

Quarterly Newsletter



I Am Seen



Children's Bible
Fellowship of New York

— I Am Seen —

Dr. Rhonda shares how embracing identity without shame helps us and others feel truly seen. She challenges us to drop the labels and lean into what makes each of us unique. Read more on pages 5-8!

— Leading and Learning —

Wes and Jack reflect on how leadership, presence, and honest relationships help us see and be seen. Together, they show how growth happens when we're known and supported in community. Explore their stories on pages 9-12.

— A Place To Be —

Diego shares how CBF became a place of belonging, helping him feel noticed, known, and valued. His journey reminds us that simply showing up for someone can change everything. Be inspired on pages 13-14.

— I Still Belong —

A short word to all alumni: you still belong here. You are seen. You are missed. You matter. No matter how long it's been, your story is still part of ours on pages 15-16.

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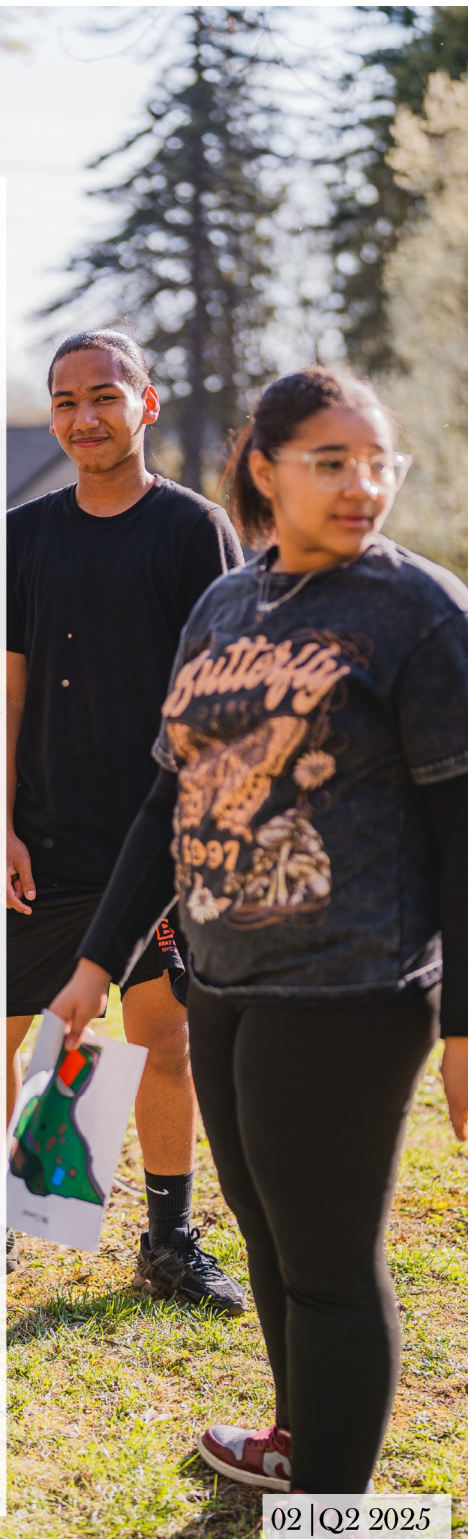
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Our Appreciation





NV CBE CEO

Our theme for the 2025 Fundraising Gala in June was “I Am Seen.” Dr. Rhonda Richmond was our keynote speaker, and her message resonated deeply with everyone in the room. Her experiences and reflections were a powerful echo of God’s heart toward each of us.

I asked Dr. Rhonda if she would write an article for this newsletter capturing some of the powerful insights she shared at the Gala. In this issue, you’ll find her article, her bio, and information on her book “But God Gave Me a Pencil.” I believe her life and story will inspire you as they did me—I encourage you to take the time to read.

If I were to write the story of the first 45 years of my life, I might title it: “I Hid.” There were many reasons for hiding—shame, fear, and self-loathing being the primary drivers. Yet, I discovered that I could not hide from God. But He did not come to accuse or condemn. Instead, He invited me on a journey to be seen.

That journey began in a Christ-centered recovery group, surrounded by a safe circle of men operating under strict guidelines. Slowly, as I began sharing the real me and was met with love and acceptance, I found the courage to remove the training wheels. I began sharing even my most shameful experiences in spaces that weren’t always “safe”—places without guidelines or guarantees. Still, I found I was loved—by God, and by some of His closest friends.

Now, I believe being seen is deeply connected to being loved. As Dr. Rhonda put it so poignantly, “Being seen is a



human right.” And I think I now understand why: if I wear a mask with others, only the mask can receive love. But being loved—for who I truly am—is my deepest human need.

The apostle Paul wrote:

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

—Romans 5:8

At CBF, this truth is reflected in one of our distinctives: the importance of being fully seen—every part of us—and yet fully loved. Being seen, and seeing others, is part of the DNA of this ministry.

As the prophet Samuel said:

“People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

—1 Samuel 16:7

Learning to see with God’s eyes is part of our calling as His bride. And as I continue to expose the layers of my lifelong hiding, I’m discovering new depths of love—His love, and the love that comes through His people.

~Sean Stewart



Meet Dr Rhonda

Dr. Rhonda Richmond is an educator and artist from Iowa with over 25 years of experience in research, curriculum design, and academic planning. She holds a doctorate in education and a master's in curriculum and instruction, with endorsements in special education and cultural and linguistic diversity. Her personal experience with learning disabilities, autism, and sensory challenges has shaped her passion for student development and long-term success.

When her children were diagnosed with similar challenges, she created literacy tools to support them—resources she later used as a special education teacher and principal. Known for her persistence and creativity, Dr. Richmond continues to advocate for inclusive education and professional growth, using her story and skills to inspire and empower others.

“But...GOD Gave Me a Pencil” is Dr. Rhonda Richmond’s memoir about her journey with autism and learning disabilities. Diagnosed later in life, she shares how she overcame early struggles with literacy to eventually earn her EdD and become a leader in inclusive education. The title reflects the strategies and tools that helped her turn challenges into strengths.

Alongside her story, she offers insights that supported her children and students with similar needs. More than a memoir, this book is a resource for anyone navigating learning differences and a reminder that disabilities are not weaknesses—but different ways of learning worth embracing.



“I Am Seen” — A Personal Reflection of Dr. Rhonda Richmond

These words didn’t always belong to me, and there’s a reason why. Across the globe, the word disability is still treated like a four-letter word. For many, it carries a sense of shame, limitation, or failure. It’s a label often whispered behind closed doors, wrapped in stigma, or spoken with pity. In some communities—including the one I grew up in—it was viewed as something to be hidden, fixed, or explained away.

As a child, I wasn’t diagnosed with any learning or developmental differences, but I lived every day with the internal confusion and exhaustion of someone who didn’t process the world the way others did. I now know that I am autistic and have multiple learning disabilities, but for most of my early life, I had no name for what I was experiencing. What others did see was my behavior—and it was often misinterpreted. I was, by many accounts, difficult. Hard to please. Judgmental. Stubborn. Teachers and family members described me as “too sensitive,” “too intense,” or “too grown.” I would cry when routines were interrupted. I had angry outbursts when I didn’t understand expectations or when instructions weren’t clear. I got into fights—not always with fists, but often with words. I could be harsh and literal to the point of cruelty, missing sarcasm and social cues and unintentionally wounding others with what I believed was just honesty.

I struggled with transitions. I obsessed over fairness. I clung to routines. I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t just “get it” like everyone else—why spelling, reading, and math felt like trying to decode a foreign language, even when I tried my hardest. And the hardest part? No one saw the root of the struggle. Not even me.

My grandmother, who raised me, did her best with what she had. She only had a fourth-grade education herself, but even she knew enough to be wary of the special education systems available to Black children in the 1970s and 80s. Many kids in those systems weren’t supported—they



NY CBF | Dr Rhonda

were tracked, labeled, and forgotten. So she kept me close. And while she didn't always understand why I acted the way I did, she gave me love, structure, and protection in the only way she knew how.

Still, I was a child trying to survive in a world that never seemed to make sense. And so, I learned to mask. Though I had no language for it at the time, masking became my survival tool. I studied people like a script. I memorized responses. I forced eye contact. I mimicked social cues. I copied what "normal" looked like. I learned to smile through confusion, laugh when I didn't get the joke, and nod like I understood—until the mask became my face. That's how I made it through school. That's how I graduated from high school—functionally illiterate. I didn't understand phonics. I couldn't write a paragraph that made sense. I didn't have basic math skills. But I could perform well enough to move through the system unnoticed. Unseen.

Over time, a few mentors entered my life—beautiful, well-intentioned people who tried to help me grow. But one by one, they each reached a point where they had to pass me on to someone else. It wasn't out of neglect or lack of care. They had simply hit the ceiling of what they knew how to give. I had needs that didn't fit into the frameworks they were used to—and I didn't have the words to help them help me.

Years later, I became a mother. And when one of my daughters began struggling in school, everything I had buried came rushing back. I saw her frustration, her confusion, her withdrawal—and I saw me. I remembered how it felt to be lost in the classroom. I remembered spelling tests that reduced me to tears. I remembered secretly practicing how to write my name for hours, just to avoid embarrassment in front of my peers. And I knew I couldn't let her carry the same pain I had carried.

So I sat down at our kitchen table—a plastic table with worn-out crayons and broken pencils—and I told her, "I see you. I love you. I believe in you." And we began again, together. Through faith, creativity, and determination, she caught up. Then she soared. Today, she holds multiple degrees, has a thriving career, and helps others in her own



powerful way. Not because she was fixed. But because she was seen. And for the first time, so was I.

At the age of 40, I finally received a full diagnosis. Autism. Executive functioning disorder. Sensory processing disorder. Dyslexia. Dyscalculia. I had a mirror that reflected back the real me—not the masked, exhausted version I had curated for decades, but the intricate, intelligent, deeply feeling person I had always been. That diagnosis gave me more than labels. It gave me permission to rest, to learn, to grow, and to forgive. It helped me forgive my family, and even myself, for all the times we got it wrong. It helped me reframe my past not as broken, but as beautiful in its resilience. And it opened the door for me to do what I now do every day: help others feel seen.

“I Am Seen” is Not Just a Phrase. It is the beginning of healing. To be seen is to be known and valued as you are, not as who people expect you to be. It is the difference between surviving and thriving. It is the moment when shame turns into dignity and silence turns into voice.

Today, I serve as an educator, program leader, and author. I mentor others who, like me, were once overlooked or misunderstood. I teach parents how to see their children. I show teachers how to look beyond the behavior. I walk with individuals who are still finding the words to name their pain and their brilliance.

To the leaders, supporters, and partners reading this: when you choose to see people—especially those who are misunderstood, mislabeled, or mistreated—you are doing holy work. You are disrupting generations of silence. You are creating space for others to come home to themselves.

And to those still waiting to be seen: your story isn’t over. Sometimes visibility comes quietly. Sometimes it starts with a whisper, a question, a moment of eye contact. But it will come. And when it does, it changes everything. Because being seen is not a reward for good behavior—it is a human right. And now, after years of hiding, masking, and fighting to be understood, I can finally say with confidence:

I am seen. And I will never stop seeing others.

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NY CBF || Hope

At CBF's Hope Community, I've come to understand what it really means to be seen—not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. Over the past year, I've had the chance to lead Bible studies, speak up during our monthly Hope Celebrations, and share ideas for our group. In those moments of leadership, I felt like people were truly paying attention. It's in those spaces that I don't feel like I'm in the background. When I lead, I feel like I matter.

Feeling valued is a big part of that, too. I've noticed that people in the Hope Community—whether it's the moms, staff, or friends—feel comfortable coming to me and having personal conversations. That means a lot to me. It shows that people trust me, and it makes me want to grow even more.

Some of my favorite memories this year haven't been the big events, but the honest conversations. I love checking in with Kathy, one of the moms, and having real talks. I also have a special friendship with Diego—he'll ask me about everything, from what to pack to how to get ready for things, and that makes me feel important. I try to help others like Stephen, who asked me how he could work at CBF. I told him the truth: it's a process. It's something I've been learning too—how to become more independent. Over the past couple of years, I've grown in that way, physically and in how I speak up. I'm more confident saying “no,” offering ideas, and knowing my voice matters.

But being seen isn't always easy. It takes time and effort—both from me and from others. Sometimes I wish people could better understand what it's like to live with a



disability like cerebral palsy. Even if it takes me longer to do something, I still get it done. And when I help someone else like Stephen or Jacob, I try to imagine what things feel like for them, too. I've learned that empathy is important. Everyone deserves to be seen for who they are—not just what they can or can't do.

The people at CBF mean a lot to me. Some days are good, and some days are harder, but I'm learning to be patient—with others and with myself. I just hope people try to imagine life from my shoes and give space for my voice. That's what it means to truly be seen.

CBF hasn't always been easy, but it has changed me for the better. Over the last eight or nine years, I've grown a lot. I've learned more about myself, my abilities, and what it means to be a leader. Being part of Hope has given me that chance.

And for that, I'm thankful.

~Wes Nepumoceno





When I think about what it means to be seen, it's not just about someone noticing you—it's about someone understanding you. For me, feeling seen looks like being known and loved even in the mess. It's being challenged and called out, but also being encouraged and built up. No one does that more clearly in my life than my wife, Laura. She sees every side of me—the self-doubt, the co-dependency, the hurt I carry and sometimes cause—and she loves me anyway. She supports me when I can't see what I need, helps me grow as a man and a husband, and keeps me grounded in my relationship with the Lord. Her unconditional love reflects how God sees us: fully, honestly, and still chooses us.

That same kind of presence—of truly seeing someone—is what we strive to offer our students every day. This year, we've had more opportunities than ever to make that happen. Our partnership with BSSWA has grown in depth and consistency, and we've been embedded in their classrooms multiple times a week throughout the school year. In that space, we've built real relationships with students. We've listened as they shared their dreams and doubts, asked for advice about life after high school, wondered about their passions, and worked through practical steps like interviewing for jobs or navigating social challenges. They've asked hard questions about their identity and purpose, and we've tried to offer a steady, compassionate voice in return. Our goal has always been simple—to show up and care. And over time, they've let us in.

We've also had the privilege of hosting Elevate Retreat Days and a BSSWA Senior Class Trip, giving students time



away from routine to reflect, rest, and have fun. These moments matter. They break through the noise of everyday life and offer students space to breathe. Whether it was during these larger events or smaller Youth Group Takeover Nights, we've seen the impact of simply being present. At one of those church nights, Codi and I shared about our experiences with anxiety and panic attacks. We talked openly about how mental health struggles don't disqualify you from faith—and how seeking help is not weakness, it's wisdom. Conversations like those are where vulnerability meets healing. For many students and even adults, it was the first time they heard someone say it's okay to not be okay, and that God meets us in our brokenness.

There's something powerful about being truly seen—by God and by others. This year, we've done our best to offer that to our students, to let them know they matter, that we care, and that they are never alone. And in doing so, we've been changed, too.

Thank you to everyone who's prayed, given, and stood with us. You are part of this story. You've helped us show up, stay consistent, and be the hands and feet of Christ to a generation hungry to be seen.

~Jack MacKay



An Interview with Diego Ortiz and Codi Bement

There's something powerful about being truly seen—not just noticed, but understood, accepted, and valued. For Diego, that's what CBF has become: a place where he can just “be,” where people know him, care for him, and take the time to listen.

Diego first came to CBF years ago, after being introduced through Uncle Wynn and later reconnected through Uncle Jim and Miss Gail while recovering in the hospital. What began as an introduction has since grown into deep, enduring community. “I like the family, the friendships that I have... I look up to you guys like family,” Diego said with a smile.

Though he once lived at CBF and attended the on-site school, his journey has continued in a new season—one filled with Hope Celebrations, activities, and new connections. “I like coming to Hope Celebrations because I get to meet new people,” he shared. “Even if I already know most of them, I still meet someone new every time.”

Diego openly reflected on how being at CBF has helped him grow socially and emotionally. Talking to new people was once incredibly difficult. “I felt shy and embarrassed. I didn't know anybody. But now, I've learned how to open up. I've grown to be a nice person,” he said. For Diego, that growth wasn't just about gaining confidence—it was about learning that people would really listen, that his voice matters.

When asked what it means to feel seen, Diego answered with clarity: “It means I have people around me who see me for



who I am, who talk to me and listen. They don't judge me. They understand." For Diego, being seen also means being able to share parts of his story and find connection in the experiences of others—like a conversation with a staff member who, like Diego, grew up without a father. "We had the same struggle," he said. "That made me feel really seen."

If you were to ask Diego what CBF is all about, he wouldn't list programs or facilities. He'd say, "Come and see for yourself. You'll feel welcomed. You'll get something out of it. You'll find people who really care."

Diego's story reminds us of what truly matters—not flashy events or perfect plans, but creating space for people to be known. In a world where so many feel forgotten or overlooked, Diego's words echo our mission: to reconnect the next generation and the forgotten into real belonging in the Body of Christ. At CBF, Diego knows he is loved. He is heard. He is seen.

~Diego Ortiz





We Still Belong to Each Other — Join Us for CBF Alumni Day!

There's something sacred about shared memories - the kind that shape us deeply and stay with us long after the season has passed. Whether you were a counselor, camper, volunteer, teen teamer, Hopetown staff, full-time staff or more, you helped build something that's still alive today.

That's why we're inviting you back home. CBF Alumni Day is happening on Saturday, August 23 from 2:00-9:00 PM, and we would love to see you. Whether it's been 20 years or just two, this day is for you. It's a time to reconnect, laugh, reminisce, meet one another's families, and hear about the incredible work the Lord continues to do through CBF.

We look forward to catching up with alumni and sharing where the Lord is leading CBF. The modes of ministry may have changed over the years, but CBF's heartbeat remains the same - loving NYC youth and the special needs community through deep, year-round discipleship.

Our theme, "I Am Seen," is not just a phrase - it's the heart of everything we do. True relationship begins when we are fully seen, with all our defects and glory, and yet are still fully loved and embraced. That's the kind of belonging we want to nurture - not only in the young people we serve, but in our alumni family too.



**The Lord isn't done writing our story - and as alumni,
you're still a vital part of it.**

Important Notes:

- ◆ RSVPs are required by August 18 to RSVP email to Ann Chavarro (Annabelle) at alumni@cbfny.org
- ◆ Event from 2:00pm—6:00 pm
- ◆ Families are welcome
- ◆ A detailed schedule for the day will be sent out soon

We really hope you can come. You were - and still are - a meaningful part of this ministry's story. Looking forward to giving you a big hug!







Because of you, more young people and adults with special needs are finding places where they're known, heard, and valued. From classrooms to retreat days to quiet moments of conversation, your support is helping people experience real connection in a world that often overlooks them. You've helped create opportunities for growth, leadership, and healing—and that's no small thing. We don't take it for granted. Your presence behind the scenes—praying, giving, showing up—makes the work possible. We see you. And we're so grateful to be walking this journey together.

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