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For the Love of Literacy

Speech-language pathologist and family literacy advocate Kelly M. Byrd, Ed.D., has worked with her staffing firm for more than a decade. The job flexibility staffing provides has allowed her to accomplish many life goals—including writing a children’s book that has helped her students feel represented and passionate about reading.

By Glenn Cook

Kelly Byrd is on a mission for children “who look like me.” She wants to help students in high-need urban areas get resources and support so they can be confident and competent readers. She wants to write and publish books that are culturally representative and empowering. And, in her newest role, she wants to be a good “mommy” to the two-year-old girl she gained custody of last year.

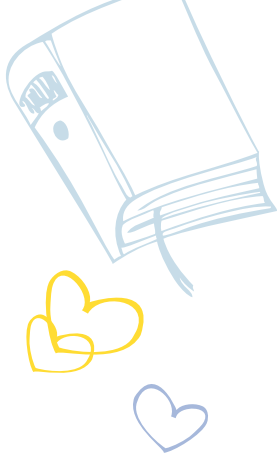
Byrd, the 2024 National Staffing Employee of the Year, also is a realist when it comes to her ambitions. She knows she can work toward those goals because Supplemental Health Care, the staffing firm she works for as a K-12 speech-language pathologist, provides her with the support and flexibility she needs.

While working with Supplemental in St. Louis Public Schools, Byrd completed her dissertation, wrote a children’s book, and started the Love for Literacy nonprofit that has donated thousands of books to youth over the past five years.

“I’m very fortunate to work with a company and a recruiter that understands and encourages my passion and desire to help others,” says Byrd, who has been with Supplemental for more than a decade. “They have been there for me every step of the way.”

Dan Riddle, regional director for Supplemental Health Care’s schools division, was Byrd’s recruiter and has continued to work with her as a friend and supporter throughout her tenure with the staffing firm. He says Byrd downplays her accomplishments and is quick to shift attention to others.

“She does a great job of taking the spotlight off of her and putting it on other people,” Riddle says. “She’s got a great story—a doctorate, a great family she grew up in—and yet she sees the other side. She knows everyone is not in her shoes, and so she goes above and beyond to help anywhere she possibly can.” >>>



Righting the Reading Disconnect

Byrd attributes her success to a combination of factors: family, strong mentors, faith, good fortune, and hard work. Talking about her journey to this point, she provides evidence of each.

As an undergraduate at St. Louis University, she knew she wanted to go to Howard University in Washington, DC, to pursue her master's degree. When one of her mentors—professor Linda Campbell, Ph.D.—died during Byrd's junior year, she had the opportunity to meet the speaker at Campbell's memorial service—the late Orlando Taylor, Ph.D.

“The person who came to speak was the graduate dean at Howard, who had, as it turns out, been a mentor to Dr. Campbell,” Byrd says. “I had an opportunity to meet him and told him I knew that's where I wanted to go. The day I graduated I got a message that I had been admitted to Howard.”

After two years in Howard's speech pathology program, where she received a master's degree in communication sciences and disorders, Byrd left DC for a position with Atlanta Public Schools,

where she worked for three years and found her passion for literacy.

“I was looking at children who did not want to read and write, and I started trying to understand where the disconnect was happening,” she says.

Byrd left Atlanta to pursue her doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, focusing on literacy practices within Black families. She saw that children are “more connected to reading if they're able to see images of people who look like them” and remembered that it was “something I always wanted when I was a kid.”

While in school, she applied for a position at Supplemental Health Care, which was working with St. Louis Public Schools to fill high-need positions in its special education department. She was brought on as a full-time speech therapist.

“Kelly is a perfect example of the flexibility the staffing industry provides that the regular work world doesn't,” Riddle says. “We can bridge gaps and provide long-term solutions—both for our staff and for the school districts we serve.”

A Call to Return Home

After four years in Illinois and completing the majority of her doctorate program, Byrd moved to Texas to work in the Houston school district and to continue writing her dissertation. But after a year, her family in St. Louis—and her desire to help children in the inner city she called home—were “calling me back” to Missouri.

“I have three incredible nephews, and before I went to Houston I had them come up to Illinois to visit me. One day I was on the phone with my youngest nephew, and he said he was looking at a collage of pictures I had made for them from that trip. And then he said he missed me and wished I was home,” Byrd says. “I was back in St. Louis in two weeks. I just packed everything up and went back.”

Supplemental Health Care made it possible for Byrd to return home, complete her degree, and work in St. Louis Public Schools.

“Working in schools has some really rewarding moments, but you also have those times when you are just shook,” Byrd says. “Our children have so many tough experiences—the loss of a parent, the loss of classmates. You're never prepared for that type of a situation and, unfortunately, it's something that happens entirely too often.”

The pandemic, she says, was “really rough” because families did not have the technology access needed for students to work at home. “We were so unprepared for it, and it was just a scramble to get



2024 National Staffing Employee of the Year Kelly M. Byrd, Ed.D., accepts her award at Staffing World, the ASA annual convention and expo, last October in Charlotte, NC, alongside her recruiter Dan Riddle (second from right), regional director for Supplemental Health Care's schools division; Katie Dashiell (far right), marketing manager of Supplemental Health Care; and Jason Marconi (far left), president of non-acute care at Supplemental Health Care.

Photo by Burton Photography

the kids the resources they needed,” Byrd says. “At the same time, it was awesome to see everyone in the district—the teachers, the administrators, the people providing special education services—come together and do their best to help. The district showed much resilience.”

Going home for Byrd was just the beginning of her professional relationship with Supplemental and with Riddle.

“Dan is an incredible recruiter, and he’s been there with me through everything that has happened over the past 11–12 years,” Byrd says. “He was incredibly supportive when I was working on finishing my dissertation and when I was going through illnesses with my mom and dad. He created a safe place for me because I knew I had someone in my corner who was always there and would stand up for me in whatever capacity that I needed him to. It’s been awesome.”

Now in its 40th year, Supplemental Health Care started a large expansion of its K-12 education work to help school districts staff hard-to-fill positions in their special education departments. Riddle, who now oversees a group of recruiters that serve school districts across the region, has kept Byrd on his personal team because she “goes above and beyond to help anywhere she possibly can.” “She’s almost a ‘too good to be true’ person for me,” Riddle says. “I can’t think of anyone I know who is more selfless. Lots of people see a need and talk about it, but they don’t do anything about it. She sees a need and her feet get into action.”

Strong Support Systems

In 2015, three years into her St. Louis tenure, Byrd finished her dissertation; she created the Love for Literacy nonprofit two years later. She also decided to write a children’s book and found a mentor in Patricia McKissack, a St. Louis author of more than 130 titles. Byrd’s father and McKissack had taken piano lessons from the same teacher when they were children.

“The idea for my book came from the first conversation we had,” Byrd says. “She was just incredibly down to earth, and it was almost like talking to a family member. It had been raining all day long, and she said, ‘Talking to you is just like sunshine on an otherwise miserable day.’ That stuck with me—and months later when she passed, I remembered what she’d said.”

The day McKissack passed, Byrd decided to write a thank-you letter to her as a “therapeutic thing for myself.” From that letter her 2018 book—*Like Sunshine On an Otherwise Miserable Day*—was born.

Since the book was published, Byrd has given away more than 4,000 copies to children during the annual St. Louis African Arts Festival, which is held each year on Memorial Day weekend. “When Supplemental found out about the work I was doing outside the job—work that I was really passionate about that was connected to the kids and the school district—they provided funding that has allowed me to purchase hundreds of books for the festival,” Byrd says. “To me, that just speaks volumes.”

For the past two years, Supplemental Health Care also has donated copies of Byrd’s book and other multicultural titles to the company’s speech-language pathologists, students, and school districts as part of Family Literacy Day, a nationwide event held each November to raise awareness about the importance of reading and writing together in a family setting.



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– Dan Riddle, regional director for Supplemental Health Care’s schools division

“I’ve never been in a situation where a company goes above and beyond to support something that I really love to do,” Byrd says. “That’s meant a lot to me.”

Flexibility to Reach Goals

Byrd was going through a series of major changes when she learned she had won the National Staffing Employee of the Year award. After a decade in St. Louis, she was starting a position as a speech-language pathologist for St. Joseph Public Schools. The move allows Byrd to work remotely and take care of her two-year-old cousin, who she became guardian of in September.

“She’s such a selfless person—even in her personal life,” Riddle says. “Even though her heart is with the kids in St. Louis, what has occurred in her personal life means that, for now, she needs to work in a remote position. Fortunately, because she’s part of the staffing industry, she has the flexibility she needs to do so.”

Byrd says she was “kind of in shock” when she learned she had won the ASA honor and says it “validated that the work I do is important and necessary.” “It was not important to get a pat on the

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Meet the 2024 National Staffing Employee of the Year All-Stars



Sponsored by PMC Insurance Group, the National Staffing Employee of the Year and All-Star awards honor current or former temporary or contract employees with an extraordinary story of staffing success and who best exemplify one or more of the industry's key messages of bridging and flexibility. ASA names All-Stars, as merited, in each industry sector: engineering, information technology, and scientific; health care; industrial; office-clerical and administrative; and professional-managerial. Learn more at americanstaffing.net/nsey.



Health Care Sector All-Star Kelly M. Byrd, Ph.D.

Supplemental Health Care

Kelly M. Byrd always knew she wanted to work with kids and ensure they had their voices heard. As a child, she wanted to see characters in books that looked like her. As an adult, she turned to Supplemental Health Care, where her contract assignments provided her with the flexibility to go back to school and complete her doctorate degree. She also founded the nonprofit organization Love for Literacy, which promotes Black family literacy in her community, and wrote the children's book *Sunshine On an Otherwise Miserable Day*.

In November 2022, Byrd partnered with Supplemental to create family literacy resources for Family Literacy Day that were shared with the company's speech-language pathologists, students, and school districts across the country. Supplemental has also donated hundreds of copies of her children's books to school districts across the country. Byrd used staffing to grow her career and give back to her community, showing what can happen when talented people partner with staffing.

Photo by Adrian Tatum Photography



Engineering, Information Technology, and Scientific Sector All-Star Meisha Millwee

Harvey Nash

Meisha Millwee helped make a difference in her community during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. After moving from Dallas to Nashville, Millwee turned to Harvey Nash to help her find a role in her new town. Just months into her contract as the project coordinator for communicable and environmental diseases and emergency preparedness at the Tennessee Department of Health, Covid-19 swept the nation. In the ensuing months, she oversaw efforts to help skilled nursing and assisted living facilities adjust to an online program that tracked available beds, services, and assets in the Volunteer State. Now, Millwee is a liaison to the White House Task Force for Communicable and Environmental Diseases team to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for Covid-19 reporting. Millwee's talents are changing the lives of others thanks to the opportunity she gained in staffing. Millwee was also recently given the first-ever Harvey Nash Global Contractor of the Year award from among 11,000 active, highly talented, and passionate contractors from around the world.

Photo by Matthew Pessoni,
Gemini Production Group Inc.



Industrial Sector All-Star Kathy Stanifer

Employbridge

Kathy Stanifer is using the flexibility staffing provides to help people (and animals) in need. Affectionately known as "Granny" by her co-workers, Stanifer currently works as a CDL driver for Gleaner's Food Bank in the Indianapolis area. After finishing her daily route in the afternoon, she cares for homebound patients by cleaning their homes and helping them with meals. Stanifer also rescues injured and neglected horses, rehabilitating them with her own money and then giving them to people within her community. Stanifer is an exceptional person who's using staffing to improve the lives of everyone around her.

Photo by Just Go Creative



Office–Clerical and Administrative Sector All-Star

Cassandra Hughes

Express Employment Professionals

For Cassandra Hughes, staffing provided the flexibility she needed to deal with a major life change. After starting a role as a customer service agent, her world changed when she was granted custody of her five nieces and nephews—all of whom were under the age of 10. Hughes worked closely with the team at Express Employment Professionals to adjust her schedule so she could maintain a full-time weekly paycheck. A year after starting, Hughes was offered a full-time role with the client company.



Professional–Managerial Sector All-Star

Carla Monroe, PMP, CSM, CSPO, CSSGB,

CMQOE, ITIL

Kelly Technology

Staffing has allowed Carla Monroe to work remotely and better balance her work with her personal life. Through Kelly Technology, Monroe is able to pursue her career as a technical project manager for a West Coast transit agency while spending time with her daughter in South Carolina. Her flexible schedule also allows her to regularly attend meetings of her local Project Management Institute chapter so she can further develop her leadership skills.

Photo by Double Take Photography



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After giving her acceptance speech on stage at Staffing World® 2023 as the 2024 ASA National Staffing Employee of the Year, Kelly Byrd read her new children's book, *Like Sunshine on An Otherwise Miserable Day*, to conference attendees during special Author Talks at the ASA Bookstore.

Photo by Adrian Tatum Photography

Learn More About Love for Literacy

National Staffing Employee of the Year Kelly Byrd always knew she wanted to work with kids and ensure their voices were heard. As a child, she wanted to see characters in books that looked like her. With the support of her staffing firm Supplemental Health Care, Byrd founded the nonprofit organization Love for Literacy, which seeks to shine a light on the importance of African-American family literacy experiences and their role in literacy development in children. She also authored the book *Like Sunshine On an Otherwise Miserable Day*, which is culturally representative and empowering for Black children. Learn more about these initiatives at loveforliteracy.org.



back,” she says, “but it was a signal to me that I’m doing good work and I’m doing the right things.”

Katie Dashiell, Supplemental Health Care’s marketing manager, has helped facilitate the company’s donations to Byrd’s literacy efforts and has worked with her on a variety of projects, including her presentation at Staffing World, the association’s annual convention.

She saw that children are **“more connected to reading if they’re able to see images of people who look like them”** and remembered that it was **“something I always wanted when I was a kid.”**



“Before her Author Talk at Staffing World, she said, ‘I’m reading a children’s book to adults; I don’t know what kind of questions they’ll have.’ Then afterward, there were so many people who came up to her in tears because they felt represented,”

Dashiell says. “It was awesome for her to see the impact she is making firsthand.”

Moving forward, Byrd has no intention of slowing down. In addition to “continuing to be mommy and growing into that role,” she plans to keep promoting her literacy events and has “three or four more books floating around in my head.”

“My goal is for children to come and pick up Black children’s books that show them they can be president, or a ballerina, or a doctor, or a scientist,” she says. “Book publishers have traditionally published white authors where Black children are not the main characters. I want them to have books that look like them and are reflective of the experiences they can have. That’s my future. That’s where my energy and efforts will go.” ■

Glenn Cook is a professional writer who has covered a wide range of business and education topics. He also is a prolific photojournalist, having created award-winning article and photography packages for national publications.

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