinars are offered online.

Participants can opt to attend all courses within a single topic area or select those of specific interest. Additionally, archived webinars are accessible on the CDW website.



### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKS

# 2024 TRAINING CALENDAR



Visit [www.communitydevelopmentworks.org/attend-training](http://www.communitydevelopmentworks.org/attend-training) to find a complete list of courses or to register. Call CDW at 318-443-7880 or 800-803-8075 for more information.

### THE RAPIDES FOUNDATION

The Rapides Foundation continues a legacy of community healthcare initiated in 1903.

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