Sights & Sounds

The Magazine of Alabama Institute for Deaf & Blind

Spring 2024

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Recently, the Alabama School for the Deaf, the Alabama School for the Blind and the Helen Keller School earned multiple athletic accolades, including state championships. Pictured L to R: Kristopher Williams, Senior, Alabama School for the Deaf in his basketball uniform holding a basketball; Gabriel Locker, Junior, Helen Keller School of Alabama in his basketball uniform and wearing a championship ring; Taelor Robinson, Junior, Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) in her cheer uniform with pompoms; and Daymion Winfrey, Senior, ASB in his wrestling uniform and holding his headgear. Daymion also wears his championship medal.

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**A Letter from the President**

Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D. smiles to camera.

EARLY IN MY CAREER at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind, I had the opportunity to coach several of our athletic teams. We were known as the “Home of Champions,” a label proudly worn by our students and staff.

The championship tradition continues this year. We are proud to announce that the Helen Keller School of Alabama basketball team has just clinched its second consecutive championship in the Alabama Special Olympics. The Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) wrestling team also just won its 20th consecutive team championship in the Annual South Central Association for Schools for the Blind competition. Not to be outdone, the ASB cheer team also won the overall team championship in the spirit competition. ASB Senior Daymion Winfrey won the Class 1A state wrestling championship this spring, becoming the school’s 25th wrestler in school history to win a state championship. Abbie Theiss also made school history, becoming the school’s first female wrestler to win a title last year. Championship wins continue at Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) where the boy’s basketball team just defeated eight schools for the deaf from around the Southeast to secure the Mason-Dixon Basketball Championship. We also recently celebrated the ASD boy’s track team being named the National Deaf Interscholastic Athletics Association Division II winner.

Even off the fields of play, AIDB fully embodies the name, “Home of Champions.” We feel strongly that every child needs their own champion. That starts with our parents who believe in what their child can accomplish by providing us the opportunity to work with them, to residential advisors in the dorms who help get them ready for a productive day of learning, and teachers who ensure each student has equal access to the best education available. Additionally, we are very proud of the work our staff do in the Regional Centers, Alabama Industries for the Blind, and AIDB North Campus to provide championship-level expertise and guidance to Alabamians of all ages who are Deaf, Blind and DeafBlind.

As you read this issue of Sights & Sounds, you will read about our champion students, alumni, staff and donors. I am proud of each of these champions and know there are more wins just around the corner.

Signature of Dennis A. Gilliam

Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D.  
President

**The Home of Champions**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement and Chris Fernsler, Daily Home

AIDB President Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., presents HKS student George Meyer of Eastaboga with his Championship Ring.

IN THE HEART OF A TOWN long known for its place on the stock car racing circuit, another championship legacy also lives on in the student athletes at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB). High school sports matter, not just for the thrill of victory, but for the profound impact they have on the lives of those involved. Sports are a unifying force, bringing together students from different backgrounds, ages and walks of life; forging bonds that transcend the boundaries of the playing field. Athletics are a very important part of the fabric of life at AIDB where we believe that if we can help a student learn to succeed at sports, we can help them learn to succeed in life.

**HELEN KELLER SCHOOL OF ALABAMA**

Named after one of Alabama’s most courageous and famous citizens, the Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS) has been serving students who are DeafBlind or have sensory loss with additional disabilities since 1955. HKS focuses on the needs, abilities and potential of each individual student, building individualized programs to give them the greatest opportunity for success. When put into everyday practice, the HKS mission translates into opportunities on the statewide and national level for students to succeed in sports, academics and, ultimately, life after graduation.

This spring the HKS basketball team brought home the Alabama Special Olympics State Basketball Championship for the second year in a row. To commemorate the school’s first state basketball championship last year, the AIDB Foundation provided championship rings to the history-making team. The rings were presented to the team in the fall by Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB, at a team celebration including the HKS cheer team and a special visit from the Alabama School for the Blind marching band. “I am incredibly proud of these student athletes and their accomplishments,” said Gilliam. “They are all remarkable individuals with a tremendous amount of potential for success in life.”

The championship seasons do not end with basketball at HKS! The school has a long history of excellence in the Special Olympics. HKS students have brought home team and individual state and national titles in powerlifting, equestrian as well as track and field events. Most recently, George Meyer and Tierece Wilson competed in the 22nd Annual Special Olympics North America Golf Championship, sponsored by the National Alliance for Accessible Golf, on October 2-5, 2023, at the Seaview Golf Club in Galloway Township, NJ. Meyer competed in three rounds to win gold in his division while his teammate, Wilson, also made a personal record by placing fourth in his division.

TOP (Left): Alabama School for the Blind Cheer Team. TOP (Right): AIDB President Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., presents HKS student Timirra Spencer of Montgomery with her Championship Ring. LEFT: Alabama School for the Blind Wrestling Team. RIGHT: Daymion Winfrey, Senior, ASB, is the Class 1A state champion.

**ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND**

This spring Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) celebrated three major victories, the ASB Cheer and Wrestling teams came in first place at the South Central Association for Schools (SCASB) for the Blind competition and senior Daymion Winfrey brought home the Alabama High School Athletic Association state title in wrestling!

In January, the wrestling and cheer teams traveled to the Mississippi School for the Blind to participate in the annual SCASB competition where both teams brought home victories! The ASB cheer team competed against teams from Georgia Academy for the Blind, Louisiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Mississippi School for the Blind, Oklahoma School for the Blind, and Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The team secured the overall championship, placing first in the Spirit Competition while teammates Tamya DeWitt won 1st Place in the Outstanding Individual Routine category and Chrislynn Oliver placed 2nd in the Mascot Competition.

The ASB wrestling team dominated and clinched their 20th consecutive SCASB championship with a team score of 196 points; soundly defeating Oklahoma School for the Blind who scored 95 points, Georgia Academy for the Blind who scored 53 points, Louisiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired who scored 32 points, Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired who scored 29 points, and Mississippi School for the Blind who scored 21 points.

Senior Daymion Winfrey achieved his lifelong dream by becoming the ASB Red Wolves’ 25th wrestler in school history to win the Alabama High School Athletic Association championship title in the 138-pound state title match in Class 1A at the state tournament in February. For Winfrey, the win was the culmination of a history of sporting and academic excellence at ASB. “I’ve got my name on the Wall of Champions. This has been a goal of mine since I wrestled in the seventh grade,” Winfrey said. “I’ve put in a lot of time before practice and after practice. I knew I was going to be an underdog, but I put that aside. I just worked my moves,” Winfrey said. The ASB wrestler did not surprise his coach. Winfrey, after all, soaked up a record of 39-4 with 25 pins this year. “Daymion has a good work ethic, and he is leaving a legacy,” said coach Troy Haynes. “We have a tradition of excellence. Wrestling is a big part of our school. The older kids pass down what they know to our younger kids.”

Alabama School for the Deaf Track Team.

Alabama School for the Deaf Basketball Team.

**ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF**

The Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) has a long history of fielding championship athletic programs. Almost since they began throwing a pigskin or dribbling a basketball, the ASD Silent Warriors have been winning national championships, Mason-Dixon championships and state titles in football, boys and girls basketball, volleyball and track & field.

Last June, the ASD boys track team defeated over 20 teams from schools for the deaf around the nation to be named National Champions for Division II of the National Deaf Interscholastic Athletics Association. The championship was based on the individual athlete’s best running timings and results in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, 400-meter dash, 800-meter dash, 110-meter hurdles, 400-meter relay, 800-meter relay, 1600-meter relay, 3200-meter relay, long jump, triple jump, high jump, and javelin.

This January, the ASD Boys Basketball Team competed against teams from Eastern North Carolina School for the Deaf, Florida School for the Deaf, Georgia School for the Deaf, Kentucky School for the Deaf, Louisiana School for the Deaf, Mississippi School for the Deaf, North Carolina School for the Deaf and the Tennessee School for the Deaf in the annual Mason- Dixon Basketball Tournament held in North Carolina.

The ASD team entered the tournament as the No. 3 seed, playing against the No. 6 seed, Florida School for the Deaf, whom they soundly defeated with a final score of 56 to 21 before moving to the second round where they played the No. 2 seed, North Carolina School for the Deaf, once again proving victorious with a final score of 57 to 10 and advancing to the final round to play for the Mason-Dixon Basketball Tournament Championship.

The team resoundingly defeated the Mississippi School for the Deaf in the Championship Game, with a final score of 63 to 26 to secure the Mason- Dixon Championship. “This team has shown what trust, dedication and pursuit of excellence can accomplish,” said Coach Paul Kulick. “Together, these student athletes are leaving a legacy for those that will come behind them in their drive for championship excellence.”

**RISING VOICES: STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION AT HELEN KELLER**

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

THE STUDENTS of Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS) have taken a significant step in school history by forming the school’s first Student Government Association (SGA). "SGA is not just a club; it is a platform for student voices, a beginning for leadership, and a bridge between the student body and the administration. It's where ideas take shape, communities unite, and change begins," said Jeanna Chandler, Principal, HKS. “We are so excited to support our students as they become the newest school leaders.”

In January, HKS students hit the campaign trail with a flurry of creativity as the hopefuls canvased the halls with their posters and campaign slogans. The campaign culminated in a school-wide election, the first time many students had ever participated in an election. HKS enjoyed local support from its own local elected officials with a visit from Talladega County Probate Judge, Chad Joiner, who made sure each student received the traditional “I Voted” sticker. SGA plays a significant role in a school for several reasons. SGA provides a platform for students to advocate for their interests and concerns. Participation in SGA offers students the opportunity to develop leadership skills that will be critical when they enter the workforce; collaboration, effective communication and problem-solving are just a few skills students will have the opportunity to learn.

“We were so impressed with how well each student did throughout the process. This was the first time any of them had the opportunity to participate in public speaking and overcome those fears. Each student did a wonderful job communicating in their own mode of communication, be it voice or American Sign Language,” said Amy Shelly, Academic Director, HKS. “SGA is so important because it means the students now have a voice and a meaningful role in what our school does to support them and prepare them for life after graduation.” Please join us in congratulating this year’s SGA Officers!

2024 SGA Officers stand on the front steps of Helen Keller School of Alabama: Back Row (L to R): Willie Jillson, General Officer; Gabriel Locker, Treasurer; Tyler Beard, General Officer; George Meyer, President Front Row (L to R): Gracie Miller, Vice President; Akira Twyman, General Officer; Amaris Jones, Secretary; Zoey Harrison, General Officer; Samantha Williams, General Officer

**GROWING DREAMS**

By Heather Jeffcoat

BEING ACQUAINTED with farming from his childhood, Dominick Jefferson wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty the first time he visited The Joe Tom Armbrester Agricultural Center (JTA), just a few miles from the Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD). But, his time on the farm planting seeds, harvesting crops, helping with animals, and learning how to use the advanced equipment has forever changed the way he looks at farming.

Now, Dominick is confident farming will be a part of his future, even possibly a career choice for the ASD junior, thanks to the experiences and continued encouragement he and his classmates at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind have been given.

“I came here (ASD) in middle school. I’ve always wanted to work on a farm. My family has a farm. My favorite part is planting - getting in the dirt and planting seeds. That is my favorite job to do,” said Dominick. “And, also taking care of the animals, checking on them and making sure they’re okay.”

Planting and harvesting acres of crops, working with the multiple animals at the farm and learning to fix tractors and farm equipment are just a few of the tasks the students from the Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, the Helen Keller School of Alabama and E. H. Gentry Facility are offered at JTA. The farm that opened in 2018 and was named after a local farmer who believed in the importance of farming education brings a hands-on experience to all students, providing accommodations to meet each new farmer where they are.

“Uncle Joe Tom was a lifelong learner, and I know he’d be proud of what’s going on here and the technology we’re implementing,” said Matt Armbrester, JTA Program Manager. “In today’s society, students are so far removed from farming. We need to teach kids where their food comes from; how important agriculture is; and the science, math and technology that’s behind it all.”

Dominick is taking every opportunity to spend time at the farm, even offering support for his fellow classmates who didn’t grow up around farming. “I had experience with animals, and my classmates didn't know what to do. I taught them how to do things, involved them in things so they could participate and really understand the experience,” he said. “I don't want them to be paranoid or fearful that the animals are going to bite them or hurt them. I try to relieve some of their fears and concerns.”

For his teachers, seeing Dominick encourage and educate his classmates has solidified the importance of having a place like JTA. “Dominick really does take the lead and connect to other students to show them it's okay; it's not going to be a bad experience. And, so for me, it's helpful to have a student who is confident and is willing to step in because they listen to me, but I'm their teacher. It's more impactful when it's another student sharing that,” said Cammie Turner, Agriscience Teacher at ASD.

Dominick Jefferson enjoys his time at JTA by tending to the kale.

For JTA Program Manager Zach Burke, JTA goes beyond the possibility that this hands-on opportunity could lead to careers for AIDB students–it also helps them understand basic tasks that can help them in their daily lives. Dominick agrees sharing, "It has definitely inspired me to work in the agricultural field. I want to prepare myself for the future, to get ready for a career in farming and agriculture. I'm still thinking about how that would work. I'm still learning about everything that's out there, and I want to really make sure that I'm satisfied with all the options before I move ahead with the plan. But I definitely am looking forward to that.”

Even if Dominick doesn’t take the next step into a farming-based career, he said it will always be a part of his life. “It is important for me. I can't see myself not doing it. I like to stay busy and active. I like to use my energy and get out there and work. And, you know, I have a lot of energy, so it fits me well,” he said. “When I came here and saw everything that we have, it was just really amazing to me. It was very inspiring to me that we have all these resources. It just really opened my mind, opened my eyes, and I just had so much fun. I feel like it just continues to inspire me, and to realize that others don't have this, and I can't imagine what that is like. I can't believe that we have it and others don't have it. And then I have this ability to learn so much. I'm really thankful to Cammie, Zach and Matt.”

For Cammie, Matt and Zach, seeing and hearing how Dominick has been empowered by JTA gives them pride in knowing their teaching is taking root. “To hear that means I'm doing my job. My biggest goal is that I want them to understand the importance of agriculture to society, but also when I see them out here learning and see the success of our plants or our animals, I see their self-confidence and their pride in themselves grow,” said Cammie. “And, to me, I want them to know ‘I can be independent. I can take care of myself.’ I want them to be able to have those skills and that self-confidence because it is really empowering. So, those are my goals: to connect them to agriculture and see it’s fun, but also the importance of it – to take those skills with them for the rest of their life and know how to appreciate all the work, blood, sweat, tears that go into everything to prepare this for them. It makes me happy; it makes me proud.”

“The JTA is the perfect example of providing limitless potential through AIDB and that's part of the mission statement. Anywhere from stem-related activities, hands-on activities or conventional activities and farming, this is the place where students can do it,” said Zach. “It is more confirmation for me. It is why we are here.”

Dominick Jefferson enjoys his time at JTA by taking care of the chickens.

**THE BRIDGE TO TOMORROW**

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

Daymion Winfrey, Senior, Alabama School for the Blind is preparing for his future through the Student Readiness Program. Daymion shows off his state wrestling medal while seated at work.

AS THE SCHOOL YEAR winds down each year at Alabama School for the Blind (ASB), the junior class begins eagerly looking forward to their senior year and taking their first steps out of the confines of textbooks and classrooms and into the workforce. For many, participating in the ASB Work Experience Program through the Student Readiness Program at Alabama Industries for the Blind (AIB) is a chance to step into the realm of adulthood and responsibility.

“Our mission is to develop each student’s maximum potential to become an independent, productive member of society,” said Candace Gibson, Transition Teacher, ASB. “Being able to easily partner with an organization like AIB ensures our students have the real-world experiences that develop the skills and confidence needed in the workplace.”

In the spring, students create their resumés, submit employment applications, and go through a real-world job interview process at AIB to be hired for paying work during their senior year. “The Student Readiness Program at AIB has shown me how people with disabilities can thrive in our economy,” said Daymion Winfrey, Senior, ASB. “It has really opened my eyes to what I can do and I feel prepared for what’s next.”

According to Diana Harris, Operation Technician at AIB, who coordinates the program for AIB, students participating in the program spend their senior year rotating through a variety of jobs, getting hands-on experience in production, purchasing, customer service, and inventory management. “We have a smart group of students from ASB,” said Harris. “I am so proud of the work that they have accomplished. As they have cycled through their assignments this year, they have gained so much experience that will help them when they enter the workforce. Not only are they learning technical skills, they are learning the soft skills that will help them be successful in their next step, whether that is college or the workforce.”

This year, ASB’s seniors will graduate with their goals set on a future filled with discovery and adventure. They will embark on the next chapter of their lives, knowing that the bridge to tomorrow has been built upon the foundation of their high school experience at Alabama School for the Blind.

WELCOME TO EDUCATION “VILLAGE”

A Program presented by the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program and the Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech Language Pathologist Departments at Helen Keller School of Alabama.

Originally written by therapeutic staff and submitted by Caitlin Carpenter, Occupational Therapist, and Tim Greene, Arena Coordinator.

THE “VILLAGE” is a very special program originally designed by Occupational Therapist Ellen Davis, OTR. She envisioned a program for children that could address the cognitive, physical, social, sensory and academic needs of students outside the classroom in the fun and unique environment of the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program Arena (MGH).

One class of Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS) students, along with their teacher and classroom aide, will engage in purposeful activities focused on learning once a week at MGH. Therapists, MGH staff and teachers collaborate in advance to identify student needs and class goals. This integrated approach provides an opportunity for students to generalize skills learned in the classroom to a new setting. Students work very hard when they are at play and without realizing they are learning! MGH Arena offers a large indoor riding arena that can be used when the weather is rainy or chilly, a classroom and a barn to explore. Outside, students have many opportunities for sensory input and endless opportunities to learn about the world around them; trails to walk, a pond to toss a rock and hear it splash, and trees to watch the leaves sway in the wind.

The program wouldn’t be as life-changing for HKS students without the wonderful MGH staff and a talented and special group of dedicated volunteers to ensure the program is successful. MGH volunteers, some of whom have served over 20 years, come from all walks of life: school families, retired military veterans, former teachers and people who have a love of horses and kids. If you are interested in volunteering, wear closed-toed shoes and clothes you don’t mind getting a little dirty. Don’t worry…it washes off. See you at the barn!

BOTTOM LEFT: Faith Swan, HKS student, with (L to R) Katie Hickman, MGH Instructor/Volunteer Coordinator; Lacey Ellis, Physical Therapist; and Kate Storjohann MGH Lead Program Instructor. BOTTOM RIGHT: Rylan Schmidt, HKS student, with Big K, a member of the MGH herd.

**PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE TODAY**

The Alabama School for the Deaf Robotics Teams travel to compete in nationwide competitions.

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, AIDB Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

FROM ELECTRIC VEHICLES to artificial intelligence, it is no secret that the future will be shaped by advances in technology. It is also no surprise that the experiences students participate in inform their development and understanding of the world around them.

This school year, the Alabama School for the Deaf robotics teams had the unique opportunity to travel to states across the country and compete in nationwide robotics competitions.

In January, the Middle School VEX IQ Robotics Team, comprised of 7th graders Aiden Sizemore-Natalie and Elyjah Padgett, traveled to the Tennessee School for the Deaf to compete at the 5th National Technical Institute for the Deaf Regional Stem Center (NRSC) VEX IQ Competition. This exciting event, hosted for students who are deaf or hard of hearing, featured opening and awards ceremonies, practice sessions, and a trip to a trampoline park to relax and socialize.

“The competition was fun but a little tough,” said Padgett. “We got to partner with other teams in the competition and had fun at the trampoline park. I enjoyed meeting new people from all over the country.”

In February, the High School VEX V5 Robotics Team, comprised of sophomore student Alex Beasley and junior Brayden Weeks flew to the Kansas School for the Deaf in Olathe, Kansas for the 6th Annual High School VEX Robotics Competition.

“I had a great time,” said Weeks. “I learned new things related to coding and building our robot.”

Aleura Hughes, ASD, collaborates with another competitor.

February also saw the two Underwater Robotics Teams, comprised of freshman Levi Smith, junior David Vaden, freshman Harper Walls and sophomore Brayden Weeks, fly to the NRSC ROV Tournament at the Texas School for the Deaf in Austin, Texas. During the competition, team Alabama, comprised of freshman Harper Walls and junior David Vaden, received the good sportsmanship award.

Texas School for the Deaf also hosted the NRSC Aerial Drones Competition in early March. The Alabama School for the Deaf Drones Teams, comprised of eighth-grade student Aluera Hughes, freshman Jessica Mesino, freshman Levi Smith and junior David Vaden, flew to Austin, Texas to take on over 40 teams from across the country. After much anticipation, Levi and David's team would take home the Judges Award. This prestigious award is given to the team with the best answers to the interview questions during the competition.

From Alabama to Kansas, Tennessee, Texas and beyond, the Alabama School for the Deaf Robotics teams are ready for wherever the future of technology may lead!

**CELEBRATING THE 2024 BLIND WORKERS OF THE YEAR**

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

Charissa Archield smiles to camera.

THIS SPRING, Charissa Archield and Michael Taylor were named the Blind Workers of the Year by AIB. Each year employees of AIB nominate their colleagues for the honor. “We are thrilled to come together as an agency to recognize the hard work and dedication of our own,” said Jeff Papalia, Executive Director, Alabama Industries for the Blind.

Charissa Archield, Manager of the Base Supply Center at Anniston Army Depot, is the 2024 recipient of the Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award. The award is presented to an individual who demonstrates career advancement at a National Industries for the Blind associated nonprofit agency or in the private sector. Named after the late Dr. Samuelson, the award is a tribute to his leadership in establishing upward mobility and placement programs for people who are blind. Nominees are evaluated for the award based on job performance, positive activities both at work and in their community, and career advancement or steps taken toward career development, such as participating in training or attending college. “Charissa is a real team player who exhibits her desire to help Alabama Industries for the Blind succeed through her day-to-day actions,” said Susanne Willis, Sales and Marketing Manager.

“Whether it’s sharing her personal journey about losing her eyesight or explaining what the Skilcraft brand represents, she is putting herself out there to educate and motivate people to purchase items from AIB.”

Archield began her employment at AIB in 2021, as a production employee on the tie line. Archield soon joined the Upward Mobility Program which allowed her to gain hands-on experience in several AIB departments. Archield also completed a leadership course offered by the National Industries for the Blind. “The Upward Mobility Program at AIB set me up to experience multiple areas within AIB, and that equipped me to be in the role I am today,” said Archield.

Michael Taylor, Screen Print and Embroidery Assistant, is the 2024 recipient of the Peter J. Salmon Award. The award honors employees who excel in their positions at National Industries for the Blind-associated agencies. The award is named after the late Dr. Peter J. Salmon, who was instrumental in the passage of the Wagner O-Day Act and the formation of the National Industries for the Blind. Nominees for the Peter J. Salmon Award are people who are blind and currently employed in a direct labor manufacturing or service operation in a National Industries for the Blind-associated nonprofit agency. Nominees are evaluated for the award based on job performance and positive activities in both the workplace and in their communities.

“My mother had no options when I graduated high school,” said Taylor. “She had to figure it out for two children with a very aggressive eye disease. She found E. H. Gentry Facility and that led to AIB. I am so thankful that AIB is here.” Taylor began his career at AIB in 1993 and has been a valuable member of the Screen Print Department for over twenty years. “Michael takes pride in providing the best possible product and service to his customers,” said Keith Powell, Supervisor, Screen Print and Embroidery Department. “Visitors to AIB are always delighted and impressed by his knowledge and dedication to the mission of AIB.”

**THREE LOCAL FOUNDATIONS AID IN BUILDING A PLACE FOR ALL AIDB STUDENTS TO GATHER**

By Heather Jeffcoat

AT ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND (AIDB), what is deemed impossible happens every day with the help of the AIDB Foundation. Since its inception in 1980, the AIDB Foundation has worked tirelessly to raise private support for the Institute’s charitable, educational and training programs, creating opportunities and providing normalcy for every individual who relies on AIDB.

Through Foundation support, AIDB has been able to expand facilities, bring innovative technology to Alabama and deliver limitless opportunities to the main campus and each of its ten regional centers. The next Foundation project is the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center, which would become a space where students from the Alabama School for the Blind, the Alabama School for the Deaf, the Helen Keller School of Alabama, and the E. H. Gentry Facility will be able to join in on activities.

“It has been a dream for AIDB to create a space for all students and staff from all campuses to gather together for large inclusive events,” said AIDB President Dr. Dennis Gilliam. “And, with the help of the Foundation and those donating to the Foundation, we are going to make that dream a reality.”

The new facility will be used for academic competitions, art and music shows, as well as social opportunities such as club meetings, proms and dances. It would ensure all AIDB students can participate in cultural, academic, social and recreational programs that will enhance their individual social competency and group effectiveness. It will also allow for synergetic, professional development opportunities for the faculty across all departments and campuses.

With the recent help of three Alabama-based nonprofits’ donations to the AIDB Foundation, that dream of the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center is closer to becoming a reality.

**THE ALABAMA POWER FOUNDATION’S DONATION HELPS BUILD A PLACE FOR AIDB COMMUNITY**

The Alabama Power Foundation’s mission is to assist nonprofit partners by providing volunteers and organizational, promotional and financial support.

“The Alabama Power Company was founded in 1906 to be of service to the state of Alabama. Our long-term partnership with AIDB through employee volunteer efforts and the Alabama Power Foundation, reflects our commitment of elevating the state by ensuring quality education is provided to all Alabamians regardless of circumstance. It is an honor to work alongside the AIDB team in identifying solutions to barriers that may otherwise prevent students from experiencing the highest-level educational environment available. It is a privilege to support the development of this multi-use facility that will make a positive impact on those served at the AIDB campus, as well as individuals and organizations from across the region,” said Terry Smiley, Vice President of Eastern Division for Alabama Power and also a member of the AIDB Foundation board.

“The Alabama Power Foundation is proud to support AIDB as it provides transformative opportunities and education to more than 31,000 Alabamians of all ages with hearing and vision loss. This grant will help AIDB build a world-class facility and bring all their students and faculty together in an inclusive, welcoming space. Our team recognized the value a place like this brings to those served by AIDB, its staff, and the Talladega community,” said Staci Brown Brooks, Vice President of Charitable Giving for Alabama Power Company and President of the Alabama Power Foundation.

Alabama Power is excited to be a part of the growth of AIDB and the new development of the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center.

“AIDB is an incredible asset to our state and all its people. The Institute is a unique leader. It provides comprehensive programs and helps those with hearing and vision loss reach their full potential,” said Brooks. “The services and support they provide align closely with the Alabama Power Foundation’s mission to make life better for all Alabamians and move the state forward. It is my hope AIDB will continue to grow and flourish in Alabama, transforming the lives of those served by giving them the tools, platforms, and access to reach their potential. I look forward to seeing the impact they make in 2024 and beyond.”

“Alabama Power’s support means so much to AIDB. We are honored that they continue to partner with our students and staff, providing a way for each to grow. They are making an impact on our future,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the Office of Institutional Advancement at AIDB.

Staci Brown Brooks, Vice President of Charitable Giving for Alabama Power, smiles to camera with the Alabama Power logo in the background.

**THE DANIEL FOUNDATION HAS SIGHTS ON BIG CHANGE FOR AIDB CAMPUS**

A graphic rendering of the new AIDB Student Life and Conference Center.

The Daniel Foundation of Alabama has believed in the mission of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) for more than 40 years. It is their continued support and passion that is now helping to create the new student center.

The Daniel Foundation aims to strengthen communities within Alabama and improve the quality of life for citizens from all regions of Alabama by supporting the non-profit sector across the state. They desire to be a piece of the puzzle that allows an organization to meet their goals, especially those organizations based in the rural areas of Alabama.

Executive Director of The Daniel Foundation Maria Kennedy values their time-tested partnership with AIDB. Their generous donation will go in support of the construction of the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center. They believe the new AIDB Student Life and Conference Center will bring the community and AIDB together, offering not only this as a resource to the students and staff at AIDB but also to the City of Talladega.

“The Daniel Foundation of Alabama has a long history with AIDB, going back more than 40 years. We appreciate the opportunity to support their work and invest in a facility that will benefit AIDB and the surrounding community. We hope this facility helps enrich the sense of family among AIDB populations and services and becomes a catalyst for community gatherings,” said Kennedy.

“The Daniel Foundation of Alabama desires to support projects and organizations that lead to a better quality of life for Alabama citizens,” she said. “The comprehensive services provided by AIDB lead to an increased quality of life for those with vision and hearing loss. AIDB’s level of service to this population is unmatched by other organizations, with regional centers which help to create access to services across our state.”

“We are extremely grateful for the well-established support we have seen from The Daniel Foundation. Their recent support will directly impact the students who utilize the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the Office of Institutional Advancement at AIDB.

**THE CARING FOUNDATION OF BLUE CROSS AND BLUE SHIELD OF ALABAMA SUPPORTS AIDB’S MISSION**

The continued support of The Caring Foundation of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama has opened doors and paved new paths for Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) faculty and students.

The Caring Foundation’s mission focuses on improving the health and well-being of Alabamians by investing in charitable organizations across the state. After one inspiring campus tour to AIDB, it was clear to Tim King, Manager-Community Relations at BCBS of Alabama, that AIDB was a community they wanted to be a part of and see grow.

“We did a team site visit with them in the Fall of 2023, and we were all blown away with the people and services we witnessed. It was a very moving and memorable time, and it solidified our belief that our support was worth the investment. AIDB is one of the jewels of our state," said King. "The services and programming they provide to the diverse amount of people is inspiring. Their reputation is far and wide. We are fortunate to have them in our state.”

The Caring Foundation sees the vision of the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center and is excited to be part of the build to create the multi-purpose facility that will have a large auditorium, state-of-the-art technology and multiple meeting spaces in an assortment of sizes.

“One of our corporate values is giving back to the community. We try to positively impact the health, wellness and education of Alabamians. We depend on excellent partners like AIDB to collaborate with and improve our state, so it can be a better place for our children and grandchildren,” said King. “AIDB’s commitment to education, rehabilitation and employment programs for people who have disability challenges is outstanding and noteworthy. The AIDB Student Life and Conference Center is another vital piece of their commitment to their mission, and we are honored to be a part of this important project,” continued King.

“We are incredibly thankful for the support from The Caring Foundation. Their support will help take our students and staff to the next level, creating real change for their future,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the Office of Institutional Advancement at AIDB.

Tim King, Manager, Community Relations at BCBS Alabama, smiles to camera with the BlueCross BlueShield of Alabama The Caring Company logo in the background.

**A LIMITLESS LEGACY TO AIDB**

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

John Watson looks at something off camera.

IN THE REALM of promoting accessibility and empowering Alabamians who are Deaf, Blind, and DeafBlind, the generosity of philanthropic donors serves as a beacon of hope and progress. Among these benefactors stands the distinguished John Watson, whose compassionate dedication to supporting the mission of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation has provided essential resources to hundreds of individuals of all ages who are served by AIDB.

A legacy born in the 1990s with Watson’s service on the AIDB Foundation Board of Directors has evolved through the decades, leading to Watson’s most recent generous contribution to support the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center. The Center, which is set to begin construction this year, will offer a state-of-the-art facility designed to bring together all students under one roof for cultural events, academic programs and extracurricular activities.

“John Watson’s impact on those served by Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind has inspired a sense of hope and possibility for many years,” said Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “AIDB is incredibly grateful for the lasting legacy that the generosity of John Watson has had on the students and consumers served by AIDB.”

Watson’s involvement with the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center is not the first time his support has led to a critical addition to AIDB. In 2002, AIDB celebrated the completion of the Dothan Regional Center which was, at the time, the newest addition to AIDB’s statewide network of Regional Centers. Not only did Watson give the leading gift to fund the Regional Center, but he also led the initiative to gather private support from the local community. Watson has also generously funded an endowment that provides college scholarships to graduating seniors from Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf and Helen Keller School of Alabama.

“Supporting an organization financially isn't just about giving money; it's about investing in a vision, believing in the mission, and empowering positive change. It's a tangible expression of our commitment to making a difference and leaving a lasting impact on the world around us,” said John Watson. “I am incredibly honored by the opportunity to support the mission of AIDB. It has been a life-affirming experience to be involved with an organization that changes the lives of so many here in Alabama.”

THE POWER OF TOUCH

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

AN INVENTION FROM 1824 continues to change lives 200 years later at Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind (AFCB). In the 1820s a Parisian teenager who was blind began the work of revising a 12-dot cryptography system created for soldiers to use in night-time battlefield communication into a six-dot code that would allow people who were blind to use only a single index finger to feel and read. The system had six dots, three lined up vertically next to each other, with different combinations of dots representing letters and punctuation marks. In 1824, history was made when Louis Braille presented his system to his peers.

Two hundred years later, adult students at AFCB continue to discover the profound significance of braille. Braille is not just a means of reading and writing; it is a lifeline for people who are blind, a bridge connecting them to the world around them. With braille, individuals who are blind are no longer confined to the limitations of sight, they can write and communicate with others independently. They are empowered by the power of touch.

Empowerment is the backbone of AFCB, a program that guides adults who are blind through the necessary skills and processes of adjustment to blindness so that the student can lead the independent, productive and fulfilling life of their choice.

Did you know that of those people who are blind and employed, at least 90% of them use braille in their job? A student’s ability to read and write in braille is a cornerstone of their ability to work and is part of the prevocational training offered at AFCB. Taught daily under learning shades, AFCB students learn the braille alphabet, numbers and contractions, and how to write with the slate and stylus, braille’s equivalent to the pencil and paper, and a Braille Writer. Eventually, additional electronic devices are introduced.

“Without braille, I wouldn’t be where I am today,” said Anna Trotman, Braille Instructor, AFCB. “Braille is important because it gives people who are blind a way to communicate in their own words and a way to be independent. Learning and using braille helps improve spelling and grammar. Also, people who can use braille are more efficient in their work. Improved language skills and efficiency lead to better jobs and greater independence for braille users.”

From the slate and stylus to the most current high-tech tools used for braille, the students at AFCB know that braille is a symbol of hope, equality and empowerment!

Laura Boone, an AFCB student, practices with the slate and stylus to boost her confidence and proficiency in writing braille.

**MORE THAN JUST A MOTTO**

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, AIDB Marketing and Community Relations

FOR ERIN PAULSON, a junior at Alabama School for the Blind, “Deaf. Blind. Limitless.” is more than just a motto. It is a way of life.

“That’s what being at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) has taught me,” exclaimed Paulson. “That you can accomplish anything you can set your mind to and succeed even if you have lost one of your senses.”

Paulson began her journey with AIDB through the Talladega Regional Center where she received Early Intervention services. With the help of the admissions team, Paulson then enrolled at the Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS) in August of 2008. “I knew Erin when she first started at HKS,” said LeeAnne Vondracek, M.S., Student Life Director, HKS. “She always had a smile on her face and loved to talk to everyone.”

After two and a half years at HKS, Paulson transferred to Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) and has continued to blossom. At ASB, she discovered a love for agriculture and animal science.

“Erin is a very passionate young lady who excels in her agriculture classes,” said Kalie Mitchell, M.Ed., Agriscience and 10th Grade Science Teacher, ASB. “She participates in 4-H, poultry shows and is always willing to try new things. She can be successful at anything she sets her mind to.”

Paulson also received services through the Health and Clinical Services including the Low Vision Clinic, the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program, the Speech Therapy Department and the Occupational Therapy Department.

“Erin is eager to learn. She is determined to learn skills and use them in her everyday life,” said Tamara Harrison, M.S., Speech-Language Pathologist. “My favorite things about Erin are her positive attitude and joyful spirit. Her willingness to encourage others and be a good friend is contagious.”

“She is eager to try new things, loves talking with people and is just such a joy to be around!” agreed Elizabeth B. Jones, OTR, Occupational Therapist. “She has persevered in occupational therapy to gain the skills needed to become a more independent young woman including learning organizational skills for school and participating fully during the school day and in the dorm.”

Looking to the future, Paulson plans to have a career working with animals.

“I am limitless,’ said Paulson. “Just because I’ve lost my eyesight doesn’t mean I can’t. Being visually impaired doesn’t stop me.”

Erin Paulson, a junior at Alabama School for the Blind, helps in the barn at Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program.

**MODERN MANUFACTURING PROGRAM LAUNCH**

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

THE ALABAMA INSTITUTE for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) has partnered with East AlabamaWorks to offer a Modern Manufacturing Program to K-12 and adult students, ages 16 and older, within Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, Helen Keller School of Alabama and E. H. Gentry Facility (EHG). Classroom space at EHG has been transformed to support the needs of the program which welcomed its first students this spring.

"I am very interested in the Modern Manufacturing Program, which will help me grow as a future employee in the manufacturing or automotive industry,” said Parker Clardy, a student at EHG in the General Services caseload. “I look forward to adding all the certifications MMP offers to my resume to help me find higher-wage employment opportunities."

Led by East AlabamaWorks, the Modern Manufacturing Program was created based on the industry needs of automotive manufacturers in Alabama. The program will equip students with basic knowledge of processes to prepare them for over 40,000 manufacturing jobs that are available in workforce Region 2, a region that spans seven counties in East Alabama: Calhoun, Cherokee, Clay, Cleburne, Etowah, Randolph and Talladega.

Students who complete the program will have an advantage in the job market in manufacturing industries. The Honda Alabama Auto Plant in Lincoln is one manufacturer, and supporter of this new program, within Region 2.

“The Modern Manufacturing Program will provide students with basic manufacturing skills before they enter the workforce, helping to increase their career options and hiring potential, while also assisting local employers efforts to fill the workforce gap,” said Michael Gaines, Manufacturing planning and control division lead, Honda Alabama Auto Plant. “We look forward to continuing to work with East AlabamaWorks, local schools and the community to provide opportunities to students through this new program.”

“AIDB is truly appreciative to East AlabamaWorks and its partners in making this exciting initiative available to students within AIDB’s programs,” noted AIDB Chief Adult and Field Services Officer Jessica L. Edmiston. “We hope to quickly expand to offer fully accessible weekend, evening, and summer classes to those who are not currently AIDB K-12 or adult learners, but who have hearing or vision loss or perhaps a physical, cognitive or hidden disability who desire to become certified in Modern Manufacturing. The program is a truly robust opportunity that complements our menu and continuum of services within AIDB.”

Parker Clardy leans against the open window of a car.

**STEM ACADEMY FOR DEAF & HARD OF HEARING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

By Cara Wilmot, M.Ed., Academic & Transition Specialist, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind - NTID Regional STEM Center

Eugeina O’Daniel interprets information shared by a NASA scientist at the Huntsville Space & Rocket Center for two students on the field trip.

“SCHOOL'S OUT for summer!" rings as students bid farewell to classrooms, but for youth who are Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH), summer presents unique challenges without communication access. Deaf summer camps have long addressed this need, exemplified by initiatives like the STEM Academy by the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind – National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) Regional STEM Center (AIDB - NRSC), catering to high school students who are DHH.

STEM Academy is a condensed version of a program for incoming NTID first-year college students. Gerard Buckley, NTID president and RIT vice president and dean, says, "As part of NTID's national outreach mission, we wanted to expand STEM preparation for Deaf and hard of hearing students from throughout the nation. We were pleased to have the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind become a senior partner as the Southeastern Region NTID Regional STEM Center. Over the past five years, the NRSC at AIDB has provided outstanding STEM-prep activities to hundreds of students, parents, interpreters, educators, employers, and VR professionals. Our research shows that deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals are underrepresented in STEM careers, and through our partnership, NTID and AIDB have sought to change this picture and increase deaf participation in STEM. We are pleased with the progress to date and look forward to future years of collaboration."

STEM Academy Transition Program 2023 staff and students visiting the Huntsville Space & Rocket Center.

STEM ACADEMY FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AIMS TO:

- Bridge academic gaps in core subjects like reading, ELA, math, and emotional intelligence.

- Foster American Sign Language (ASL) literacy.

- Cultivate leadership skills.

- Enhance college readiness.

- Spark interest in STEM fields.

Mattea King is standing next to an interactive board showing how her one hand classifier represents a person walking.

The STEM Academy experience may provide some resources lacking in districts with limited social, cultural, and educational resources for students who are DHH to be prepared to transition from high school to postsecondary education. For students attending schools for the deaf or center-based programs, it allows students who are DHH to continue to be surrounded by language over summer break.

Classes are dynamic and led by co-teachers who infuse academics with excitement. Math sessions feature inventive problem-solving exercises and rocket launches while reading incorporates novel studies with deaf characters, complemented by ASL summary videos. Academic progress is celebrated, but the curriculum extends beyond academics to encompass holistic development.

In ASL classes, students explore sign language parameters through interactive activities and video projects, catering to varying proficiency levels. Wellness classes focus on self-esteem, social-emotional skills, and resilience through art and journaling. A notable project involved students transforming dissatisfaction with their artwork into a lesson on perseverance, resulting in personal growth and reflection.

College Readiness is one of the STEM Academy's significant goals. As a sponsor, an NTID recruiter spent an evening with the students, talking about the unique postsecondary opportunities at NTID because it is the first and largest technical college for students who are DHH. Every year the students attend, they earn a college scholarship to attend NTID. Each year, the program also has a successful Deaf adult share their experience transitioning from high school to college and a career. This year, Raven Sutton from the Netflix show The CircleThe Circle shared her journey to her current career as a social media influencer, including the communication barriers she had to overcome.

The success of the STEM Academy has spurred interest nationwide, prompting states to replicate the program. AIDB - NRSC has collaborated with multiple states to expand its reach, with plans to launch in Florida in 2024. Resources and training are being developed to ensure fidelity to the original program, alongside efforts to sustain support for students beyond the summer months.

EXPLORE THE ENRICHING OPPORTUNITIES OFFERED BY THE

STEM ACADEMY AT AIDB. VISIT AIDB.ORG/STEMACADEMY TO DELVE DEEPER INTO THE PROGRAM AND KICK START YOUR APPLICATION TODAY!

Lynn Dunn explains grammar rule while Laurie Carter provides ASL interpretation. Margie Hutto is monitoring student comprehension and ready to provide additional clarification in ASL as needed with Kaneesha Stallworth ready to provide voicing.

RACE TRACTS

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, AIDB Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

RACE Tracts attendees hit the brakes long enough to pose for a group photo.

GRADUATING from high school and transitioning to college or career is an exciting time in any student’s life. With the help of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) statewide network of Regional Centers, Alabama students are more prepared to successfully navigate this transition and the exciting world of their limitless future.

Through a collaboration with the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) and the Alabama Junior College System, 2024 Transition events were held for high school students throughout the state who are Blind, Deaf, DeafBlind and their teachers and parents. Students’ agendas were filled with concurrent team-based activities created to promote job exploration, team cooperation, social interaction and friendly competition. The Parent Teacher Session included ADRS resources and programs.

“The transition event was a great opportunity for Kyanna to be around peers like herself and to get a better understanding of college courses and what direction she wants to go,” said parent, Michelle Morris.

Themed Ready to Acquire Certificated Employment, or RACE Tracts, this year’s interactive experience allowed students to explore certificate programs offered through Alabama's Junior College System. Each regional event also offered a parent/teacher session about AIDB's suite of resources.

“Our family enjoyed the transition event sponsored by AIDB at Wallace Community College because it gave us an overview of the resources available to our son that we were unaware of,” commented parent, Beth Wilson. “Evan was able to take a tour that exposed him to the coursework and programs available locally.”

Throughout each event, students also had the opportunity to meet with mentors and learn about college-specific resources and support. “This is really what it’s about,” said Leslie Mitchell, Student Services Specialist and Americans with Disabilities Act Coordinator for Central Alabama Community College. “You empower minds with inclusive education, where every student’s potential finds its runway and technical and college programs can pave the way for diverse talents to soar.”