



## **Afterschool Ambassador Program: Legacy of Leadership**

### **News Release**

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### **Zuni's Bellson Selected as One of Just 16 Afterschool Ambassadors in Country This Year**

*Valarie Bellson Will Work in New Mexico and Across Nation to Make Afterschool and Summer Learning Programs Available to More Children and Youth*

Washington, DC – Valarie Bellson, Children's Program Coordinator at the Zuni Public Library, has been selected to serve as a 2023 Afterschool Ambassador, the Afterschool Alliance announced today. She is one of just 16 leaders in the country chosen for the honor this year. Afterschool Ambassadors continue their work with local afterschool programs while serving a one-year Afterschool Ambassador term, organizing events, working with community leaders and policy makers, and in other ways increasing support for the afterschool and summer learning programs families rely on.

"We are absolutely delighted that Valarie Bellson will serve as a 2023 Afterschool Ambassador," Afterschool Alliance Executive Director Jodi Grant said. "While students and families need afterschool and summer learning programs more than ever, programs are facing significant challenges including staff shortages, funding shortfalls, and finding ways to meet the academic and social needs of students as they recover from the challenges the pandemic created. We need strong, creative champions to spread the word about the essential role afterschool programs play in keeping kids safe, inspiring them to learn, and giving parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised after the school day ends. Bellson is poised to be just the kind of powerful advocate we need."

"I am looking forward to joining the Afterschool Alliance in growing support for afterschool and summer learning programs this year," said Bellson. "I've seen up close the incredible ways these programs support students and families, providing safe spaces as well as equitable programming. No patron is denied participation in our programming at Zuni Public Library, which offers critical services needed in our Pueblo. That's even more important now, as we recover from the isolation and hardship the pandemic caused. Many of our kids have ground to make up and afterschool programs can help them do that. I'm so proud to be part of the afterschool movement and to have a chance to serve as an Afterschool Ambassador for New Mexico this year."

Zuni Public Library serves a community of approximately 7,000 residents. Its mission is to provide a broad selection of educational and culturally related materials of interest to Zuni youth and patrons. Zuni Public Library is anxiously waiting to reintroduce the Rez Kids Book Club, which combined reading chapter books and planned field trips to Albuquerque and Santa Fe museums, giving students a sense and day of experiencing life outside of Zuni Pueblo. Plans for the spring and summer include introducing Zuni cultural classes, robotics classes, theatrical performances and a summer reading program. Exciting collaborations are in the planning stages with the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project and the A:shiwi Awan

Museum. Both these programs have established successful youth programming that are popular in the community throughout the years.

Each Ambassador will organize a major event for *Lights On Afterschool*, the Afterschool Alliance's annual rally for afterschool. Most of the thousands of local *Lights On Afterschool* events will be on or around Thursday, October 26, 2023.

The 2023 Afterschool Ambassadors are:

- **Stamford, Connecticut:** Tiffany Wilson, Mill River Park Collaborative
- **Shoshone, Idaho:** Karma Metzler Fitzgerald, Lincoln County Youth Commission
- **Indianapolis, Indiana:** Chrystal Struben, AYS – At Your School
- **Terre Haute, Indiana:** Eleanor Ramseier, Camp Navigate, Inc.
- **Skowhegan, Maine:** Dawn Fickett, RSU/MSAD 54's 21st CCLC The REACH Afterschool Program
- **Derwood, Maryland:** Zainab Abbas, SciTech2U
- **Battle Creek, Michigan:** Deondra Ramsey, Battle Creek Public Schools 21<sup>st</sup> Century Program
- **Medford, New Jersey:** Becca Gutwirth, YMCA of the Pines
- **Newark, New Jersey:** Dorine Francis, FOCUS Hispanic Center for Community Development, Inc.
- **Zuni, New México:** Valarie Bellson, Pueblo of Zuni, Zuni Public Library
- **Brooklyn, New York:** Earl Whitfield, CAMBA East New York Beacon 166
- **Norman, Oklahoma:** Whitney Dunn, Boys & Girls Club of Norman, Center for Children and Families
- **San Antonio, Texas:** Shawn Petty, Texas ACE Program @ Westat
- **Newport, Vermont:** Elizabeth Chambers, North Country Supervisory Union Encore Afterschool and Summer Program
- **Hampton, Virginia:** Michelle Simpson, Alternatives World Changers
- **Pasco, Washington:** Margarita Alaman, Educational Service Districts 123 21<sup>st</sup> Century Programs

Some 24.7 million U.S. children not in an afterschool program would be enrolled, if a program were available to them, according to [a survey of nearly 1,500 parents](#) commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance and conducted by Edge Research in May and June of 2022. That is the highest number ever recorded. Unmet demand for afterschool programs is significantly higher among Latino and Black children (at 60% and 54% respectively) than among children overall (49%). Cost is the top barrier to enroll, cited by 57% of parents as a reason for not enrolling their child. Ninety percent of parents rate the quality of the program their child attends as excellent (51%) or very good (39%).

A large and powerful body of evidence demonstrates improvements in grades, school attendance, behavior and more among children who participate in afterschool programs. Researchers have also found that students in afterschool programs are more engaged in school and excited about learning and develop critical work and life skills such as problem solving, teamwork, and communications.

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*The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org).*

*The Zuni Public Library is committed to creating a safe space filled with cultural, educational and recreational opportunities for the Pueblo of Zuni and surrounding community through traditional media like print and video, and also through in-person events that explore STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math) in the world around us. By drawing upon our rich cultural heritage along with engaging experiences, a growing book collection, makerspace opportunities, and collaborative programming, the Zuni Public Library aims to nurture the explorer spirit and curious minds in all generations.*