

Safety Net

BACKSIDE LEARNING CENTER celebrates 20 years serving the **BACKBONE** of the racing community

By **SEAN COLLINS**

Photos by **LINDA DOANE**

EACH WINTER, THE HUSTLE and bustle of a busy Churchill Downs backstretch winds to near silence as the barn area turns into an empty and desolate ghost town, at least until you approach the racetrack itself. In the shadow of the “Big Board” lays the year-round center of help and prosperity for the backbone of the industry: the Backside Learning Center.

While the horses are gone, the BLC still churns away at providing support for more than 1,000 people who live and work at Churchill Downs and its nearby training center. The dedicated team not only prepares for the return of the masses in the spring, but still helps the people who stay behind in the winter.





The Backside Learning Center at Churchill Downs has ably been serving its community for 20 years in immeasurable ways

**PROVIDING SUPPORT AND RESOURCES IN A SAFE,
WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE DIVERSE COMMUNITY
OF RACETRACK WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

PROPORCIONAMOS APOYO Y RECURSOS EN UN AMBIENTE
SEGURO Y ACOGEDOR PARA LOS TRABAJADORES
DEL HIPÓDROMO Y SUS FAMILIAS



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Backside Learning
AT CHURCHILL DOWNS



Sherry Stanley joined the BLC as its executive director in 2013 following a stint in Central America working for the Peace Corps and a job as an assistant director for a refugee resettlement program in the United States

“I am still here,” said Bertila Quinteros, a groom for trainer Ian Wilkes. “I have kids at school. I don’t like to move; I prefer staying in Kentucky.”

The backside population is represented by different countries, backgrounds, and education levels. For the last 20 years, the BLC has focused on empowering workers through education, connecting with resources needed to thrive, and building a community that can act as a home away from home.

“They come with so many strengths,” said BLC executive director Sherry Stanley. “The fact they’ve gotten to where they are, all the barriers they’ve broken, is pretty incredible.”

Whether workers attend English classes or are just picking up their mail, the BLC has become a staple in the Churchill Downs community.

“We are that safety net for people,”

Stanley said. “We touch every person on this track in some way.”

Two decades ago, the then Kentucky Derby Museum executive director Lynn Ashton and Churchill Downs senior vice president of racing Donald “Donnie” Richardson recognized a need to close the language gap among the workforce. Thanks to funding from the Klein Family Foundation and WinStar Farm, the learning center opened its doors in 2004.

In its early years, the BLC struggled to create its own identity as it was under the Kentucky Derby Museum umbrella, making raising money a struggle.

“Our mission and our identity got lost,” Stanley said. “We didn’t get any grants because we were under the umbrella of another organization.”

Community development has always been important to Stanley.

Joining the Peace Corps in the mid-’90s, she worked in international development in Central America. After returning to the United States in 2006, she worked with a refugee resettlement program. In 2013, she heard about the BLC’s executive director position.

“It was the perfect culmination of my life’s experiences,” Stanley said. “The combination of oversight and administrative management, but also you’re interacting with the population every day; I really love that aspect of it.”

Under Stanley’s leadership, the BLC took its critical next step as it became its own 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2016, leaving the Kentucky Derby Museum umbrella.

“It really helped us with our independent identity,” Stanley said. “We can apply for grants. We were able to hire all these people that we needed.”



The Beechmont Baptist Church, a few miles from Churchill, is where the BLC holds its twice-weekly homework helping sessions as well as other activities for kids of elementary and high school age

That made a really big difference in terms of being able to get funding and individual donations.”

The change allowed the BLC to grow its staff and, therefore, its support offerings.

English classes are an important piece of the puzzle since most of the community is Spanish-speaking, but the BLC also helps with smaller day-to-day tasks. Making photo copies, navigating medical care, making phone calls, and finding directions can be difficult to complete with a lack of resources and language barriers.

“Helping people with little things we don’t think about makes their lives so much easier and creates a sense of peace,” Stanley said. “It allows people to be more satisfied with their jobs because they feel supported.”

In addition to these small tasks, the



BLC provides many different programs. Family programming was a major addition to give more women, who make up about 30% of the workforce, a chance to get involved.

“When I came, it was mostly men

that were able to access our services,” Stanley said. “So many women had kids and families off the track. As soon as they got done working, they had to go home.”

Children are unable to live on the

backside, so families tend to live in the nearby neighborhood. Twice a week at the Beechmont Baptist Church, a few miles from the track, the BLC hosts the Front Runners Program to provide elementary through high school kids after school homework help and team building activities.

Mike Schoenman has volunteered with the program for six years. A retired computer programmer born and raised in Louisville, he was looking for long-term volunteer work to help him keep busy. Having some racetrack experience in the past, he decided to give the BLC a shot.

“I did some tutoring for troubled kids from broken families; it was a lot more contentious,” Schoenman said of his previous volunteer experience. “The first night I came to volunteer (with the BLC), I was sitting in the parking lot. I was trying to psych myself up to go in. I didn’t know what to expect. Within five minutes, it was a 180. The kids were cheerful, bright. You could tell they came from good homes. It was an eye-opening experience.”

Schoenman has always been drawn to the work ethic of the backstretch workers.

“They’re all working hard, getting up in the morning and getting at it,” Schoenman said. “They pass that on to their children.”

The importance of helping the children of backstretch workers cannot be understated for both Schoenman and the BLC. As many parents are busy working with the horses or struggling with English themselves, it creates potential for kids to fall through the cracks in the public school system.

“My parents sat down and read with me,” Schoenman said. “They were able to correct my homework and help me through it. A lot of them don’t have that. (The program) helps getting them over the hump and encourages them to do so. It’s amazing; some of



After retiring from his job as a computer programmer, Mike Schoenman was looking for volunteer work and was happy to find a fulfilling role at the BLC





them don't need much help at all. It's just a matter of sitting there and letting them show off. I enjoy helping them anyway that I can."

"Where we see the most impact is in our youth programming," Stanley said. "(The adults) are here to make

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—SHERRY STANLEY, BACKSIDE LEARNING CENTER’S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

money to support their families and to help their kids have a better life. We're going to see the greatest impact of this next generation of bilinguals who have gotten all this support growing up and have greater opportunities to choose

what kind of life they want to have."

Quinteros emigrated from Guatemala more than two decades ago and has consistently participated in BLC programs for the last 12 years. She joined to improve her English but quickly felt embraced by the commu-

nity, leading Quinteros to start bringing her daughter to youth programming.

"At the time, I didn't know anything about the schools or English," Quinteros said. "They helped my daughter with homework and to apply

for university. She's an adult now, almost graduated from college."

The BLC was able to advise Quinteros and her daughter through the college application process. She now studies nursing at the University of Louisville.

"I know (horse racing) works for a lot of people," Stanley said, "but when they're able to go off and do something better and have more of a quality of life, that's just really rewarding to see."

Programming isn't limited to just after school help. Other child development programs include prenatal care, classes for new mothers, and giving kids the opportunity to attend summer camps.

"My sister-in-law has a little baby," Quinteros said. "She comes with the baby to programs that incentivize and make it fun for the little ones."

"Things get much more complicated when you're dealing with families," Stanley said. "It's communicating with

schools, housing issues, dealing with landlords. Anything and everything that affects the family, we support them with those challenges.”

While the Beechmont Baptist Church is providing a place for the kids to learn and be supported, the main building at Churchill Downs is doing the same for the adults.

Dailey Menendez has quickly grown to appreciate the importance of the support system since she started teaching English part-time with the BLC in 2022. As a Louisvillian, Menendez would attend races on occasion with friends, completely unaware of the livelihoods of those behind the scenes. After working with them, she discovered the sacrifices they make to help keep a central aspect of the city’s culture operating.

“These individuals come to the United States looking for an opportunity to better their life,” Menendez said. “They are often (overlooked) when they themselves make the whole experience.”

Having left family and friends behind in search of a new life in the U.S., and with the stress of the jobs they work, many backside workers struggle with depression, anxiety, and loneliness.

Menendez once noticed a student who seemed upset even though it was his birthday. When asked why he was sad on his birthday, he revealed that his mother had passed away in Guatemala and he had no opportunity to go home before they buried her.

“I was devastated,” Menendez said. The following class, she brought a cake and a card for everyone to sign and they sang him happy birthday. “We made him feel special because he felt alone here. You have to be there and build



Caton Bredar, a BLC board member, says she never had a trainer turn her down for a donation

this community to let them know we’re in this together, we’re a family.”

Menendez has formed strong friendships with her students and stays in touch with them constantly, even when they are away in the winter.

“They have changed my life and completely changed my outlook on how I teach and who I am as a person,” Menendez said.

Stanley believes this community aspect is critical to the morale of the workforce given they often live just feet away from their job at all times.

“We have a relationship of trust with people,” Stanley said. “They know we’re here to support them and we’ll do whatever it takes to help them with any situation. We want people to have a better life and access to opportunities.”

The services and community provided by the BLC are unique, which is why it is important for many workers, such as Quinteros, to stay



at Churchill Downs. Many workers seek jobs at Churchill Downs because of the BLC. Stanley says she has received messages from other tracks looking to add similar programs, and she hopes the mission can expand to a wider variety of tracks.

“One of the things that could strengthen the sport is being able to strengthen the community at the most basic level,” said BLC board member Caton Bredar, who works as an on-air analyst for FanDuel TV.

Bredar has been involved with the BLC in some capacity for about 12 years. She began volunteering to plan fundraisers and write press releases. When she was young, she saw many grooms riding in the back of vans that her father drove. She sees the BLC as a way to give back to the people who have made her life in racing possible.

“The opportunity to contribute to their ability to assimilate and grow in our country,” Bredar said, “that to me is what it’s all about. It provides me



HEAR MORE FROM BLC’S SHERRY STANLEY
in our Beyond the Headlines series
on [BLOODHORSE.COM/PLUS](https://BloodHorse.com/plus)

LEFT: COADY PHOTO; ABOVE: BACKSIDE LEARNING CENTER



Through her part-time position teaching English as a second language, Dailey Menendez has seen firsthand the sacrifices made by backstretch workers who moved to this country to work in the racing industry

with so much satisfaction.”

One of the best ways to contribute is through donations, something Bredar has worked on since she started volunteering.

“One of the first things I did (for the BLC) was go to the barn area and solicit trainers for contributions,” Bredar said. “I never had (a trainer) turn me down. I think they feel that if their employees have a network of support, they’re going to be better employees.”

Not only trainers have seen the benefits that come from a well-supported workforce, but more owners are starting to get involved.

One of the innovative ideas to raise funds for the BLC was the Purses For a Purpose program, an initiative brought to fruition by owner Brook Smith. Owners can enroll their horse in the program for a flat dollar amount or donate a percentage of their purse. Through social media campaigns, the BLC will support all the horses enrolled. The program provides owners



Bertila Quinteros, a groom for trainer Ian Wilkes, was grateful for the assistance BLC staff provided her daughter with when she was applying to colleges

the opportunity to give back and make a difference in the lives of those who take care of their horses.

“We’re really grateful to the industry and especially the owners that recognize the value of what we’re doing,” Stanley said. “We have owners who are on our board of directors or volunteer with us, so it’s not just about the money.”

Smith donates 10% of his purses and, as part owner of leading Kentucky Derby (G1) candidate Sierra Leone, has continued to promote the program he helped create.

“There’s been a different sense of community over the last couple of years on the backside,” Bredar said. “I think that has largely been because of programs like Purses For a Purpose. The more people see what you do and the more people feel it is producing a more positive feeling within the community; the more people are willing to participate and contribute.”

As the sun sets on the first 20 years of the BLC, the organization continues to look for ways to grow their services. The main goal for the future is a new, larger facility.

Current restraints on space leave much to be desired in terms of confidential office space, especially as staff continues to grow. In addition, splitting adult and child programming between two locations has its struggles.

A new off-site facility would allow the BLC to better organize their space and allow for all programming to happen beneath the same roof. Stanley believes this new facility and extra space will help the BLC reach that next level in support.

As the BLC embarks on their next 20 years, one thing is for certain. The Churchill Downs backside community will have an outlet of support led by hardworking individuals at the BLC who are dedicated to their community’s success and prosperity. **BH**