

DIRECTOR: Nicole Swisher Woodson will take reins June 1

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manifested in her work and also in her family life. She and husband Adrian have been foster parents and, in addition to having three children of their own, adopted an entire sibling group of seven in order to keep them together.

If her name seems familiar, she is the daughter of Steve and Novella Swisher — and she’s been bringing their 10 grandchildren to visit in Sisters for years. The desire to be closer to her parents was part of the reason Woodson jumped at the opportunity to apply for the executive director position at Circle of Friends.

Debbie Newport, who has been serving as interim executive director for the program, said that Circle of Friends conducted a very thorough application process and worked through a surprisingly large and well-qualified pool of applicants.

Current conditions forced the organization to conduct its interviews remotely.

“Going through it in a virtual process was probably the biggest challenge,” Newport said.

She said the board is thrilled to have a director with Woodson’s background and enthusiasm on board.

“We’re all pretty excited,” Newport said.

Circle of Friends connects vulnerable children in the Sisters community with adult mentors. Circle of Friends in Sisters was founded by Duncan Campbell in 2011. The mentors spend quality one-on-one time with each of the children to build nurturing relationships that help them thrive, starting as early as kindergarten and first grade and continuing with them through high school.

Part of Woodson’s role will be to recruit more mentors into the program. It’s a natural role for her, because she has so much personal experience in the satisfactions found in helping youth with needs.

“You see that light-bulb moment — and it happens



PHOTO BY JIM COERNELIUS
Nicole Swisher Woodson will take the reins as Circle of Friends’ new executive director starting June 1.

with every child at some point: ‘This person is going to help me. I can trust this person.’ And that’s the most rewarding thing you could possibly imagine,” she said. “It’s life-changing, those rewards.”

Circle of Friends adapts program for pandemic

The need for connection between mentors and Sisters youth has only intensified in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, as families face the stresses of isolation and job losses. Yet social distancing protocols and restrictions on gatherings make that connection challenging.

Kellie Scholl, Circle of Friends Youth Program Coordinator, reported to the organization’s board of directors that a number of programs have been developed to make the best of the situation.

Scholl reported that Circle of Friends Mailboxes “are a special way our kids can communicate with mentors and myself. Mentors can leave goodies and notes in the boxes for the kids and our kids can do the same for their mentors. The kids were encouraged to decorate their boxes and leave them somewhere by their front door.”

A Circle of Friends Activity Passport was handed out with the boxes. It is four pages of four activities on each page (total of 16 activities) the kids can do to get a stamp from their mentors. The idea is there are four weeks of activities they can do with support from mentors — when they are done and have completed all the activities they can receive a prize. There is a video about the passports

posted on the website under mentor resources.

Virtual “Zoom” programming was launched with a scavenger hunt.

“We had seven mentors and nine mentees participate. It was great! Everyone had so much fun running around and finding items — all the kids who participated had decorated CoF mailboxes and started activities in their passports,” Scholl reported. “BINGO was our second Zoom programming — we played three rounds and had just as much fun as the scavenger hunt. We had 11 kids and seven mentors participating this time.”

Zoom Art programming helped the kids make Mother’s Day Cards as well as cards for senior residents at Sisters Lodge and for first responders. Kellie has been approached by the Sisters Middle School principal about several kids who are in need of support right now — she will be speaking to her on the phone next week to see how CoF can support these kids during this time.

“I have continued to connect weekly with mentors and families by both emails and phone calls,” Scholl noted.

The organization is in communication with organizers of summer, waiting to see how camping shapes up in the face of group restrictions.

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