

Brightside Academy

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

by Sarah Horn, Director of Marketing



Since its inception in 1992, Brightside Academy has been providing quality care to children six weeks to 12 years old. Operating 49 locations in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York, the company is committed to strengthening learners and respecting families. Currently, the organization provides early education for 6,700 children on a daily basis. 90% of the families at Brightside Academy are receiving child care subsidies.

At Brightside Academy there are three key pieces to the puzzle: the child, the family, and the staff. There are many everyday heroes. The stories of a center director and a family that attend her center are two of them.

It's an ordinary day at Brightside Academy in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Anyone who has ever walked in the door of an early education program, knows there is no such thing as an ordinary day, and Raina Kelly is anything but an ordinary Center Director. From the time she was five years old she held court in her grandmother's back yard in the afternoons. Raina's friends in the neighborhood would listen to her lesson plans. You could say that being a caregiver and educator is what Raina knew to be

her destiny and what others would say makes this young woman extraordinary.

Born in Larimer, a neighborhood adjacent to East Liberty, Raina knows what the community on Pittsburgh's East End is about. She has seen the area go through many evolutions. Once known as Pittsburgh's 'second downtown,' it has been a thriving and populous area; it has seen poverty, gentrification, and hope. In the early 20th Century, industry was booming, schools were being rebuilt, and the social life of the community flourished. But things changed. Businesses closed and the community had to adjust. Affordable housing was built for those in need. There has been a rebirth recently, but it is just beginning.

Raina's roots in the community come from her strong sense of family. Her grandmother, Vivian Kelly, was deaf. Early on she was inspired by her grandmother who communicated through her writing and poetry. Raina had aspirations of teaching sign language because of her love for her grandmother. This relationship would prove to shape Raina's life; Vivian Kelly taught her how to take care of a family. Raina's mother, Darlene Taylor, was working seven days a week as an

anesthesia technician and her father, Stacy Taylor, as a radio announcer on the local gospel station. He would later become a Pastor. While in high school, Raina worked at a fast food restaurant to make money and Grandma Vivian would match what she was earning. Raina speaks fondly of this time, saying that her grandmother helped pay for more than one prom dress.

When it was time to start thinking of college, Raina had been living with her grandmother for three years. She looked forward to starting school in Ohio. She took on the role of caregiver very naturally and stayed in Pittsburgh to give her strength to an ailing grandmother, grandfather, and uncle. She began working on her AA in Early Childhood Education. In 1994 Grandmother Vivian passed away. Perhaps this could have stopped Raina from working on her career, but it seems to have pushed her harder to be a success. She was working in early care as an Assistant Group Supervisor in downtown Pittsburgh during school. She had her daughter, Stephanie, who is now 11. Her son, Tavaughn, is 10.

In 2000, Raina achieved her AA. She began working for Brightside Academy in downtown Pittsburgh. She was a

Group Supervisor for three years during a time she likes to call 'practical application of her degree.' She says that while working as Group Supervisor she found out what it was like to be a single mother. She was working full time, working hard to feed her family and find affordable housing. Having support from those around her at work and at home helped her to make it through the welfare system. This support is what she shows the families at her center now. Raina worked herself through the career ladder at Brightside Academy. From Group Supervisor she became an Assistant Director, then went to East Liberty to open Brightside's first site with extended hours (open 6 a.m. to 12 midnight) and was the Assistant Night Care Manager. In 2003, Raina became a Center Director and in 2005, while East Liberty had been rebuilding, Brightside Academy moved in to a brand new facility in the community.

Today, Raina is enrolled in T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps Scholarship Program) and will achieve her BA in Early Childhood in 2010. She achieved her PQAS instructor's certificate and also completed the Pennsylvania Center Director Credential.

Headquartered in Pittsburgh, Brightside Academy's corporate office works very closely with the field. Tammy Patterson, one of five Area Managers, oversees 12 Brightside locations. She has been instrumental in Raina's growth as a Center Director. Raina says, "Tammy is like family to me. Our main goal is that quality care is given to each and every one of our families." Working together they have achieved a STAR 3 designation (with the Pennsylvania State Accreditation program, Keystone STARS) and a NECPA certification. Tammy and Raina would agree that state and national programs have improved quality. To date, Brightside Academy has 28 STAR 2 centers, 6 STAR 3 centers, 1 STAR 4 center, and, 4 NECPA

accredited centers. In addition, the organization is working through the Step Up to Quality Initiative in Ohio.

Brightside is proud to participate in programs that foster lifelong learning. Francyne Wharton, Director of Education, says, "The foundation of our philosophy on professional and personal development at Brightside Academy is set in seeing the person where they are in terms of need, through their eyes, and supporting her or him in a shared enabling vision of good fit educational possibilities." Of the 1,000 employees at Brightside Academy, 30% are actively participating in ECE coursework.

If you ask William and Asia Rollins what makes Brightside Academy unique they will tell you that the center feels like their extended family. When they moved from New York City, they had no family here and were nervous about putting their child in an early education program. The Rollinses came to Pittsburgh to get their BA Degrees. While six months pregnant, the Rollins began touring facilities. They visited three providers before choosing Brightside. What sold them, according to Asia, was "the staff actually wanted to know about us!" Their daughter, Lexi, was enrolled in Brightside's East Liberty program at infancy. She is now two years old. William and Asia are now studying for their Masters Degrees, working, and caring for young Lexi. They say that without Raina and the Brightside staff acting as their liaison, the subsidy process would be difficult to navigate.

William and Asia explain that the most important things to them as parents are: the safety of their child in the center (Brightside has a secured site with codes on all doors; the neighborhood can be tough at times); staff to child ratio; and a playful, learning, conducive environment. For them, going to school would

not have been possible without Raina and the Brightside team in East Liberty. Lexi has gone from a shy baby to a young girl who can speak her ABCs and count to 10. Her vocabulary has grown and she is very socially outgoing. It's the teachers at Brightside Academy who nurtured her. And the Rollins family will forever have a bond with Raina and the staff at Brightside. "We invited most of the staff to our recent wedding," Asia says, and made memories that will last forever.

The pride that Harold Lewis, President/CEO, has in the work Brightside Academy does shows all over his face when he speaks about it. "Our vision, of creating learning and care environments that support positive life and education experiences for the children and families we serve is attained every day. We celebrate the success of a child, watch a staff member graduate, or a parent get a job," says Mr. Lewis. He adds, "What makes us unique is that we nurture and support the whole family."

Senior VP of Operations, Taylor Ward, says, "We must be compassionate of our families. Our neighborhoods experience violence and poverty as they struggle to get ahead with limited resources. But, our outlook is optimistic. When we support our families through the development of a strong sense of partnership, community, and respect, we all share in the success."

With expansion plans for the future, which includes ten centers in 2009, Brightside Academy is committed to quality programs for the under-served. Believing that young minds deserve a bright future, regardless of where children live, is why Brightside will always focus on the communities that need them most.

For more information visit www.brightsideacademy.com.