

Fall/Winter 2025

The Ruthmere Record

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Cover Photo & Above: Night-Blooming Cereus in Ruthmere's Greenhouse, taken at a Blooming Party on September 14th, 2025 by Executive Director, Bill Firstenberger.

We Are About to Bloom!

By William A. Firstenberger, Executive Director

The cover photo of this issue was taken on September 14 at our second impromptu Night Blooming Cereus Party of 2025. This "short notice" event series has kept our staff on our toes as we are on the cactus's schedule, not Ruthmere's. Yet by being forced into learning new abilities to maneuver quickly and take advantage of previously untapped local talent, we have discovered that Ruthmere has the capacity to constantly remake itself into something fresh and stunningly beautiful. Stay tuned for more exciting surprises of this type, we are planning (as best we can) for more, but this event is only a metaphor for what is to come for our entire organization.

Ruthmere Campus is about to bloom in many important ways. The Beardsley Discovery Center is about to permanently change for the better the way that we deliver our services to the public. However, this great new facility would mean nothing if we fail to make our improvements and opportunities known to our community far and wide. The Ruthmere Board has taken a bold step to hire the expertise of J2 Marketing to lead us in the development of a new marketing plan, in which we are currently engaged. Once in place our Board has made the further commitment to aggressively put the Ruthmere brand out front as never before with a robust marketing budget. Our next step is a comprehensive canvassing survey by Thrum Analytics to be launched in October to a full range of our constituents.

WATCH FOR IT IN YOUR EMAIL! We need to hear your voice through this survey--it's the best gift that you could give to Ruthmere. Please take the time to participate, as the results will help guide our direction and marketing efforts for many years to come. With your help through sharing your opinion on all facets of our programs and services Ruthmere will bloom spectacularly in 2026 and beyond.



The first night-blooming cereus Blooming Party on August 12th. Photo by Tim & Meg Shelly.

Texas Student Takes Top Prize in 8th Annual Beardsley Cup

by Mark Doddington, Membership Coordinator

Saturday, September 20, saw the Eighth Annual Robert Buchanan Beardsley Memorial Piano Prize Competition in Ruthmere's Game Room. Six extraordinary talents gathered to compete for the top prize of $1000 and an opening night performance in our Fall Concert Series, scheduled for October 16.

The winner for 2025 is Sean Yang of Rice University in Houston, Texas. Yang, the sixth and final performer of the day, took top honors for his dazzling renditions of works by Frédéric Chopin, Edvard Grieg, Franz Liszt, and Isaac Albéniz. In addition to his piano studies at Rice, Yang is also focusing on biomechanics, the study of human movement, at MIT.nano Immersion Lab in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He also studied at Vanderbilt University in Nashville and at the University of Michigan.

Second prize, a check for $300, went to Ye-Eun Hyun of South Korea. Hyun has performed in venues all around the world, including Carnegie Hall. She recently earned the Musicians Club of Women's Award for 2025. She also claimed the Korean Honor Award from the US Embassy for South Korea.

Rounding out the top three, Pun Punyasavatsut of Bangkok, Thailand, took home $200. Punyasavatsut also competed in last year's Beardsley Prize. He is currently working toward his Doctor of Music degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Also competing this year were Mijeong Lee of South Korea, currently studying at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan; Takeshi Nagayasu of Japan, presently studying at UMich in Ann Arbor; and James Wilson, currently studying at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Nagayasu also competed in last year's Beardsley Prize, claiming second place.

A total of fifteen hopefuls entered the 2025 Beardsley Prize, whittled down to the top six by a panel of distinguished and accomplished judges, all Doctors of Music and all with copious experience on both sides of the judges' table.

Taking on the herculean task of judging this year's competition were Drs. Robert Elfline of Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois; James Helton of Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana; and Clare Longendyke, a full-time touring concert pianist and former Beardsley finalist.

In addition to the composers played by Yang, this year's Beardsley Prize also offered music by Robert Schumann, Ana Sokolović, Elliott Carter, Johann Sebastian Bach, Nikolai Kapustin, Ludwig van Beethoven, Alexander Scriabin, Nicolas Namoradze, and Claude Debussy.

On a final note, many thanks to the backstage crew, Joy Olsen, Andrea Hutslar, and Connie Saltzgaber, for helping make this year's event flow without a hitch. Their precision timing kept everything right on track. And finally, thank you to our Piano Competition Presenting Sponsor, Doug Beardsley.

We look forward to seeing Sean Yang again on October 16. For details regarding Ruthmere concerts, please visit www.Ruthmere.org or call 574-264-0330.



Piano Competition Finalists: Takeshi Nagayasu, James Wilson, Mijeong Lee, Pun Punyasavatsut (3rd), Ye-Eun Hyun (2nd), and Sean Yang (1st)

Holiday Tours - Toys Through Time

by Carolyn Bonanno, Communications Coordinator, and Joy Olsen, Collections Manager



Remember those favorite toys from your past, the ones that you might still have stored in a safe place, saving them for your grandchildren one day? Ruthmere's 2025 holiday tour's theme, "Toys Through Time," will bring those childhood memories to life. Ruthmere has invited local designers to bring their creativity and expertise to decorate Ruthmere Museum with toys from 1875 through 2025. This period covers 150 years of children's play.

Each designer has selected a local nonprofit of their choice to represent. During the Holiday Season at Ruthmere, visitors will be given a ballot at the end of their tour to vote for either their favorite room or their favorite nonprofit. That drives the incentive for people to come for a tour and pay close attention to the efforts that have gone into the toy decorations. At the end of voting, Ruthmere will award a $1,000 check to the winning designer's nonprofit. You will have a chance to not only see those favorite toys from your past but come and support your favorite nonprofit! "Toys Through Time" Holiday Tours run November 29th – December 30th. Be sure to check out the Havilah Beardsley House, too, which will also have antique toys on display! For more information Ruthmere.org.

Thank you to our sponsors, Doug Cripe and the Elkhart County Convention and Visitors Bureau!

Ruthmere Night at Holiday Lights

by Andrea Hutslar, Outreach Curator

Every year, Wellfield Botanic Gardens hosts a spectacular holiday event that lights up the cold winter nights of Elkhart: Winter Wonderland Holiday Lights. Over 1.8 million lights transform the beautiful Wellfield Gardens into a magical wintry landscape, and thousands come every year to experience this unique offering by one of our city's top attractions. This year, however, we are offering Ruthmere fans a chance to support our organization and make their visit even more memorable. We invite you to join us at Ruthmere Night at Holiday Lights on Thursday, December 4th from 6-8 pm at Wellfied's new Visitors Center!

Your ticket to this festive event includes:

- Hearty eats provided by Teri's Bichin Kitchen Catering;
- Holiday cheer (both alcohol and non-alcohol) from Navarre Catering;
- A special one-night-only exhibit display of the History of Ruthmere Holiday Tours;
- A short musical interlude of wintertime classics at 7 pm with our own Program Educator Tehillah Moses and Docent Kate Irelan;
- And, of course, your walk through Wellfield's Winter Wonderland Holiday Lights!



Tickets for adults are $50, and tickets for children 15 and under are $20. Our reservation deadline is November 28. You can register at Ruthmere.org or by calling us at (574) 264-0330. We hope to see you there - and thank you to our underwriters, Connie Fulmer and Doug & Karen Grant!

Fall Into Music This Fall

by Mark Doddington, Membership Coordinator

It's almost time for the 2025 Ruthmere Fall Concert Series to begin. As the leaves begin to change outside, the Game Room will become very colorful with music. Starting on October 16 with the winner of this year's Eighth Annual Beardsley Piano Prize and concluding with our traditional post-Thanksgiving event, we can look forward to a magnificent and magical season.

First-place Beardsley Prize-winner Sean Yang will launch the season on Thursday, October 16 at 7:00 pm. Yang, a student in both piano at Rice University in Houston and in biomechanics (!) at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, will reprise his stellar performance with additional material. Upon completion of the concert, he will be presented with his $1000 prize and a framed gold certificate commemorating his victory on September 20. His name will also be added to the illustrious roster of Beardsley Prize winners on display beside the silver cup on permanent display in the Game Room.

On October 30, we welcome Spencer Myer. An international superstar, Myer has performed on four continents and in states from Rhode Island to Alaska. Among his contributions to the symphony world are the Cleveland Orchesta, The Cape Town and Johannesburg symphonies in South Africa, and the Orquesta Filarmónica de Jalisco in Mexico.

November 13 will bring us Varshavski & Shapiro. Stanislava Varshavski was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Her partner in the arts, Diana Shapiro, hails from Moscow, Russia. They have been performing together since their days at the Jerusalem Rubin Academy in Israel, starting in 1998. They are both currently on the faculty at Silver Lake College in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Together, they will bring their keyboard skills to dazzle us on one, or both, of our antique pianos.

November 28, a Friday, welcomes the return of Elkhart's own Nicholas Roth. Roth grew up in the neighborhood around Ruthmere, and spent many of his childhood and teen years practicing in our Game Room. Currently on the staff at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, Roth has been closing our Fall Concert Series for many years, and we look forward to seeing him once again.

As an added bonus, on December 11, Ruthmere proudly presents the Norell Piano Duo in a two-piano holiday performance. Luke and Mary Rose Norell, both on the faculty at Goshen College, have appeared at Ruthmere

2025 Fall Concert Lineup



October 16
Beardsley Prize Winner, Sean Yang
Sponsored by Wade Mayberry



October 30
Spencer Myer
Sponsored by Eric Trotter



November 13
Varshavski & Shapiro
Sponsored by Marie Smith



November 28
Nicholas Roth
Sponsored by Terry Trimmer

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Sandra Van Tilburg

(cont'd from pg. 6)

many times over the last few years, including judging the Beardsley Prize and hosting their own piano camp recital in our Game Room. This concert marks the beginning of what we hope will be an expanding series of two-piano presentations at Ruthmere.

With the exception of Nicholas Roth, all concerts will be on Thursday evenings. All concerts begin at 7:00 pm. Tickets are $20 for Ruthmere members, $50 for non-members. Season passes are available to Ruthmere members for $80. For information on reserving your seats or becoming a Ruthmere member, visit our website at www.ruthmere.org, or call 574-264-0330.

Beardsley Discovery Center Penultimate Update

by William A. Firstenberger, Executive Director

I've always liked the word penultimate, but I've never had a really good reason to use it in a piece of writing, until today. Penultimate means "second to last," but it sounds so much more important than that, and that's a good thing because we have very good news with this penultimate update. The Beardsley Discovery Center is slated to open to the public on April 1, 2026, with all other Ruthmere Campus sites on our traditional Opening Day of Tour Season. A short thirty days later, we will hold the Grand Opening Ceremony Ribbon Cutting of our new facility on May 1, followed by a reception celebration.

But the party is just getting started. The next day, May 2, we will host our Second Annual Derby Day event on the grounds of Ruthmere Mansion. We will again welcome the beautiful "Sarge" from RC Egan Training Stables to wow our guests and pose for pictures, and the HUGE double-sided big screen TV from Monster Message will delight fans at race time. Fashion will also take center stage with a new "Hats" division, and remember that the smoking porch is open for just this one day of the year for stogie-lovers!

A new VIP Package will be released in the months ahead to make your experience better than ever, and when the race is done, the celebration continues at the Derby Day Afterparty at the High Note of the Hotel Elkhart. Place your bets now on a winning good time!







Photos from Derby Day 2025 by Howard Higby

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Long Live Downton Abbey!

by Joy Olsen, Collections Manager

Do you know whose line that was in *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale*? (Spoilers ahead!)

It was my favorite character, Lady Mary. And I was crying my eyes out when her father, Earl Grantham, gave a finger kiss and said goodbye to the old home, *his* home for most of his life. We found out that the next generation will live on in the beautiful castle. Long live Downton Abbey!



A couple dressed up in period attire for our Downton Abbey *Dinner & Movie in 2022*

Ruthmere has had a long history with the popular *Downton Abbey* series. We created tea events and jazz clubs, and even partnered with the local movie theaters to premier new seasons and the movies that followed. Folks looked to us to give them a "sneak-peek" into the newly released seasons, and then the new movies that replaced the long-playing series. Whenever the next one was aired, we would have an event. Just like clockwork! Ruthmere even had a contest that gave the lucky winner an all-expense paid trip to the famous Highclere Castle in England where *Downton Abbey* was filmed - you can't beat that! The couple had a wonderful time!

I too, was very fortunate to have traveled to England to take an all *Downton-Abbey*-centered trip. It was offered by a local travel company, and we saw so many places used throughout the long running series. For instance, we walked the stairs in the castle that the cast cascaded up and down, stood in the graveyard where Mary cried for her poor deceased Matthew, and visited the stables where the huge show horses started the fox hunt. It was a trip I will never forget! I am so happy we went. We even had the opportunity to be served an afternoon tea on the grounds behind Highclere. During that afternoon my husband, Denny, and I were just steps away from the current owner, the Earl of Carnarvon, George Herbert, and his son. I had such a love for England that I have traveled there 2 more times. I would definitely go again!

I find it so nice that the creator of *Downton Abbey*, Julian Fellowes, would plan to air the finale during Ruthmere's Tuesday Teas @ 2 season, September through the end of October. It was just so kind of him, and I didn't have to create an event, we already have one – once a week! Thank you again, Julian, for giving us the theme for this year's popular fall teas. It has been a wonderful season. Every week has sold out - long live Ruthmere's teas!

In conclusion, I have to admit, I have a deep emotional bond with the *Downton Abbey* series, and figure I always will. Having tea will always remind me of watching the show every Sunday night while enjoying a cup of Earl Grey tea!

So before I get choked up again, let me stress that if you have not seen *Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale*, you must. It was a wonderful, over-the-top production with the Crawley family and a sweet nod to the beloved characters that either left the show or passed on to their mansion in the sky. It exceeded all my expectations, a hundred times over.

Now, raise up your teacup and say out loud, "Long live Downton!"



Promo image for Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale

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Want to see your name on this list next year? Contact Executive Director Bill Firstenberger at (574) 264-0330 or bfirstenberger@ruthmere.org to set up a time to chat!

The Mousleys From a Teacher's Perspective

By Susan Law, Visitor Services Manager

When you announce, "It's time to learn about Elkhart's history," even if you use your most excited third-grade teacher voice, you are met with the proverbial blank, deer-in-the-headlights stares.



Many a teacher has been tasked with the daunting question, "How do I get kiddos excited about our city's past?" Much to my relief, I needn't toil long, thanks to the educational programs available through The Ruthmere Foundation. Visiting the Ruthmere Campus gives students a firsthand experience, an eyeglass if you will, into life during the 18 and 19 hundreds. Sharing historical art, its beauty, and the need for its preservation becomes more important to the audience. Well, definitely for the adults on the tour, at least.

There was still a connection missing for the students. The goal is to get all students fully engaged and to help children understand the need to take care of our physical history, right?

Just as I thought I had done everything I could to make (read in a dull affect) Indiana Social Studies: Grade 3/ The Local Community and Regional Communities standards 3.1.1 through 3.1.8 stimulating, Andrea Hutslar, Ruthmere's Outreach Curator and Joy Olsen, Ruthmere's Collection Manager, created an invaluable gift for learners and teachers alike...*The Mousleys At Ruthmere*. Lady Libbie and Lord Bertie Mousley are the small, whiskered, furry personification of Elizabeth and Albert Beardsley. Since their introduction in 2021, classroom children have been able to relate to and appreciate Elkhart's history on a much deeper level. The Mousley's books and video bring the house and its art to life. Kiddos are whisked into the past, spurring on their imaginations and deepening their appreciation.

School tours now begin in the classroom with Bobby Mousley, one of Lady Libbie's and Lord Bertie's nephews. He is the narrator of "My First Museum Visit." Students sit with wide eyes and open hearts as Bobby shares museum etiquette and the need for preservation of art collections. During my last of thirty-some Ruthmere Museum tours, my students and I assembled in the Game Room. As we waited for the Mousley's video to begin, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. A round-cheeked face with a missing-front-toothed smile whispered, "Mrs. Law, Look! The Mousleys!" I followed his gaze. My heart was instantly warmed - for right there, on the stage beside the majestic obsidian-black Steinway…Lord and Lady Mousley were dancing. Turning back to agree, I saw not only the gleaming face of my young friend, but 24 little faces transfixed on the magic of the Mousleys.

The video was queued. All eyes turned to the screen. The Mousleys were talking, moving, teaching us about the Ruthmere home, its collection, and its importance. Even me, the old headmistress, got chills to see the Mousleys come alive. The bus ride back to school was filled with questions and comments of, "Mrs. Law, how can you get a job at Ruthmere? What do the workers do to protect the art? I want to work with art. Can I become a curator? Do I have to go to college to get a job there?"

Thank you Lady Libbie and Lord Bertie for making social studies standards 3.1.1-3.1.8 so exciting. So real. We are forever grateful.

Welcoming New Part-Time Team Members

by Jennifer Johns, Curator

We're excited to announce Susan Law and Abigail Gratzol as new part-time visitor services staff members to our team! As our organization continues to grow, we remain committed to providing exceptional service and support to our community.



Susan is a long-time educator with Elkhart Community Schools, where she taught for several decades before transitioning into her role with Ruthmere. She brings a passion for history, education, and community engagement. Mentoring is one of her passions. She strives to provide a vision of what's possible, helping students set goals for brighter futures and achieve their potential. Susan is dedicated to creating meaningful connections that inspire curiosity and a love of learning. When not at work, you would most likely find her reading, relaxing with her dogs, or visiting with family and friends.



Abigail is an Elkhart native and grew up right down the street from the Havilah Beardsley House. She graduated from the University of Indianapolis with a BA in History and a minor in Archaeology. Her passion for state and local history has led her to volunteer at local museums (the Havilah Beardsley House being one of them this past year). Abigail also has a part-time position as Assistant Curator at the National New York Central Railroad. In her spare time, she enjoys reading and writing, being outside, and spending time with her nephew.

All our staff members have diverse skills, and a shared passion for our mission; each of us play a vital role in helping to serve you better. Please join us in giving Sue and Abigail a warm welcome!

Grants in Action: Restoring Spaces and Celebrating Seasons

by Karen Shirk, Grants Coordinator

One of the most exciting parts of working at Ruthmere is seeing how support from generous partners can truly bring our historic spaces to life. This year, we're thrilled to share a behind-the-scenes project that's been quietly in the works - and one that means a lot to us: the restoration of Ruthmere's Staff Dining Room.

It's a small room, tucked away from the grander parts of the mansion, but it tells an important story. This was where household staff would take their meals - a simple, functional space that was once part of the everyday rhythm of life at Ruthmere. Now, thanks to the funding in part by a grant from the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we've been able to begin restoring the room to reflect its original character and purpose. It's a thoughtful reminder that every corner of the mansion, no matter how humble, has a story worth preserving.

The Havilah Beardsley House, too, has recently had a major restoration. The front porch project, funded through grants from the Americana Corner Grant Program and Daughters of the American Revolution, was finished in August, and the front of the historic home has been returned to its late-19th-century appearance.

As we work to restore the past, we're also looking ahead to one of Ruthmere's most beloved traditions: our Holiday Tours. With generous support from the Elkhart County Convention and Visitors Bureau and donor Doug Cripe, we're excited to welcome visitors once again for a festive, history-filled experience this winter with our "Toys Through Time" holiday tours.

Whether we're restoring a dining room once used by staff or decking the halls with vintage toys and holiday cheer, every project at Ruthmere is driven by the same goal: to preserve history and invite others to experience it in meaningful, memorable ways. We're deeply grateful to our supporters for helping us bring these moments to life.

Lightning in a Bottle

by William A. Firstenberger, Executive Director

Lightning in a bottle - it's a curious term. We all think of this phrase as exemplifying some type of extraordinarily rare and unlikely success, and the essence of being a witness to that achievement. But what does it feel like? How does one know when they've crossed into the realm of "lightning in a bottle status?" It's cliché to say, but "you'll know it when you've experienced it" surely rings true. Well, it happened on June 18, 2025, and the story is so compelling, it demanded to be put into writing. Twice!

Ruthmere's Membership Coordinator, Mark Doddington, whose name is synonymous with our music concerts, got the first word in on this story with his piece, "Piano in the Dark," which is posted on Ruthmere's blog *House of History*. Mark's article captured the aesthetic beauty of the experience so well, I dare not wish to compete with his poignant narrative. My goal here is merely to add a new layer of context to that spectacular event, and perhaps inspire others to forge new memories at Ruthmere.

It was the finale day for our 2025 Spring Concert Series. The day began with an unusually strong morning rainstorm that left the ground saturated and the air thick with steamy humidity - fuel for the forecasted afternoon cold front which threatened truly dangerous storms. Hours later, with darkening skies to the west, the thunderstorm hit with a fury at 4pm, knocking out power at Ruthmere Mansion - a most unusual result. "Surely, the power will come back soon, it's never out here for long," said Collections Manager Joy Olsen, who has been an employee longer than any staff member in Ruthmere's history as a museum. An hour later, the power was still out, and we had a momentous decision.

Should we cancel or postpone? The Atwater-Reed family had taken out a week of their lives for this special trip to the hometown of Tyler Reed's mother, Vicki Atwater, close friends with our Concert Sponsor Jim Kelly. No, too much was riding on this, but first things first, let's check with our 16-year-old artist. Tyler Reed, the youthful phenom, who for the past two years has taken the eastern seaboard classical music scene by storm (of a different kind), was cool as a cucumber. "I'm good. I don't need light to read the music because I've memorized the program," Tyler said with a wry smile. With Tyler confident and ready, I hastily typed out an email to all attendees, "Tonight's concert is moving forward as planned. But we have no power, so please bring a flashlight."

I shared with the audience that night that I have a theory, "a little adversity makes for a great memory." By that I mean that when things go perfectly smooth, one may have an enjoyable experience, but if you toss in a few mishaps along the way, you're going to create a much stronger memory for future recollection, and furthermore, I believe that this "strength through adversity" idea should be actively sought out. Ruthmere supporters will find the phrase *Gratias Ago Adversis Vires*, which means "I thank the forces of adversity," as my family's Thanksgiving wish in the 2026 Ruthmere calendar.



Tyler Reed performs by electric candelight - photo from the Atwater-Reed Family

(cont'd from pg. 14)

That night the combination of small, but manageable, hurdles (careful stairwell steps in the darkness, lack of air conditioning and a general uneasy feeling of these unprecedented conditions for a concert) made for an electrically charged atmosphere of drama--in a room without functioning electricity! With no HVAC to provide the background hum soundtrack of 21st century life, the silence in the Game Room was deafening before Tyler struck his first note.

Tyler's performance was everything Mark so eloquently expressed and more (you really need to read Mark's article!). But for me it was the fact that Tyler perfectly executed his skill under conditions that no musical artist would want to attempt, and he did it with a graceful ease and smile. We were witnessing the formation of a legend. For those who were there, this memory will endure for the rest of our lives. For those who were not there, their imagination will have to be enough, and we hope will motivate them to seek out their own lightning in a bottle. Ruthmere and its staff will do our best to provide the opportunities.

Do You Have What it Takes to Perform at Ruthmere?

by Mark Doddington, Membership Coordinator

We are proud to announce the 1st Annual Ruthmere Solo String Competition, coming in the Spring of 2026. Based on the growing success of our piano competition, we are opening the doors for violinists, violists, cellists, classical guitarists, and more (anything acoustic and string-y). Contact Mark Doddington at 574-264-0330 or mdoddington@ruthmere.org for more details.

We're also on the lookout for new talent for our Coffee on the Piazza series. Pop, country, R&B, and jazz in a relaxed, family environment, every Saturday morning in June, July and August. Send me your YouTube videos. There's money and free coffee!

Summer Fun in the Sun



Artists connect at the Ceramic Showcase on July 12th



Performer Wyatt Marshall shakes hands with the audience at Coffee on the Piazza on July 5th



The Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony for the newly-restored porch at the Havilah Beardsley House on August 8th - photo by Ace Media

Ruthmere
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Ruthmere is supported by its membership, private donations, planned gifts, and legacies.

New Readers for Lincoln Penny Story Hour

by Tehillah Moses, Program Educator & Susan Law, Visitor Services Manager

It has been a busy year with the Lincoln Penny Story Hour and we have more programs ahead of us this fall and winter! In this get-to-know-your-community program, we are looking forward to having Deborah Domine speak on perspectives in journalism and the first amendment from her time as a judge. The other fall speaker we have is Darlene Lidy. She will be speaking about how she navigates life in the Elkhart community with a wheelchair, while also having a business named Wheelchair Help selling disability products.

We are especially excited to welcome our Christiana Creek neighbor and first youth presenter, Willow Townsend. She is a 12-year-old activist, musician, scholar, international award winner, and Braille-Literate learner.

Willow was born blind and has made it a priority to raise awareness of the Blind and Low-Vision community to foster a more inclusive world. She is a twice exceptional learner in the Elkhart Community School district as a high-ability student with blindness. But, don't think for a minute that she is letting blindness set her limits. In a 2023 WNDU interview, Willow was quoted as saying, "It is amazing just to be blind. I know most people would be like, 'Ew, I don't want to be blind. I want sight.' But for me, I like being blind, and I pretty much would never change the way I am because I like the way I am."

We appreciate all of our speakers for each of their unique strengths, differences and contributions to our greater Elkhart community area. If you want to learn and appreciate more about the community you live in, come to a public Lincoln Penny Story Hour or ask to be added to an email list for the next event. If you are an educator and would like to have your students participate, contact Tehillah Moses at 574-264-0330, ext. 112 or tmoses@ruthmere.org, or Bill Firstenberger at ext. 105 or bfirstenberger@ruthmere.org.



Willow Townsend at a recent ceremony for accessibility features at the pedestrian crossing at Main St. & Beardsley Ave. Photo from Elkhart Community Schools District News.