



Leslie Public Schools Foundation Newsletter

September 2026

From Small Roots to a World of Possibilities

Kathleen Shipman Ruiz ~ Class of 1982

For Kathleen (Kathy) Shipman, growing up in Leslie provided a foundation that has stayed with her throughout an impressive career spanning public accounting, entertainment, higher education and the nonprofit world.

The ninth of ten children, Kathy remembers Leslie as a place where



Kathleen Shipman Ruiz
Class of 1982

she enjoyed sports, friendships and the freedom of small-town life. She played nearly every sport available and especially loved basketball, earning a spot on the varsity team as a freshman. Just as important were teachers and staff members who recognized potential in her that she did not always see in herself.

Kathy was the first in her family to graduate from college. She credits Mr. Benson with first suggesting that college was something she could pursue. With encouragement from her brother Rick, who worked at Michigan State University, that possibility became a reality.

After beginning at Lansing Community College, Kathy transferred to Michigan State, where she earned both her bachelor's degree and MBA through an accelerated five-year program. A strong student with a

natural ability for numbers, she chose accounting in part because it offered financial independence. She passed the CPA exam and began her career with Ernst & Young in Chicago.

A few years later, an unexpected phone call changed the course of her life. A recruiter was looking for Midwestern accounting talent for The Walt Disney Company in California. Kathy accepted an internal auditing position and moved west, thinking she would stay only a few years. Instead, California became home.

At Disney, Kathy traveled the world auditing international operations and licensees before moving into accounting, financial planning and strategic planning. Her career later took her to corporate finance with The Hughes Corporation. After her sons were born in 1997 and 2000, she stepped away from her career to focus on her family and later launched a consulting business.

Eventually, Kathy entered higher education at Marymount University, where she became CFO and was named CFO of the Year by the Los Angeles Business Journal. She later joined Loyola Marymount University's film school before moving into the performing arts. Today, she serves as CFO of an opera company, where she has modernized financial systems, strengthened reporting and built a highly skilled finance team.

Throughout her career, Kathy has

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Director's Corner

Cindy Farley
Executive Director

Fall is here, and so is the LPS Foundation Annual Fall Campaign, a time for our Blackhawk community to come together in support of the students and educators of Leslie Public Schools. Every gift matters and helps provide opportunities and resources that enhance the educational experience for our students.

This year, we're adding a little friendly competition with Battle of the Blackhawks: A Decade Showdown! Check out page 3 to see how you can help your decade claim the bragging rights.

Leslie alumni can make a gift and represent their graduating decade. If your child, spouse, parent, or another relative graduated from Leslie, you can give in their honor and represent their decade. No Leslie connection? Join the challenge as a Blackhawk Supporter.

Of course, you don't need a competition or a mug to make a difference. A gift of any amount is meaningful. When many people give what they can, those gifts come together to create opportunities that can have a lasting impact on our students.

This fall, give back, have some fun, and show your Blackhawk pride. Together, we're building stronger schools and brighter futures for every Blackhawk.

A Legacy of Learning: The Allender Family's Leslie Story Bill Allender and Kristen Allender Ambroggio

For Bill Allender and his daughter, Kristen Ambroggio, education is more than a profession. It is a family tradition deeply rooted in Leslie Community Schools.

Bill spent 30 years in education, including 26 at Leslie High School teaching Industrial Arts. For more than a decade,



Bill Allender and
Kristen Allender Am-

he also served as the school's Contact Counselor for the Capital Area Career Center. Kristen is continuing the family tradition in her 21st year as an educator and ninth year at Leslie, teaching English Language Arts at Leslie Middle School.

Neither father nor daughter started college expecting to follow the path they eventually chose. Bill entered Northern Michigan University intending to become a history teacher before a friend encouraged him to explore Industrial Arts. Kristen began college as a business major before realizing education was where she belonged.

Educators had been part of Kristen's life for as long as she could remember. Many relatives on Bill's side were teachers, and her father's Leslie colleagues became much more than coworkers. "I was surrounded by great role models," Kristen said. "They were not only his friends and coworkers. They were family."

Those relationships helped shape the educator Kristen would become. From her father, she learned that everyone in a school, including teachers, support staff, and administrators, has an opportunity to make an impact.

While education has changed considerably over the years, particularly with technology, Kristen believes some of the most important things have remained the same. "Kids need structure," she said, something she saw firsthand in her father's classroom and has carried

into her own approach to teaching.

Bill was known for his "tough love," setting high expectations while making sure students knew he respected them and would be in their corner. Kristen carries that same combination of structure and support into her classroom.

Their connection to Leslie also extends beyond the classroom. Bill and his family made their home in the community, forming relationships that have lasted for decades. Kristen spent 12 years teaching in Florida, but Leslie continued to feel like home.

When she returned for her interview in 2018, Kristen remembers walking into the school and immediately recognizing the familiar smell of the building. The familiarity brought back memories and a sense of belonging. "It felt like home," she recalled.

Today, Kristen talks with her students about what it means to be a Blackhawk. For both father and daughter, the answer comes back to people, relationships and community.

Kristen is reminded of her father's impact whenever she meets someone who once sat in his classroom. "He's a legend in these parts," she said. "Whenever you talk with anyone who had my dad in class, there's always a story or memory they can share."

Many of those memories reflect the lessons Bill worked to instill in his students. He encouraged them to find the path that was right for them, emphasizing that college was not the only route to success and that skilled trades could lead to rewarding careers. No matter which path they chose, his message was the same: work hard and you can do great things.

After decades in education, Bill takes pride in the success of Leslie's students and staff. Kristen sees his impact in the stories former students continue to tell. Now, with a new generation of Blackhawks, she is building a legacy of her own.

Your Support at Work: Turning Ideas Into Opportunities

The Leslie Public Schools Foundation continues to make a difference by helping teachers bring creative ideas and meaningful experiences to Leslie students.

Foundation support has helped bring music, technology, science, literacy, math, physical education, and life skills to life throughout our schools. We have helped provide musical instruments and equipment, digital cameras for yearbook students, math games, classroom headphones, flexible seating, technology resources, and an aquaponics station for hands-on science learning.

We have also helped create experiences students will remember. Third graders have explored the human body through dissections and hands-on learning stations, while special education students have built teamwork, independence, and everyday skills through "Food Fridays." Our support has also helped recognize student achievements in physical education, provide families with strategies for supporting emotional regulation at home, and give students opportunities to serve others in their community.

From musical instruments and science equipment to technology, life skills, and creative, unique learning experiences, the Foundation helps give Leslie educators additional tools to engage, inspire, and support their students.

This work is possible because of the generosity of our donors and community supporters. Every donation to the Leslie Public Schools Foundation helps turn great ideas into real opportunities for our students. Your support provides experiences and resources that enrich education, encourage creativity, and help Leslie students succeed.

Thank you for investing in our teachers, our students, and the future of Leslie Public Schools.

Kathleen Shipman Ruiz

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discovered that her strengths extend beyond numbers. Her ability to communicate, write, mentor, and solve difficult problems has distinguished her as a leader. Her goal whenever she joins an organization is simple: leave it better than she found it.

Despite building her life in Southern California, Kathy believes her Leslie roots remain a significant part of who she is. She credits her upbringing with teaching her humility, kindness, compassion, persistence and a strong work ethic.

Looking back, Kathy wishes she had understood earlier how many educational opportunities were available to her. As co-valedictorian with strong test scores, she now realizes she could have considered colleges she never imagined were within reach. That experience shapes the advice she offers Leslie students today.

"Reach for the sky," she says. Don't assume money, circumstances or self-doubt have to limit your future. Financial aid and other opportunities may open doors you did not know existed.

She also encourages students not to worry if they haven't chosen a career path by graduation. It is normal to explore, change direction and discover new interests. Every experience, she says, adds another skill to the "portfolio" you build throughout life.

Most importantly, Kathy encourages young people to believe in themselves, take chances and pursue meaningful work.

Today, she remains an avid athlete and pickleball player, loves traveling and looks forward to spending more time with family and giving back. Although California has long been home, Kathy remains grateful for where her story began.

She offers a heartfelt thank-you to Leslie Public Schools for providing "a good education," strong role models and a safe, supportive environment that gave her the foundation to achieve everything that followed.

Battle of the Blackhawks A Decade Showdown

Get ready for a little friendly competition! This year's Battle of the Blackhawks: A Decade Showdown lets generations of Blackhawks show their school pride while supporting LPS students.

Represent your decade! Donate to the Leslie Public Schools Foundation, select your decade, and enter your graduation year to see which class earns bragging rights! Leslie alumni

can represent their graduating decade, while family members can give in honor of a Leslie graduate and represent their decade. No Leslie connection? Join the fun as a Blackhawk Supporter.

Help your decade come out on top! Scan the QR code, or type the address below into your web browser. Every gift helps build stronger schools and brighter futures for our students.

*Which decade
will come out
on top?*



*Which class will
win first place
bragging rights!*

<https://leslie-public-schools-foundation.square.site>

★ LESLIE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOUNDATION ★

BATTLE OF THE BLACKHAWKS

A DECADE SHOWDOWN!

ONE SCHOOL. GENERATIONS OF BLACKHAWKS. ONE BIG CHALLENGE.

YOUR DECADE. YOUR PRIDE. YOUR CHANCE TO GIVE BACK!

★ ALL DECADES. ONE GOAL. ★
STRONGER SCHOOLS. BRIGHTER FUTURES.

WHICH DECADE WILL CLAIM THE BRAGGING RIGHTS?

1940s AND EARLIER	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	2020s

NOT A LESLIE GRAD? YOU CAN STILL JOIN THE BATTLE!

- ★ If a parent, spouse, or relative graduated from Leslie, represent their decade.
- ★ If your child or children graduated from Leslie, represent their decade.
- ★ If you're not a Leslie graduate and don't have a graduate to represent, choose a decade of your choice and join the challenge as a Blackhawk Supporter.

GIVE TODAY. REPRESENT YOUR DECADE. SUPPORT OUR STUDENTS.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET STARTED PUT YOUR CLASS AND/OR DECADE IN THE BATTLE!

TOGETHER, WE KEEP THE BLACKHAWK SPIRIT SOARING!

Building Success One Mile at a Time Steve and Sherri Rybicki — Class of 1977

For Steve and Sherri (Wilcenski) Rybicki, their story began long before they built a successful trucking business. High school sweethearts and 1977 graduates of Leslie High School, they have built a life, family and business grounded in hard work, perseverance and strong relationships.



Looking back on Leslie, Steve remembers the people most, including the friends, teachers and coaches who made students feel they belonged. He especially remembers teachers Mr. Smith (who replaced Mr. Tague), teacher and coach Mr. Benson, and Coach Murphy.

Those years also reinforced a lesson Steve carried through life: work hard first, then enjoy the rewards. As a teenager, he earned his own spending money working on farms, developing a strong work ethic.

After high school, Steve joined the Navy and served for four years. When he returned home, he began driving for a transport company. After an unexpected setback, he purchased his own truck and struck out on his own. Many customers followed him, helping launch what became Rybicki Trucking.

Starting a trucking company wasn't easy. Steve credits banking relationships he began building as a high school student, when he received his first loan, with helping him through those early years. With hard work and Sherri's support, they built the business one step at a time.

The company started with one truck and operated from their home. Remarkably, the second driver Steve hired more than four decades ago is still

with the company today, now working as a dispatcher.

What began with Rybicki Trucking has grown into three businesses. Rybicki Trucking handles transportation, Specialized Transport owns the equipment used by Rybicki Trucking, and Covered Warehouse owns the buildings and machinery supporting the operation.

Their work has become increasingly specialized, handling oversized and unusual loads few carriers will accept, including bridge beams as long as 150 feet and aerospace-related freight.

For Steve, the company's facility is a reminder of how far they have come, from changing oil in the driveway and working on trailers outside to having facilities where the work can be done indoors, rain or shine.

Steve is quick to acknowledge he didn't do it alone. Sherri, his father, customers and employees all played important roles, while teamwork and treating people well remain central to the company today.

Their advice to Leslie students who dream of owning a business is straightforward: be ready to work. Steve encourages students to pursue education in their chosen field and understand that long-term goals sometimes require sacrifice.

Family remains central to the Rybickis' story. Steve and Sherri have three daughters, with their oldest serving as the company's CFO, and four grandchildren. They enjoy traveling, while Steve maintains a longtime interest in British sports cars.

What began with one truck has grown into a family business built on hard work, strong relationships and perseverance. Nearly five decades after graduating from Leslie together, Steve and Sherri continue moving forward together.

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Blackhawk Network



Once a Blackhawk, Always a Blackhawk.
Uniting Alumni, Staff, and Friends of Leslie Public Schools.

Stay connected with everything happening at the Leslie Public Schools Foundation! Whether you're an alumni, current or former staff member, or a supporter of the district, we'd love for you to join the Blackhawk Network.

Scan the QR code to sign up and stay in the loop with future newsletters, Foundation updates, alumni news, and upcoming events. You can also join by visiting lps.foundation and clicking on the Blackhawk Network page.



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