

The Insider

July 2026



UNIVERSAL MH/DD/SAS Mission Statement

Universal MH/DD/SAS is dedicated to helping individuals and families affected by mental illness, developmental disabilities and substance abuse in achieving their full potential to live, work and grow in the community.

WHY THE NEED FOR THE INSIDER ? *The purpose of this newsletter is to provide specialized information to all Universal MH/DD/SAS employees. The intent is to develop an informed workforce, to foster a greater sense of community and to build morale.*



Feathered Wisdom ~ by Crissy Oravits

In the world of mental health and developmental support, we often talk about interventions, goals, and milestones. But as a caregiver, mother and a supporter, I've learned that sometimes the most profound breakthroughs don't happen in a clinical setting; they happen in the quiet dust of a chicken coop.

My eldest son, Austin, lives with multiple hurdles that can make the human world feel loud, unpredictable, and difficult to navigate. For Austin, connecting with people can sometimes feel like a puzzle with missing pieces. But when he steps onto our little farm, the air changes.

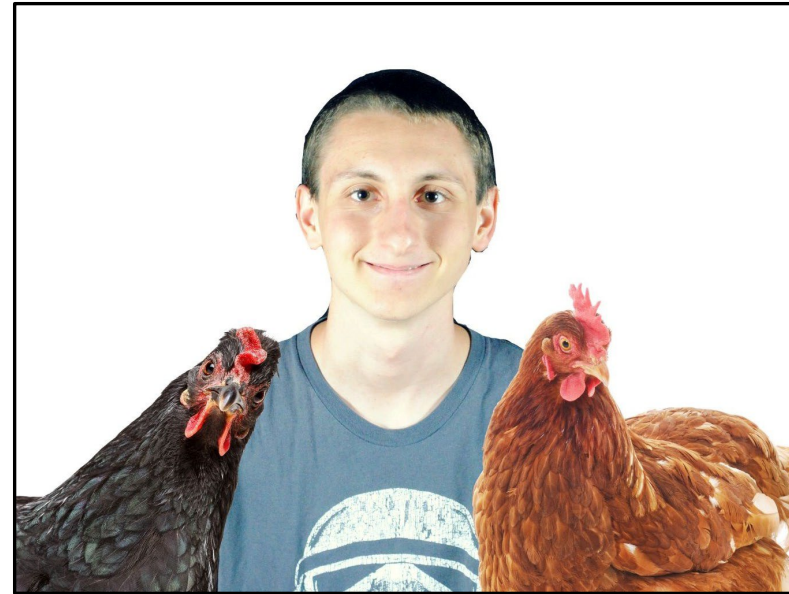
Have you ever watched a chicken interact with a human? They don't care about social cues, verbal fluency, or eye contact. They operate on a frequency of pure presence. I've watched a simple creature - a chicken - show a level of compassion and gentility that catches your breath. There is a unique magic when a bird settles into the arms of someone like Austin. In that moment, there is no "disability" or "special need." There is only a reciprocal kindness. The chicken understands Austin's spirit before most humans do; it senses his gentleness and responds with its own. It reminds us that the "least little things," a soft wing, a quiet cluck, a shared moment of stillness, often mean the most to those navigating life's steepest hills.



While our farm provides the setting for these moments, it is the community behind us that provides the opportunity. We often say it takes a village, but more accurately, it takes a team that truly sees the individual and the family connected to them.

Without the unwavering support of our Universal Wilson team and the dedicated guidance of Monique Simmons, these moments of freedom wouldn't be possible. Their support acts as the fence that keeps us safe and the gate that opens the world. Because of their genuine care, Austin has the freedom to just be; to live his life on his terms and connect with the world in the way he needs to. No shame, no judgement, no bullying, no criticisms, only care and continued gentle support, as it should be. To my fellow workers and supporters at Universal MH/DD/SAS: never underestimate the "small" things you do. Whether you are providing direct care or working behind the scenes, you are the reason families like ours can find beauty in the everyday. You aren't just managing cases; you are protecting the space where kindness like the quiet bond between a boy and his birds can flourish. Thank you for helping the people you support find their voices even when they don't use many words to speak.

In the world of special needs, we often search for big breakthroughs, but the true heart of our work is found in the 'small' moments of connection that others might overlook. Never forget that to someone else, you are the bridge to their peace. Caregiving is much like tending a garden or a farm; it requires patience for the slow growth, resilience through the seasons, and the wisdom to know that even the smallest, quietest soul has a vital purpose in our world. True support isn't about fixing what is 'broken,' it's about witnessing what is beautiful. When we look through a lens of compassion, we see that every hurdle is just a steppingstone toward a deeper kind of love.





Ashley has been employed with Ingles for over a year and has future hopes to work along side cashiers as a bagger. Currently she works hard at making sure the customers have the freshest popcorn. To say the least, Ashley enjoys her job at Ingles.

Each day Ashley arrives to work, she knows she has a full day ahead of her. From popping popcorn, to bagging the popcorn, labeling, and refilling the popcorn shelves. Ashley has her job cut out for her. Not to mention cleaning the popcorn machine at the end of her day as well as her work area.

Most days Ashley finishes ahead of time and enjoys other responsibilities such as labeling food and food containers, restocking cornbread and biscuits and sometimes even helping customers find items on their grocery list!

She loves to save and enjoys treating herself to a strawberry smoothie every Friday at Hope House Coffee after a long week of popping popcorn!

Support staff Chad says, *"I am so proud of how far Ashley has come. The sky is the limit for this young lady!"*

Raleigh's Sarah Gupta would like to recognize one of our very special staff. Meet **Justine Cookson** who has been an excellent staff to those on the TBI Waiver. Sarah says, *"She has received accolades from the people she supports, families, care managers and specialized consultative service providers."*

Recently some folks gathered for an evening of fun and fellowship. One of the folks Justine works with wanted everyone to know just how special Justine is. She says, *"Justine is truly great people, and I thank God for her being available to me! Please, let Justine know that I think she's all the hoot and she's splendidly terrific!"*



Like everyone with whom you come in contact, we are so appreciative of you Justine!



Summer brings a lot of sensory input: heat, bright sun, new smells, insects, crowds, fireworks, changing clothes, different foods. For some individuals, those changes are exciting. For others, they're exhausting.

A few principles for sensory-friendly summer planning:

Map the day before you live it. Preview outings with pictures, video, or social stories when possible. Knowing what's coming reduces anxiety.

Build in recovery time. If you're planning a big outing, plan a quiet day on either side. Stamina for sensory input is a finite resource.

Pack a comfort kit. Noise-reducing headphones, a favorite fidget, a weighted lap pad, sunglasses, extra water, a change of clothes, and any essential food or snacks can turn a possibly-hard day into a manageable one.

Pay attention to fireworks. Fourth of July and other summer celebrations can be deeply distressing for individuals with sensory sensitivities.

Planning ahead – staying home with a calm activity, using headphones, or traveling somewhere quieter – is not "missing out." It's respecting a real need.

Have an exit plan.

For every outing, know how you will leave early if needed. Knowing the exit exists can be what allows someone to stay. The pressure to tough it out is what causes meltdowns; permission to leave is what allows enjoyment.



Did you know Universal has an Employee Assistance Program?

All active full-time salaried employees and hourly employees who work 32.5 hours or more per week are eligible to access EAP services and qualify for up to three (3) confidential counseling sessions. Go to <https://umhs.net/employee-assistance> to apply for the counseling sessions.



Supporting individuals living with both Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (IDD) and dementia requires a person-centered approach focused on maintaining familiar routines, simplifying communication and identifying early changes in baseline functioning. Because dementia often complicates existing communication and cognitive skills, adapting caregiving strategies requires specific techniques to maintain the individual's quality of life.



Core Support Strategies:

Prioritize Familiar Routines: Keep a predictable daily schedule. Using picture schedules and placing clear labels (or picture cues) on doors can help the individual navigate spaces independently and comfortably.

Simplify Communication: Speak in short, simple sentences, maintain good eye contact, and allow 90 seconds or more for the person to process and respond. Never argue or confront them about memory loss; instead, validate their feelings and redirect.

Adapt Daily Activities: Break tasks down into smaller steps. Offer gentle, physical, and sensory activities like pet therapy, reminiscence with familiar photographs, and soothing aromatherapy.

Recognizing Early Signs

Dementia in people with IDD is often identified by a noticeable loss of, or change from, their established baseline (e.g., losing the ability to complete a familiar task or sudden changes in mood). Early detection is vital for implementing home modifications and interventions that prolong independence.

National Resources and Caregiver Support

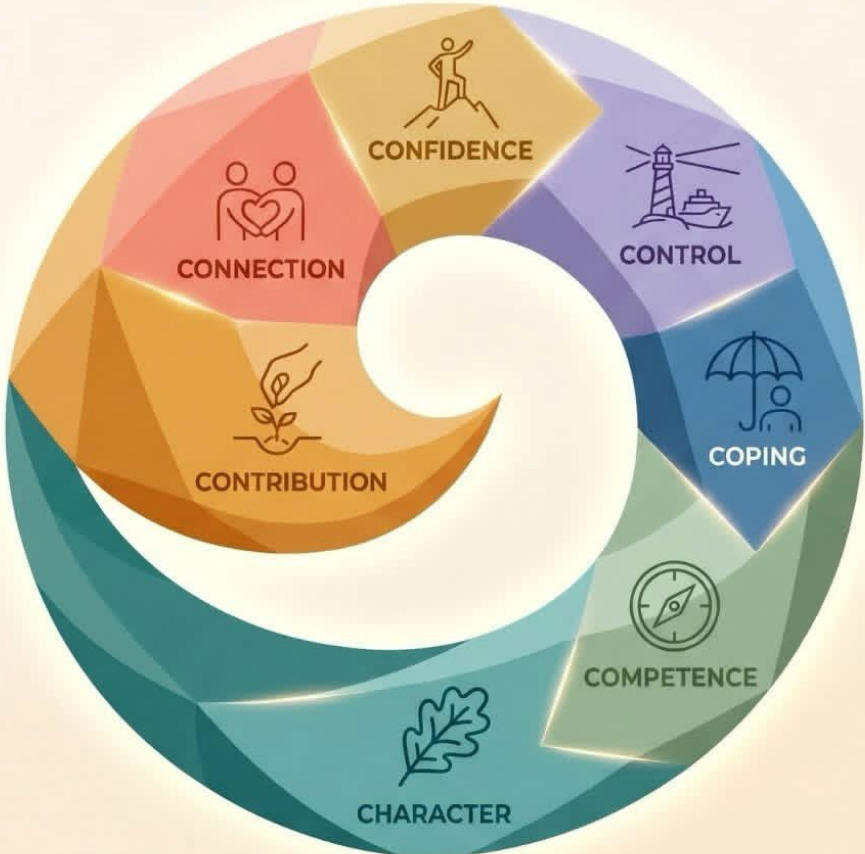
Navigating these overlapping conditions can be overwhelming, but specialized support is available:

The NTG: The National Task Group on Intellectual Disabilities and Dementia provides practice guidelines, educational toolkits, and online family caregiver support groups.

The Arc: Offers national and local chapters that provide advocacy, family support programs, and community-based resources for adults aging with IDD.

Alzheimer's Society: Offers tailored guidance on supporting a person with a learning disability and dementia

THE 7 CAPABILITIES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Here are the Top Ten Note Writer Winners



2026 2nd Qt

Name	Office
Mary Hemby	Wilson
Jerri Hart	Asheville
Jesse Watson	Winston
Jamal Frazier	Raleigh
James Baynard	Forest City
Debbie Hill	Burlington
Shinika McGee	Burlington
Daniel King	Burlington
Jennifer Hunt	Raleigh
Glenda Watkins	Burlington



You guys ROCK!

Marilyn Porter was a Regional Director for the Eastern Region of Universal Mental Health. For those who knew her, she was a dynamic personality with endless dedication to the people she served as well as her family. When you worked with Marilyn, you became family. Marilyn came to Universal in September of 2011 and through her time at the agency impacted countless employees and people that we serve. Her advocacy and spirit embodied the mission of “Caring People, Caring for People,” for both employees, and the people we support. Marilyn passed away on March 27, 2020, after a courageous fight with cancer. Her loss was one that was felt statewide and farther. Her legacy will live on through this scholarship.



The Universal Marilyn Porter Scholarship will be given annually in the amount of \$1500.00. It will be awarded to a direct care hourly staff through an application selection process. The applicant must commit to attend a credited college (community college, university, etc.) within the year of the scholarship award.

The scholarship will be selected by a 6-person scholarship committee made up of 6 Universal employees. The decision will be made based primarily on a short essay from the applicant.

The scholarship decision will not be based on, race, color, creed, national or ethnic origin, sex, religion, age, disability, or political affiliation

You can apply between August 1, 2026, and August 15, 2026, at: <https://umhs.net/scholarship>



Summer is officially in full swing. And for many, that means spending more time outside on sunny days or trips to local pools or beaches. Swimming is a great way to fill up those summer days for many reasons. It is an excellent form of exercise, and it has also been shown to have mental health benefits.

That said, any time individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are around water, extra precaution should be taken. The National Autism Association pegs drowning as one of the leading causes of death among children with autism, and as Prevention1st.org notes, children with developmental disabilities are twice as likely to suffer death from an unintentional accident. One factor that further endangers individuals with autism and other intellectual disabilities is that they may not immediately understand the dangers of water. Especially in the case of children with autism, they may even be drawn to it or fascinated by it. This is why it is so important that parents, caregivers, and individuals with I/DD and autism understand water safety practices. Adaptive swim lessons are given through the YMCA at various locations throughout the US.

CDC's recent issues of Vital Signs stated that the rates of melanoma, the deadliest form of skin cancer, have doubled over the last 3 decades. Applying (and remembering to reapply) sunscreen when outdoors, after getting out of the water, and especially during peak sun hours will help to prevent sunburn and furthermore skin cancer. Sunscreen should be at least an SPF of 15 and applied on sunny as well as cloudy days.

Monitoring how much time is spent outside on hot days is also very important. Overheating, (often called heat exhaustion or in extreme cases heat stroke), can be serious if the indicators are overlooked. Signs of heat illness that can occur when spending too much time outside can include:



- Headache and dizziness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Red clammy skin
- Not sweating when hot out (or stop sweating)
- Seizures



If any of these symptoms are present, an individual should get out of the sun immediately and head indoors or to a shady spot. If available, a cool wet washcloth should be applied to their skin to help bring down their body temperature. To help prevent overheating make sure to drink plenty of water before, during, and after spending time outside. When planning outdoor events, keep in mind that the sun is at its hottest between 10am and 4pm, so having spots where individuals can go inside to cool down or seek some shade is vital.



Passwords have been part of our work lives for years—but they’re no longer enough to keep us safe. They can be hard to remember, are often reused across multiple accounts, and are easily exposed through phishing emails, data breaches, or weak password choices. Even strong passwords can be stolen or guessed with modern tools. That’s where passkeys come in.

What is a Passkey? A passkey is a more secure way to sign in—without a traditional password. It uses something you have (your device) and something you are or do (like your fingerprint, face, or PIN).

How Do Passkeys Work? When you create a passkey:

- Your device generates a unique digital key pair – the private key stays securely on your device, while the public key is shared with the app or website.
- Your device verifies your identity when you log in by using its secure key to confirm it’s really you.
- You confirm with a fingerprint, face scan, or PIN - All of this happens behind the scenes—no password needed.

Why Are Passkeys Better?

- ✓ No passwords to steal
- ✓ Resistant to phishing
- ✓ Unique for every app or site
- ✓ Securely stored on your device

Why Are They Easier?

- ✓ No passwords to remember
- ✓ Faster sign-ins with biometrics
- ✓ Simple, seamless experience
- ✓ No more password resets



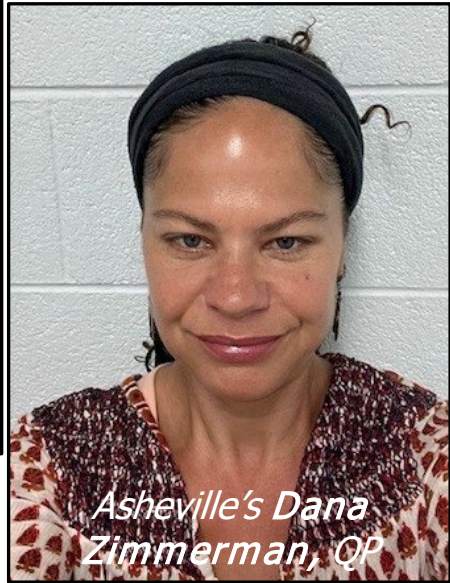
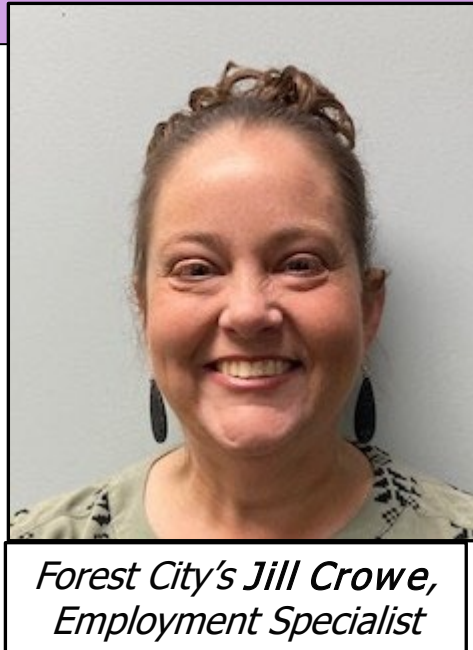
Universal will soon begin implementing passkeys for access to company resources.

As part of this transition, employees will be able to: sign in using their device instead of a password, use biometrics like fingerprint or face ID for signing in, reduce account lockouts and password resets, and benefit from stronger, more secure access. The IT Department will be available to support everyone at Universal during the upcoming transition. **Bottom line:** Passkeys make signing in simpler and much more secure.

Whenever possible, we encourage you to switch to passkeys for your personal logins to improve your security.

Please let Universal’s IT Department know if you have any questions or need assistance by emailing

trackit@umhs.net



Corporate's Bethany Greer, Financial Assistant

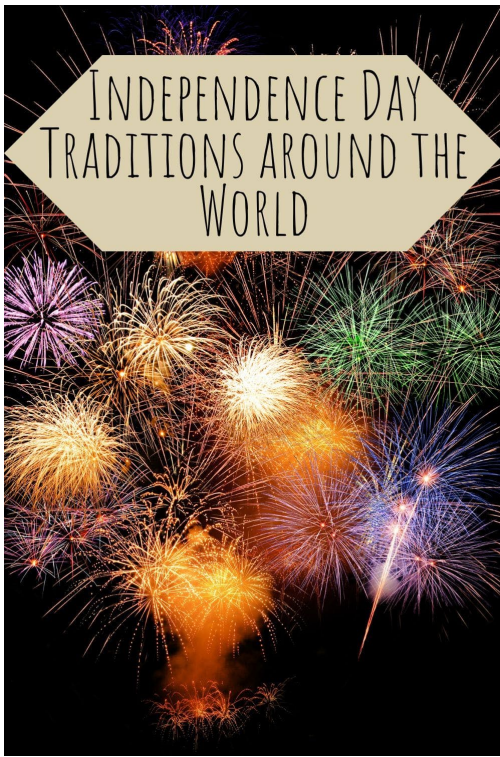
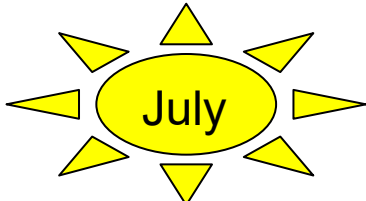
Wilmington's Daphne Fisher ~ Resource specialist

Morganton's Jill Rocco ~ ITFS

Welcome Winston's Kathleen Teague, QP

Universal's Cultural Sensitivity Mission Statement

"Universal MH/DD/SAS strives to develop awareness and respect in order to celebrate the diverse backgrounds of people."



Independence Day Around the World



Women's Equality Day



International Sign Languages Day



AROUND UNIVERSAL



Universal's Early Intervention representing at Kinderpalozza!

A big thank you to Marian Morris (New Bern) who has been providing services with Universal for 20 Years! Thank you for your dedication!



“Special needs” just seems wrong!
<https://www.facebook.com/share/r/1HShTUc1rB/>



I am only about 30 days into my QP role—which basically means I’m still in my “new kid on the block” era, trying not to push the wrong button or send an email to the entire company by accident 😊. With that being said, I can truly say I’m enjoying this journey—and that is completely because of the patience, support, and kindness you all have shown me. You’ve taken what could have been overwhelming and turned it into something manageable... and dare I say, even fun! Now let me give credit where credit is *definitely* due:

Stephanie Revels — my MVP, my lifeline, my “let me ask Stephanie really quick” person 😊. Thank you for taking me under your wing and never making me feel like my questions are too many (even when they absolutely are). You have been a true lifesaver!

Latonja McLean — my manager, mentor, coach, and occasional reality check 😊. Thank you for being my foundation. The daily training, support, and encouragement you provide keeps me going, and I appreciate you more than you know.

LaSheka King — thank you for always stepping in and helping without hesitation. You make teamwork look easy!

April Dunlap — your daily “Do you need anything?” check-ins deserve a trophy at this point. Thank you for always looking out for me!

Melissa Abshire — thank you for helping me stay organized... because without you, it would be *document chaos 101* over here 😊.

And a very special thank you to **Tamara** and **Terry Bedford**, you both truly show what teamwork is all about. Your guidance, communication, and humility do not go unnoticed, and I appreciate the example you set for all of us. I am truly grateful to be part of a team that is not only supportive but also patient enough to help me grow (and survive my first 30 days.)

You all have made a huge difference in this transition, and I appreciate you.

Thank you for everything—and thank you in advance for answering my next question 😊

Warm regards, **Kathaleen Teague(Your 30-Day Rookie)**



Lori Wyde says, "I would like to send a big thanks to the amazing Raleigh **Administrative Staff**.

Heather Everhart says, "I wanted to give a big shout out to **Tony Yingling and his team** for utilizing **Brittany Mebane** to help mitigate their EVV and Override submissions. Accounting has seen a difference in the streamlined process regarding Brittany being the contact person to assist the staff with Overrides and Missed EVV's. Great job to the whole Raleigh Residential team."

Laura Hargitt says "**Dolly Green** has been with the Supported Employment program in Forest City for 10 years this August! Her compassion and understanding make a real difference in how empowered her people supported grow to be in their placements. She is funny and relatable, and we truly appreciate having her on the team - thank you, Dolly!"

ZsaZsa Johnson says, "Kudos to **Btittany Mebane** for always helping when asked and doing so with a positive attitude!"



Morganton's Teresa Caldwell says, "Kudos to **Morgan Dawkins, Ingrid Freeman, and Jennifer Rowe!** They have been so supportive in answering my questions and assist when needed.

Transitioning from education into mental health has been a big change for me and all the UMHS team has made the experience such a positive one. Thank you all for being so welcoming, helpful, and kind! I love working for UMHS!"



Raleigh’s Lori Wyde says “I would like to recognize **Anthony Yingling** for his ongoing support and leadership. Tony consistently demonstrates compassion and ensures that we are able to show up at our best each day. He actively supports our successes in meaningful ways; he creates an environment where we feel valued and empowered which enables us to do our work well. I am so grateful for his experience, support, insight, knowledge and his ability to lead with integrity while uplifting those around him. Many, many thanks and much appreciation, Tony!

Also, my sincere appreciation to **Sylvia Gardner** for taking the time to speak with me and share her valuable feedback and experience in this field. I am grateful for her insight and knowledge.

Lastly, thank you to **Drema Greer** for her ongoing efforts in collecting and sharing Kudos. Her consistent reminders to participate in recognizing others plays an important role in fostering a positive and supportive company culture as well as helping us see the value in others!”

Tiara De Luca says “Kudos to **Christina Dixon, Arlene Croto, and Anna Lundquist** for being the best team ever! They are always available to help me and make me feel valued. Also, Kudos to **Brittany Clemens** because although she works in a different office, she is always eager to help me when I can’t figure something out on OTC. Lastly, I’d love to welcome **Daphne Fisher** to the Wilmington office.” 😊



Lori Gordon says, “Many thanks to **Sabin Carroll and Jonathan Euper!** Their quick response, expert knowledge and communication is outstanding. They keep us all going regardless of our technical issues and many user errors. They are always responsive and friendly, and we just couldn't do it without them!”

