Sights & Sounds

The Magazine of Alabama Institute for Deaf & Blind

Fall 2023

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AIDB newly-appointed President, Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., with John Mascia, Au.D., immediate past President of AIDB.

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**A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT**

Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D. smiles to camera.

The day that the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Trustees appointed me as President was a tremendous experience, and the realization of a lifelong dream to have the opportunity to give back to this organization that has meant so much to my family. Having been at AIDB for thirty years as a professional, and for all of my childhood as my parents lived and worked in service to AIDB, I cannot imagine working for a more worthwhile organization. For me, AIDB is home.

The type of institution that AIDB has been for the past 165 years is a true testament to its original mission and the original goals of our founder, Dr. Johnson. I am incredibly thankful for those who have served in leadership before me, particularly John Mascia, Au.D., who retired as President of AIDB earlier this year. I credit Dr. Mascia’s spirit and “yes mentality” to the continued success of AIDB. We are bringing the most talented staff from across the nation who work in the areas of exceptionalities to work at AIDB. My vision is to leverage that wealth of talent and knowledge by expanding the level of services we have by refining and increasing the services in the City of Talladega as a model that can be put into place across the state in our regional centers. We want to develop well-rounded individuals who can live independently in the community of their choice.

We have made great strides in providing support to students in our residential programs, yet we still have room to grow. Soon we will be investing in the renovation of some of our residential halls to provide the most accessible environments for our students. While we make strides in that arena, I will also be prioritizing the opportunities provided to the AIDB staff through focused professional development in leadership, training, and peer mentoring.

I am incredibly honored to be entrusted with the leadership of this life-changing organization. I sincerely believe that AIDB is this country’s premiere organization serving people who are Deaf, Blind and DeafBlind. In the weeks, months and years to come; I will wholeheartedly commit myself to leading AIDB in its pursuit of transforming the lives of those we serve beyond expectations.

I sincerely appreciate the AIDB Board of Trustees for entrusting the leadership of this life-changing organization to me. I am thankful for the support of Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, the Alabama State Legislature, and the AIDB Foundation Board of Directors for their continued support of AIDB. I am thankful for the donors who support the AIDB Foundation, and the staff and employees of AIDB who all support our mission with their treasure and talent.

Together we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless.

Sights & Sounds is published by the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind Office of Institutional Advancement, P.O. Box 698 Talladega, Alabama 35161.

A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

THE NEWLY APPOINTED PRESIDENT OF THE ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND IS A VETERAN EDUCATOR WHO BRINGS A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE, AND PERSONAL HISTORY TO THE ROLE.

Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D. leans his back against a desk and smiles to camera. He wears a gray suit and tie.

THE LONG, rich history of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind is one of compassion, devotion, integrity, and, above all else, service to others. These tenets not only represent the institution as a whole, but also the dedicated individuals who have given their lives to the growth and prosperity of the schools and their students. The newly appointed eighteenth President of AIDB, Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., is no exception to that level of commitment.

“My connection to AIDB runs deep,” says Gilliam. “The story begins with my grandmother who had

five children, three of whom were Deaf.” One of those children, Gilliam’s late father, was able to obtain an education from the Alabama School for the Deaf and go on to have a successful career as an educator and a salesman thanks to the decision his mother made to move her family to Talladega, Alabama after being told her Deaf children would never be anything more than farmhands. “This slight woman of four foot eleven, 98 pounds, loaded up a truck with five children and moved so her three Deaf boys would have a chance to succeed.”

Gilliam’s father, who became an educator for the Alabama School for the Deaf, and his mother who was also Deaf, set the stage for Gilliam’s passion for the Institute and led to his first job after graduating high school—working in maintenance and construction for the school. “AIDB is home,” says Gilliam. “It’s not just the place where, as a child, I’d lie on the gym floor and wait for my parents to get done with work but having the opportunity to work construction and then transition into education and administration has given me a unique perspective.”

The new President is now serving his 30th year at AIDB and says his number one focus in his work will always be to give back. “You’re supposed to make things better than when you found them,” he says. “I have been given the opportunity to make some of that change happen and I’m very thankful.” Gilliam also recognized the tremendous work and legacy of the former AIDB President Dr. John Mascia, and credits Mascia’s spirit and “yes mentality” to the continued success of the Institute. “I will consider myself a success if I am able to garner just a little bit of the success he’s been able to achieve over the last ten years,” says Gilliam. “He’s known how to push people ahead and realize what’s possible.”

Gilliam with students from Alabama School for the Blind; Thelonius Sylvester (left) and Clara Scelsi (right).

While AIDB remains the world’s most comprehensive program serving individuals of all ages who are Deaf, Blind, or DeafBlind, Gilliam says you’d be surprised how many people are still unaware of its services. Spreading awareness and showing donors the astounding abilities of the schools and their students is one of the main focuses of fundraising efforts. AIDB’s reputation also brings educators and professionals from across the nation to work for and learn from the Institute.

“’Yes, Alabama,’ is a phrase I continue to use anytime I give a presentation about what we do,” says Gilliam. “’Yes, Alabama’ is where the premiere service provider to Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind individuals is located. We are bringing in the most talented folks in the United States to work in the areas of exceptionality—they make the trek here from all over to work with us.” The diversity and shared mission of AIDB’s staff is what Gilliam also says makes the schools so special. “I believe we have the most competent, dedicated, and qualified staff that anyone could offer,” he says.

Along with his storied connection to AIDB, Gilliam also had the unique experience of coaching football and working as the descriptive video announcer for the wrestling team. “Back in the 90s we had a closed loop FM system that was broadcast about 50 feet away from the matches. I would sit in a booth and describe what was happening during these matches so that our visually impaired folks could know what was happening.” AIDB’s students are not only given opportunities to succeed in education through its programs, but sports and extracurriculars are made accessible in ways not possible in mainstream environments. “Our goal is to help these kids develop holistically,” says Gilliam. “We want them to do the best they can every day, whether that’s in athletics, academics, or in daily life skills like washing their own clothes and cooking their own meals.”

In his previous role as Vice President for Institutional Programs, Gilliam’s focus was expanding AIDB’s presence through the development of key partnerships that would serve AIDB’s consumers. His work included new relationships with the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and Gallaudet University to help benefit AIDB’s students beyond graduation. Among Dr. Gilliam’s immediate goals is overseeing the building of a student life conference center that will connect AIDB’s campuses. That project has been approved by the Board of Trustees and will begin construction soon, alongside dorm improvements and other projects that fit the Institute’s strategic plan of enhancing programs for the students and constituents that AIDB serves across Alabama.

Gilliam with students from Alabama School for the Blind; Isabella Williams (left), Ashton Jackson, (center) and Landon Peacock (right).

Gilliam with Landon Peacock.

Gilliam stepped into his new role in September with a lifetime of history at AIDB and a bold vision for its future. The new President is focused on a list of short and long term goals he wants to achieve during his time in the role.

“We’ve made great strides in providing support within our residential programs, but we still have room to grow, and I want to renovate our residence halls to the highest quality,” he says. “We also don’t have enough opportunities for our students and staff at the Alabama School for the Blind, the Alabama School for the Deaf, the Helen Keller School of Alabama, and the E.H. Gentry Facility to be together and interact with all their friends at once. We’re in the middle of working toward providing a conference center that will allow us to bring all of our schools together.”

**A SWIMMER’S GUIDE**

By Dontè Little, Assistant Director, E. H. Gentry Facility

Adele Brandrup wearing a swimsuit, a swimming cap and goggles holds herself at the edge of the pool after a swim and looks to camera.

ALTHOUGH swimming is a good physical activity, it is an even greater philosophy for life. Just ask 19-year-old Adele Brandrup. The Homewood, Alabama, native is no stranger to swimming or to navigating a “pool of resources.”

Brandrup was born with CHARGE syndrome, a rare and complex condition that affects many areas of the body, including hearing and vision. Despite this diagnosis, Brandrup took up swimming at an early age and became an award-winning competitive swimmer. Adele’s mother, Julie, attributes her daughter’s success both in the water and in life to having a “pool of resources'' like Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) Alabama Initiative for Children and Youth who are DeafBlind (AICYDB).

Focusing on children aged birth to 22 who are DeafBlind or at risk for dual sensory loss, AICYDB works to improve student outcomes by providing targeted technical assistance and assistive technology services to caregivers and school systems. “Adele’s determination, accomplishments and successes as a youth who is DeafBlind have proven that individuals who are DeafBlind are limitless and can reach their dreams” states Josh Sharpton, Director of Deaf Services at E. H. Gentry Facility.

Julie reflected on their journey. “Homewood City Schools provided Adele everything she needed—she had no language deprivation. However, Jennifer Oldenburg, through AIDB’s DeafBlind Outreach Services, provided us the expertise we needed regarding DeafBlindness.”

The Brandrups participated in numerous educational, advocacy, and independence-building functions provided by AICYDB. “Adele overcame her fears and ended up growing a great deal academically,'' said Oldenburg.

Imagining the limitless possibilities for her daughter, Julie shared, “It is amazing how much was done with support from an outreach program. It is so important for people to know this option exists.” Now as a freshman at the University of Montevallo, and member of the University’s swim team, Adele is still swimming and grateful for her ever-growing “pool of resources”!

**EMERGING EAGLES SOAR AT HELEN KELLER SCHOOL OF ALABAMA**

By Amy Shelly, Academic Director, Helen Keller School

THE HELEN KELLER SCHOOL of Alabama (HKS) believes that our students are limitless! Each day, we provide safe opportunities for students to develop the academic and functional skills for life after graduation. We are always looking for new and innovative ways to increase our students' skills and abilities. Doing so led us to develop the new HKS Emerging Eagles program.

Emerging Eagles is designed for students aged 18 to 21 who have completed their high school academic requirements. “Our goal in the Emerging Eagles program is for students to increase their self-determination skills so that they can be as independent as possible and live a life that brings them joy,” said Shannon Dodd, Transition Coordinator, HKS. “This program is designed to teach independent living, functional academics, recreation and leisure, cooking and job skills. It also teaches our students to become active members of their communities through volunteering and getting to know others.”

Emerging Eagles works with the HKS Student Life Department to expand the curriculum into the residential setting. The program’s students who live in the HKS

Independent Living dorms practice daily the skills learned. The program also is working on a partnership with Community Coffee to create a coffee shop on campus. This partnership will allow students to gain skills related to the food industry to be better equipped to gain successful employment after graduation.

The Emerging Eagles program exposes our students to a variety of opportunities to develop personal interests through activities like visiting museums, attending sporting events and exploring hobbies. Not only does this help the students discover their interests, but it also allows them to interact with others in a relaxed environment, develop soft skills and learn to express themselves as individuals.

“We believe that their participation in the Emerging Eagles program will impact the rest of their lives,” added Dodd. “We can not wait to see everything our students accomplish and want to continue helping them see that they are limitless.”

Whitney Martin, HKS Emerging Eagle, learning financial skills with teacher Elsa Calhoun.

Kancherla Williams, HKS Emerging Eagle, learning food preparation skills with teacher Mikita Lindsey.

**EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS, ONE FAMILY AT A TIME**

By Patti Anne Chastain, Admissions Assistant, Health and Clinical Services Department

“Aaargh! I’m a pirate!” laughed Princeton Kirksey during his last eye exam. The staff in the Health and Clinical Services Vision Clinic not only provide expert care, they also make sure AIDB students are nurtured and have fun along the way!

A FIVE-YEAR JOURNEY brought the Kirksey family to the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), and with the help of AIDB’s Health and Clinical Services Department, they are now equipped to be limitless! In early 2018, La'Myrtis "Monae" Kirksey requested information about the Alabama School for the Blind (ASB). Her two oldest children, Jania and Jacoby, have Marfan syndrome, which can lead to multiple vision impairments. Kirksey was familiar with AIDB, having attended programs herself since losing her vision at the age of 23. But she was unsure about her children moving several hours away from their home in south Alabama to attend school. However, in the summer of 2022, Kirksey hesitantly called the Health and Clinical Services’ Admissions Department and said, "I'm ready to complete applications for Jania and Jacoby to see if they can come to school at ASB."

Kirksey had repeatedly said that she would like to move near Talladega to be close to her children if they went to ASB. Through the Admissions Department, Monae met Shenequia Cole, a Family and Community Engagement Specialist within Health and Clinical Services, who could assist in helping her move to Talladega. Shenequia was able to help with financial planning, relocation services and even assisted with finding new furniture. By December 2022, Kirksey had moved into her new residence in Talladega where Jania and Jacoby could come home to her every day after school at ASB. Shortly after moving, Kirksey started her own vocational training at AIDB’s E. H. Gentry Facility.

This school year, Kirksey’s youngest son, Princeton Kirksey, started kindergarten at ASB. Princeton also has Marfan syndrome and, like his family, he will continue to receive vision services through AIDB's Health and Clinical Services Department. "I am very grateful AIDB exists,” said Kirksey. “AIDB has improved my family's lives tremendously. Everything AIDB has done has been above my expectations.”

Through Health and Clinical Services, we are delighted to provide another family with limitless possibilities and a limitless future.

Monae Kirksey (middle) talks with Mandy Griffin, Admissions Coordinator (left), and Shenequia Cole (right) during a recent visit to Health and Clinical Services.

**DEAFESTIVAL BRINGS EDUCATION & AWARENESS TO ALABAMA’S GULF COAST**

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, AIDB Marketing and Community Relations

AS NYLE DIMARCO once said, “As a Deaf person, I came from a beautiful and unique heritage that included a multilayered culture, a visual language, and a wealth of stories.” And this rich heritage took center stage during Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) Deafestival: Deaf Awareness 2023!

“Deafestival is a great opportunity for us to get together, celebrate the rich culture and history of the Deaf Community and the pride that we have in supporting people who are Deaf, DeafBlind, or hard of hearing,” said Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “I want to thank the AIDB Regional Centers for their dedication and planning this event, and especially Isaac Beavers, Executive Director of AIDB’s Field Services; Ryan McDonald, Director of the Huntsville Regional Center; and Fred Miller, Case Manager for the Deaf at the Mobile Regional Center.”

Held in Downtown OWA, a shopping and dining district located at OWA Parks & Resort in Foley, Alabama, this year’s event drew over 300 registered attendees from across Alabama. The event led Foley Mayor Ralph Hellmich to declare the month of September Deaf Awareness Month for the city.

“With Deafestival, we’re promoting community education and awareness. That’s why it was important for us to have Deafestival in a public space like OWA,” said Beavers.

Deafestival is celebrated each September in conjunction with Deaf Awareness Month. This year’s event featured over 30 exhibit booths highlighting vendors who are Deaf as well as organizations within the Deaf Community.

“Many of the organizations that partnered with us for this event have the same vision as AIDB: to increase access for people who are Deaf,” said McDonald. “I encourage anyone who wants to support people who are Deaf to shop at Deaf businesses, learn American Sign Language and advocate for language access in your community.”

This year’s event was sponsored by the AIDB Foundation; the Alabama Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf; Dick’s Last Resort; LBP Interpreting, Inc.; the Mobile Association of the Deaf, Inc.; OWA Parks & Resort; the Regional Early Acquisition of Language; Sorenson; and Villaggio Grille.

“It was great to see many familiar faces from Talladega, Mobile, and all over the state of Alabama and beyond,” said Miller. “Thank you to those who attended and to those who make a difference for members of the Deaf Community.”

AIDB President, Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., kicks off Deafestival 2023.

**IMAGINATION TAKES FLIGHT THANKS, IN PART, TO HONDA**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

FROM SWINGS and slides to specialized play equipment, the students at Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) will soon be enjoying a new playground thanks, in part, to a generous donation to the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation from Honda.

The new playground will replace the school’s main playground which, after over 20 years of dedicated playtime, has reached the end of its lifespan. Plans are currently in development for a new 4,000 square-foot playground that will be designed to specifically meet the needs of ASB students. In addition to standard playground equipment, specialized pieces will be included to increase and promote sensory-rich play activities for students who are blind such as play panels with different textures, sound implements, and pathways with slight changes in grade and texture. For students who have low vision, color-coded elevations will empower them to navigate the playground independently.

“AIDB’s mission to help create a more inclusive community resonates deeply with Honda’s core values,” said Allen Cope, Senior Managing Counsel, American Honda Law & IP Unit. Cope also serves as President of the AIDB Board. “We are incredibly proud to support the new playground, where the unique sensory activities will enhance the joy and freedom of mobility for so many students.”

Donors to the AIDB Foundation are creating a place for joy and growth in the heart of the ASB campus – a place where children’s laughter will be the soundtrack of beautiful days outside and where the spirit of collaboration will give rise to an extraordinary haven for play.

“The AIDB Foundation is proud to partner with Honda,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director, AIDB Foundation and Office of Institutional Advancement. “We are extremely grateful for Honda’s support of AIDB’s mission. They continue to contribute to impactful projects for our students and consumers.”

ASB summer camper playing on the playground that will soon be upgraded thanks to donor support.

**FINDING INDEPENDENCE IN COMMUNITY**

By Alan Nunn, Principal, Alabama School for the Blind

WITH THE OPENING of the new Independent Living Center at Alabama School for the Blind (ASB), our students have the opportunity to spend an entire school year learning independent living skills while living in community with others. This program is a game changer for ASB students.

While ASB has always been proud of our Independent Living Skills program, we can now take it to a new level. The opening of the new center allows for a more intensive focus on the nine components of the Expanded Core Curriculum: Assistive Technology, Career Education, Compensatory Skills, Independent Living Skills, Orientation and Mobility, Recreation and Leisure, SelfDetermination, Sensory Efficiency and Social Interaction Skills.

"I’ve learned how to fully embrace my independence by practicing daily living skills such as living in an apartment setting," said Braxton Gardner, ASB Junior.

The Expanded Core Curriculum is taught in addition to students’ academic courses. Independent Living Center students plan meals, make grocery lists and go grocery shopping. During the Covid-19 pandemic, online grocery ordering became more widely available. Since then, Independent Living Skills instructors have taught students how to use their technology to place online grocery orders, combining a living skill with assistive technology.

Once the students have their groceries, they take turns preparing meals, where they learn how to measure and mix ingredients. The staff also teaches them how to label items with braille if needed. This provides practice in math skills combined with braille skills.

"Through the new Independent Living Center, I have learned cooperation, time management skills and self-discipline,” said Tamya DeWitt, Junior, ASB. The Independent Living Center also builds Self-Determination by putting students in a living environment where they learn to work with others. Through living and working together, students better identify their own interests and values, which helps them develop their problem-solving skills and their ability to speak up for themselves. "I get to experience what it’s like to live on my own and practice daily skills independently, or with help when needed,” commented Chrislynn Oliver, ASB Junior.

Another related skill is Social Interaction. Individuals who are sighted learn to pick up on visual social cues. Individuals who are Blind or visually impaired often have to learn to recognize social cues in other ways. Living and working with others and having the leadership of Independent Living Skills instructors helps students better recognize and respond to social cues.

Because of ASB’s Independent Living Skills program, students are better prepared for life after graduation than many of their peers. At ASB, we are excited for the limitless opportunities available in the new Independent Living Center!

Seniors Braxton Gardner, Tamya DeWitt, and Chrislynn Oliver enjoy an after-school snack in the kitchen. The new Independent Living Center features four apartments for students to live in independently and four two-person dorm rooms with a community kitchen and living room.

**THE FUTURE'S SO BRIGHT, FOR AFCB**

By Jessica L. Edmiston, Interim Executive Director; with Sarah Patnaude, Home Management Instructor; Chris Misterka, Travel Instructor; and Anna Trotman, Braille Instructor; Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind

“The Future’s So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades” by 1980s rock band Timbuk 3 became a life metaphor resonating with Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind (AFCB) students and staff because learning shades that completely block any residual sight are a critical part of learning techniques that empower independence.

AFCB was founded in November 2016 at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) Birmingham Regional Center before moving to an apartment complex in Birmingham’s Avondale neighborhood. Soon AFCB will move to AIDB North Campus, a 200-acre campus located in Decatur, Alabama. “The move to Decatur will allow AFCB’s enrollment to double; fulfilling new goals, dreams and adventures,” Braille Instructor Anna Trotman explained. Two apartment buildings will expand learning into the extended day as students traverse campus to get to and from class — all under learning shades. Braille affirmations will be placed around campus to encourage students on their respective journeys. Braille libraries and labs will feature the latest technologies for the Blind. Additionally, the new location will have three kitchens for Home Management classes, special events and training.

AFCB’s future includes full integration into the Decatur community through partnerships with local agencies; short and long-term immersion initiatives; and youth and senior programs. The move also allows for expanded partnerships with the AIDB Decatur Regional Center, American Printing House for the Blind, Alabama Academy of Craft, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services and Easter Seals Programs, which are all housed within AIDB North.

“Every day, I experience AFCB’s growing potential,” said Sarah Patnaude, Home Management Instructor. “As I imagine our future, I get excited about how much more impact we will have on students, staff and the community as we grow our programming and initiatives. Really, our future's so bright that everyone wants shades!”

Christina Cordova, navigates the neighborhood using orientation and mobility skills taught at AFCB.

Julia Fleming uses Microsoft Word to create her resumé and apply for employment.

**SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS & THE EXPANDED CORE CURRICULUM**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

Grady Harrison (far right) with fellow students in this summer’s Short-Term Programs course, Access to Curriculum. The course is a highly intensive course focused on the compensatory skills needed by learners with visual impairments to access the regular curriculum provided in their school.

THE ALABAMA INSTITUTE for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) has expanded its statewide services with the opening of Short-Term Programs located at AIDB North Campus in Decatur, Alabama. Short-Term Programs focuses on sixth-to twelfth-grade students who are Blind or visually impaired, and offers instruction in the Expanded Core Curriculum. Approximately 30 courses are offered throughout the year to help students gain knowledge in areas such as independent living skills, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, career education, self-determination and self-efficiency.

Students from throughout Alabama stay on campus for three-, four- or five-day courses.

“I was blown away by the students and their drive for learning and independence,” said Jessica Chapa, Director, Short-Term Programs, about the program’s first students. “The fact that they immediately formed a friendship that resembled a family unit was just icing on the cake.”

While the program is open to existing AIDB students who need additional opportunities for mastering a skill, one of the most exciting aspects of Short-Term Programs is its ability to welcome students who are not already attending AIDB’s Alabama School for the Blind. Short-Term Programs supports AIDB’s belief that students should be served in the community of their choice. Students are able to attend courses to receive the intensive training that they need, and then return home and remain in their local school system for day-to-day education.

Student Grady Harrison from Albertville, Alabama, attended a five-day intensive course focused on compensatory skills needed by learners with visual impairments to access the regular curriculum offered in mainstream schools across Alabama. Through hard work and dedication, all students who were served in the courses surpassed their individualized goals. “I learned a lot working on the laptop and felt better going into the new school year this fall,” said Harrison.

Many students who are not already part of the AIDB family have never been around other students who are Blind or visually impaired. Short-Term Programs also gives students the opportunity to gain confidence in other areas. According to Harrison’s mother, Rebecca Harrison, “Grady has a ton of friends at school, but it’s hard for them to understand what it’s like to be Blind. It was an amazing opportunity to gain new friends that understand what it’s like.”

**HAVE EXPERTISE, WILL TRAVEL!**

By Melody Brown, Kathryn Duncan, Kim Moon and Anna Peters; Providers, Outreach Instructional Services

NO TRUER WORDS COULD BE SPOKEN, or signed, about Outreach Instructional Services (Outreach) at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB)! While AIDB knows that our flagship schools — Alabama School for the Blind; Alabama School for the Deaf; and Helen Keller School of Alabama — are often the best places for students with sensory differences, we steadfastly believe in giving families options in their education and providing the best support possible to empower those students to excel. Outreach was established with that goal in mind, and is designed to take our expertise and resources into local public, private and homeschool environments throughout Alabama to support students, families and school staff.

Megan Green of Hartselle, AL, whose child has a visual impairment, shared, "AIDB has been a huge help with navigating a whole new life that we are now having to learn. To have a group of people who knows and understands your struggles is meaningful beyond words. AIDB has provided resources and is assisting my child to get where she needs to be to start school. We love and appreciate all that they do."

The Outreach team provides assessments, observations, support and resources to schools in Alabama at no cost to the schools or parents. During the process, providers often collaborate closely with the family’s local AIDB Regional Center and other AIDB departments to ensure the student is receiving the most in-depth support possible. Outreach Providers develop very close relationships with special education staff, parents and students throughout the course of their work. “Outreach has empowered our daughter Amelia, who is 4, to reach many foundational milestones along her journey toward elementary school readiness; from Orientation and Mobility evaluations to ensuring that Amelia will have all vital American Sign Language supports available throughout each school day,” said Victoria Wilkins of Trussville, AL. “We are deeply appreciative of the safety net of caring and devoted professionals whom AIDB has equipped her with.” AIDB Outreach accepts referrals from parents, teachers, community leaders and other providers.

Amelia Wilkins in her Pre-K classroom at Paine Elementary.

**CONQUERING OUR CHALLENGES**

By Wendi Glass, Coordinator, RISE Autism

AUTHOR CRAIG D. Lounsbrough once said, “The art of working with people is found in meeting them where they’re at, which means I must be willing to go where I am not.”

For Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this rings especially true as they navigate social interactions that leave them experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed. But developing and maintaining social skills is crucial for children and young adults seeking to establish meaningful friendships, foster positive relationships and actively participate in their communities.

Through Limitless Horizons at E. H. Gentry Facility and Empowering Kids at Helen Keller School of Alabama, RISE Autism taps into the individual strengths of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. These strengths range from a great sense of humor to the capability of forming meaningful relationships with others.

Limitless Horizons was carefully designed to cater to young adults. It uses the highly acclaimed UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relationship Skills (PEERS). Wendi Glass, RISE Autism Coordinator, and Grant Patterson, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, lead the 10-week peer modeling program that develops students’ social skills each fall and spring semester.

“Our students experience improved self-esteem and social interactions, and make new friends through participation in Limitless Horizons. In addition, they acquire transferable social skills that aid their adjustment to new situations such as campus life,” stated Carla Smith, M.Ed., Instructor, E. H. Gentry Facility.

Empowering Kids focuses on the social skills of children using social stories and visuals. Small groups are led by Registered Behavior Technicians who partner with other service providers.

Limitless Horizons and Empowering Kids offer a valuable opportunity for students diagnosed with autism to engage and interact with peers in a relaxed and comfortable environment. Through both social skills programs, students gain valuable insights and practical tools to help them navigate social situations with greater confidence and ease.

“The Social Skills Group has been pretty fun,” said Patrick Woodyard, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility. “I’ve gotten a lot out of it that I didn’t know before. Things like how to use social skills in real-world situations and in conversations with friends.”

With these programs implemented by RISE Autism, students are equipped with the tools they need to succeed, empowering them to reach their limitless potential!

Limitless Horizons participants enjoy a break during classes in the EHG courtyard. Pictured L to R: Cameron Payne, Services for the Blind; Corbin Holland, General Services; Natasha Hall, Services for the Deaf; Patrick Woodyard, Services for the Deaf.

**HARMONY IN THE ARENA: BLUEGRASS & BBQ FUNDRAISING EVENT**

Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind Foundation’s inaugural event raises over $38,000 for the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program!

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

Mr. M. P. Greene, Jr. speaks at a podium.

Jim and Betty Spratlin smile to the camera.

Ronny Garrett, Dr. Terry Graham, Charlie Collat, Jr. in conversation.

Allen Cope speaks at a podium.

FILLED WITH the sounds of bluegrass, the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program (MGH) arena was transformed into a haven of down-home warmth on a chilly autumn evening. Hay bales, quilts, pumpkins, and an array of flowers created the perfect backdrop for the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation’s Bluegrass & BBQ fundraising event.

“AIDB is about the people we serve; they are the reason we are here and do what we do,” said Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “I am thankful that AIDB has programs, like MGH, that provide a tremendous service to our students. I am so full of gratitude for the event sponsors and donors who believe in the mission of AIDB and MGH; you make it possible for AIDB to change lives.”

As the sun dipped below the horizon, friends of AIDB and MGH gathered together to celebrate the life-changing work done by MGH for students at AIDB. “MGH offers therapeutic programs to AIDB students such as hippotherapy, equine-facilitated learning mental health, psychotherapy, and speech therapy; therapeutic riding, riders club, and trail rides,” said Mr. M.P. Greene, founder of MGH and member of the AIDB Board of Trustees and AIDB Foundation Board of Directors. “Through participation in these activities, AIDB students exercise static muscles, improve balance and motor skills, improve verbal skills, and build self-esteem, confidence, and pride. I am very proud of the work that we are able to do with the students at AIDB through the arena and equally proud of the staff and many volunteers who make it happen every day. I am also very appreciative of all of the donors and supporters of MGH and tonight’s event.”

The evening featured a silent auction and dinner entertainment by Three on a String, a nationally-known bluegrass band. “The AIDB Foundation is extremely thankful to our event sponsors, businesses who donated items for the silent auction and our donors who support the important work of MGH,” said Allen Cope, President, AIDB Foundation Board of Directors.

Bluegrass & BBQ was made possible through the support of these generous sponsors: Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind Foundation, Alabama Gun Collectors Association, AOD Federal Credit Union, Auto Custom Carpets, City of Talladega, Essendant, First Bank of Alabama, Dr. Michael Kulovitz, Mr. Jake Montgomery, Mr. Thomas Ritchie, Southern States Bank, Talladega College, Talladega Superspeedway and Travel Leaders.

Three on a String performing.

Mary Lauren Kulovitz with her father, Dr. Michael Kulovitz smile to camera.

Chad Jones in conversation with Dr. Dennis Gilliam.

**LIMITLESS OPPORTUNITIES, LIMITLESS FUTURES**

By Apryl McCurdy, Guidance Counselor, Alabama School for the Deaf

A student working under a car.

A student working on a car radio.

A student changing a tire as an instructor looks on.

AT ALABAMA INSTITUTE for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), our motto is Deaf. Blind. Limitless. This is especially true for the Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) students in the Work Experience Program available through the Career Tech Department. Through job placements on campus and across Talladega, the Work Experience Program equips students with the necessary skills to succeed in their future careers.

This school year, students in the Work Experience Program are learning entrepreneurship through operating a tea cart. Students learn how to make healthy teas similar to local nutrition drink shops. They practice making tea recipes, learn how to mix flavors, and set up their mixes to be sampled by customers. After they are comfortable with making their product, they begin taking orders and practice marketing what they have available. Once ordered and made, the students deliver drinks to their customers. While delivering, they also collect money for the items and give change when necessary.

Another popular worksite for students is the AIDB Transportation Department. Students hop on the bus and are taken to AIDB’s Transportation Department or E. H. Gentry Facility’s Automotive Work Experience classroom during their class period. Students work alongside the mechanics and other staff to wash and detail school buses and other fleet vehicles while gaining valuable experience and job skills.

At any point in the day, students can also be found around campus working in various positions such as teacher aides, office aides and recreational aides. Almost every department benefits from student workers, but the students receive the greater benefit. Students gain practical job skills as well as professional skills such as teamwork.

According to Brooke Shepherd, Work Experience Program Coordinator at ASD, “This program’s goal is to provide students with real-world work experience within the school or community. Our students develop the confidence and maturity needed to thrive in their chosen careers.”

With the lifelong skills learned in the Work Experience Program, students from Alabama School for the Deaf can limitlessly tackle any career they choose!

**THRIVING IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY**

By Jessica Love, Administrative Assistant to the Executive Director, Alabama Industries for the Blind

IN THE WORDS OF Michael Scott from *The Office*, “In the end, life and business are about human connections.” At a time when most retail sales are down, Alabama Industries for the Blind (AIB) has used this human connection to increase sales by 30 percent over last year’s totals.

Susanne Willis, AIB’s Sales and Marketing Manager, credits the modernization of AIB’s business strategy and the efforts of the Sales Team for this success. The Customer Service Department, which serves state agencies across Alabama, was reorganized into smaller teams serving a dedicated region. This has allowed for more personal interactions between each team member and their customer base, leading to better customer relationships.

“Having that personal connection with our customers allows us to anticipate their needs,” said Willis. “Our goal is to become the one source for all of their needs.”

As a result of the 30% increase in sales, the Customer Service Team was able to grow their department by two new employees. A Sales Representative was added to cover the Central Alabama Region. A Federal Sales Representative was also added to serve the AIB’s Base Supply Centers, located on and serving Federal customers on military bases across Alabama and Georgia.

“The addition of these Outside Sales Reps helps grow sales by recruiting new customers while ensuring that continued customer loyalty is provided to our current customer base,” continued Willis. “The past couple of years have changed how the world does business. There was no better time for us to change our business strategy in order to keep up. We changed the way we interact with our customers and implemented ways for us to provide better service. All while giving the Sales Team guidance to reach new goals set for them.”

Members of the Alabama Industries for the Blind Customer Service Department smile to camera from the production room floor.

**FROM VOLUNTEERS TO FAMILY**

By Katie Hickman, Instructor Assistant and Volunteer Coordinator, Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program

AT MARIANNA GREENE HENRY Special Equestrian Program (MGH), we call ourselves the “MGH Family.” And that family is filled with people from all over the region who come together with a shared love for the program, our students and each other.

Amber Linn became interested in volunteering at MGH while attending a Homeschool Kickoff. After completing her new volunteer orientation, she jumped right in to make a difference!

“No job was too big or too small. She happily did every task we asked of her. Everything from cleaning stalls and bathing horses to leading and side walking horses in classes,” said Katie Hickman, Instructor Assistant/Volunteer Coordinator, MGH. “We joke that I would come up to her with the most off-the-wall jobs just trying to get Amber to say, ‘No ma’am, I don’t want to do that.’ But she never did. She always said, ‘Yes ma’am,’ with a smile and went off to do whatever had been asked of her.”

Amber loved volunteering with MGH so much that she eventually started bringing her sisters, mom and dad along for the adventure too! Now, the entire Linn family is part of the MGH Family. Alyson, Amber, Aimee, Danielle and Richard have become integral to the work and are a joy to have at the arena. “If you need help, they are right there waiting to jump in,” continued Katie. “When we needed help with our Riders Club practices, they started coming an extra day each week. After bonding with the kids, they became part of our Special Olympics delegation, traveling with us to Troy, Alabama, for the Alabama Special Olympics competition in May 2023.”

After Alyson left for college earlier this year, Amber, Aimee, Danielle and Richard continued to play a large role during summer camp. Richard dressed up as Genie from Disney’s Aladdin to give campers a magical experience while they trotted through the “desert” in search of Aladdin’s treasure. Amber, Aimee, and Danielle worked as horse leaders, side walkers and photographers!

“When this wonderful family first joined our MGH Family, we didn’t know what a blessing they would be to us,” said Hickman. “We are so thankful for the Linns. We love and appreciate all that they do!”

Alyson Linn smiles to camera. Next to her is a horse grazing in the grass.

Amber Linn with Alabama School for the Deaf student, Patricia Williams.

**31 HANDS OF LOVE**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

A GENEROUS DONATION from Jed and Abby Downs of Dothan, Alabama has brought 31 hands worth of love to the equine therapy program at the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program (MGH). A new horse, aptly named Downs, has joined the MGH herd, bringing his own special love to the students of Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB).

“Downs absolutely loves our kids, the smaller the better,” said Kate Storjohann, Lead Instructor, MGH. “He loves hugs and is so stoic, which is great for our beginning riders as they learn horsemanship. He loves them and they love him! The height of a horse is measured in “hands”, a unit of measure meant to mimic the palm of an adult hand. Since Downs loves our smallest students we say that he is 31 hands of love to show how many kindergarten hands tall he is.”

MGH offers therapeutic programs to AIDB students such as hippotherapy, equine facilitated learning and mental health, speech therapy, therapeutic riding and our competitive Riders Club team. The act of riding and caring for the horses at MGH give students a fun way to exercise static muscles, improve their balance, motor and verbal skills all while building self-esteem, confidence and pride.

“We had the opportunity to visit AIDB several months ago and enjoyed learning about all of the programs offered at AIDB,” said Jed Downs. “After touring the MGH arena and learning about the important work they do with AIDB students, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to show our support and are delighted to be able to make a gift that will not only help the students with their physical therapy but also bring them pleasure as well.”

As this school year continues, Downs will be committed to his job of providing a safe and fun way for AIDB students to participate in physical therapy, build confidence and even sharpen their math skills as they convert “hands” to “little hands.”

“We are extremely grateful for this gift from Jed and Abby Downs,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director, AIDB Office of Institutional Advancement and AIDB Foundation. “Their generosity is especially meaningful as it will allow for many AIDB students to be positively impacted for many years to come. The Downs Family is building a legacy of limitless opportunities for our students.”

**THE LEGACY OF A VISIONARY**

AFTER TEN YEARS SERVING AS PRESIDENT OF THE ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND, JOHN MASCIA, AU.D., ANNOUNCES HIS RETIREMENT AND LOOKS TOWARD THE FUTURE.

Mascia reading to students at Helen Keller School of Alabama during the school’s celebration of Read Across America.

IN DECEMBER OF 2004, John Mascia, Au.D., moved from New York to Alabama with his wife and three young children to pursue for what he felt was a deep calling—serving the Deaf and Blind community at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind. In the nearly 20 years since he began his commitment to AIDB, he has created a legacy of accomplishments through his undeniable care and compassion for others along with his visionary leadership. Now, after ten years as President of AIDB, Mascia has decided to retire and focus his full attention on his family life while providing guidance and counsel to the Institute’s new President, Dr. Dennis Gilliam, during the transition.

“My vision for AIDB was always for this to be the premier Institute serving individuals who are Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind,” says Mascia. “I wanted AIDB to be a place where people can come with any dream they have, and us work side by side with them to fulfill that dream.” Known for what Dr. Gilliam describes as a “yes mentality,” Mascia has worked tirelessly to not only empower the staff and students that come through the Institute’s doors, but to also educate and inspire the community around them. “There’s no better way to stop forward progress than by saying ‘no’,” he says. “I always tell our staff and students that if they have a dream, we’re going to find a way to meet that dream. It might take years, but you never want to squelch a person’s desire to be better by saying ‘no.’”

While relocating his family to Talladega, Alabama all those years ago came with uncertainty, Mascia says the community lovingly embraced and welcomed them to their new home. “When you sound like this in Talladega, people are going to look at you funny when they first meet you,” he says. “My New York accent might be different, but what we learned is that we’re really all the same. We all want our families to live the lives they want to live, and this town has been very supportive of me and mine.” Family is the exact reason Mascia made the emotional decision to retire. He and his wife proudly welcomed their first grandchild—who lives in Pennsylvania—a year ago and decided that they want to be in her life as much as possible. “AIDB is growing, and it is strong,” says Mascia. “I’m leaving it with good leadership—Dr. Gilliam will be an inspirational leader.”

Mascia with students from E. H. Gentry Facility.

Mascia with Clara Scelsi, student, Alabama School for the Blind.

Dr. Mascia also shared immense respect and gratitude to the staff at AIDB and touts them as second to none. AIDB goes beyond a traditional school environment in that it offers residential facilities and, Mascia says, that gives staff an opportunity to develop real relationships with the people they serve. An example of these unique relationships is the band director for the Alabama School for the Blind Band, Chad Bell. “I approached him several years ago and told him our kids needed to march,” says Mascia. “I could see that he was overwhelmed at the idea—teaching them to play instruments is a challenge in itself—but he figured it out and this past July our band was in Boston marching in an international parade.”

During his tenure as President, Mascia oversaw a period of tremendous growth that included the expansion of AIDB’s statewide network of regional centers, implementation of a community-based employment model and training program, the development of AIDB’s North Campus, creation of Special Projects, which takes AIDB expertise nationwide, and numerous capital projects that brought state-of-the-art facilities to AIDB.

Dr. Mascia was integral in substantially increasing funding levels so that these, and other endeavors were possible. During his time as President, state legislative funding increased by 46%, equaling an additional $39 million invested into AIDB’s mission to help individuals reach their limitless potential by providing superior staff, facilities, training and programs.

Dr. Mascia leaves a legacy of growth and extraordinary success in serving the Blind, Deaf, and DeafBlind community, and believes that collaboration and the sharing of resources is what will continue to push AIDB forward. “I believe that AIDB’s future is bright,” he says. “I believe that campuses in Talladega will continue to innovate new approaches for educating children and adults, and that AIDB will grow statewide and regionally to serve people where they are.” While Mascia says his final graduation as President was a difficult day knowing he was leaving, having the opportunity to watch children begin their journeys at the school and see them grow and eventually graduate was a blessing to witness. “I would like to thank the children and adults that we have been able to serve,” he says. “Also, our staff, thank you for loving the people you serve and wanting to make a difference even if it meant being away from your own families sometimes. AIDB has grown in size and also in the quality of the services we provide because of their dedication and commitment.”

AIDB Logo  
P.O. Box 698  
Talladega, AL 35161

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

**Providing services in YOUR community!**

Last year, over 36,000 lives were transformed through AIDB services provided at Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, Helen Keller School of Alabama, E. H. Gentry Facility, Alabama Industries for the Blind, and the network of 10 regional centers strategically located throughout the state. Whether through educational development for young children, training for families, or adjustment and support for adults, AIDB’s students and consumers prove that together we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless!

AIDB Logo

The map of Alabama with each region outlined in a different color. Regions include Shoals, Decatur, Huntsville, Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Talladega, Opelika, Montgomery, Dothan, and Mobile.