



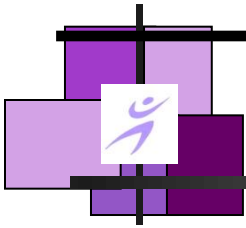
# The Insider

Oct 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.*



### The Rhythm of the Sky and the Soul: Lessons from the Barnyard ~ by Crissy Oravits

Austin sees the world differently. Where I see a routine day of tending to our chickens, ducks, and guinea fowl, Austin sees a living, breathing tapestry of atmospheric shifts. He is not merely "aware" of the weather; he is in conversation with it. While the rest of us move through our day, distracted by the hum of technology or the weight of to-do lists, Austin is anchored to the subtle language of the clouds, and the pressure changes that hover just below the threshold of human perception. There are moments when I catch him standing perfectly still in the middle of the run, his gaze fixed on the horizon, his shoulders slightly squared. In those moments, he is not alone. Beside him, our hens have stopped their foraging, tucking their heads toward their breasts, and the ducks have gathered near the water's edge in a silent, watchful huddle. They know, just as he knows, that the barometer is dropping. The animals weave in and out below his feet and legs because they know he's in sync with their silent messages to him.

There is a visceral beauty in watching him anticipate a storm. Long before the first rumble of thunder echoes across the fields, Austin has already adjusted his posture, moved the younger chicks to shelter, or simply paces about the ground twirling his figurine or twirling with his Rooster Lynn whom I'm sure, detests being his dance partner. He doesn't need a weather app. He carries the atmospheric pressure in his bones.



For a long time, I tried to "manage" this. I tried to teach him about forecasts and reassure him of any fears he presented with. It took me far too long to realize that *he* was the teacher, and I was the student. He taught me that when the air grows heavy with the scent of rain, it isn't just a weather event—it is a signal to stop, to honor the transition, and to recognize that we are part of a larger, rhythmic cycle that we so often take for granted.



We live in a world that rushes to "fix" weather, to shield ourselves from it, and to complain about its inconvenience. But when I watch Austin run his hand along the feathers of a nervous hen as the sky turns that bruised, heavy purple of an oncoming squall, I see something sacred. He is sorely afraid, but he respects the change. He understands that every shift in temperature, every whisper of wind, is a story—a movement of energy that commands our attention and our awe. He calms his animals although oftentimes petrified and nervous inside his own body.

He has taught me to stop looking *at* the weather and start listening *to* it. I notice the way the light changes just before a front moves through, casting a golden, eerie hue on the tall grass. I notice the sudden silence of the birds that occurs mere seconds before the rain begins. I find myself feeling an overwhelming sense of gratitude for these nuances and the constant reminders of Austin telling me that "it's gonna be bad bad weather now."

There is a profound humility in realizing that while we walk through our days thinking we are masters of our schedule, the world around us is moving to a much older, more deliberate beat. Austin's sensitivity—his "hyper-awareness," as the world might label it—is actually his greatest gift. It is a portal into a deeper awareness of the natural world that I nor others seem to possess, or if we do we've suppressed it deep down to oblivion.

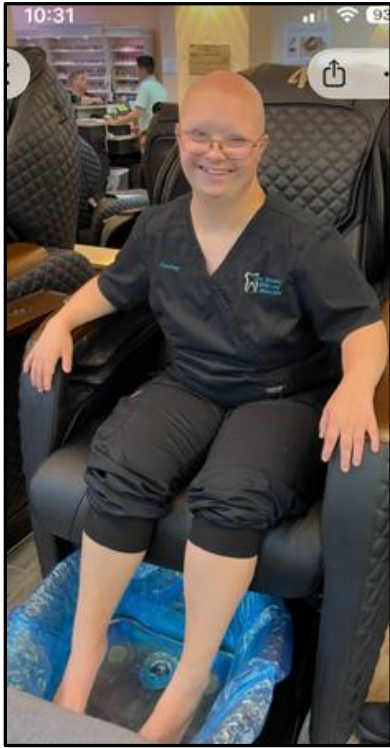
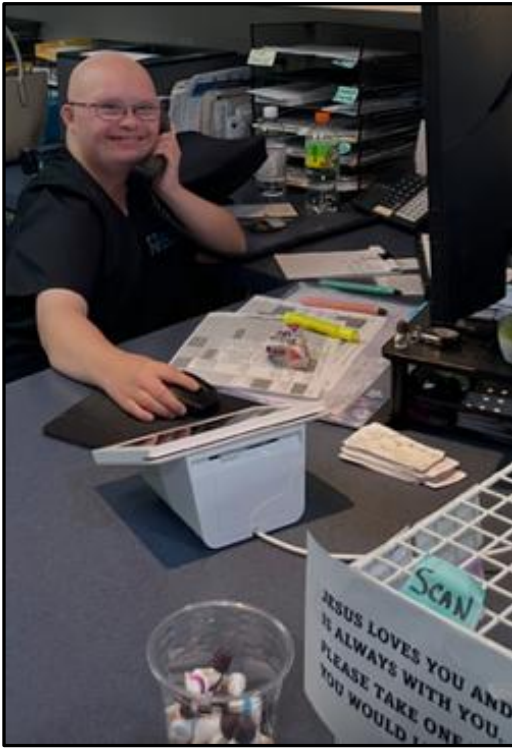
To love a child like Austin is to learn the art of paying attention. It is to recognize that the "little things"—a shift in the wind, the way the ducks huddle, the look of focused concern on his face—are actually the biggest things of all. They are reminders that we are small, that we are connected, and that there is a quiet, beautiful intelligence in the world if we are only brave enough to slow down and observe it.

So, the next time you feel the hair on your arms stand up before any type of storm, or you notice the birds growing quiet, take a moment. Don't rush to your phone to check the radar. Instead, look around. Go outside. Pace in the grass. Breathe in the shifting air. And perhaps, like Austin, you might find a little more sensitivity in knowing that everything is exactly where it is supposed to be, moving in perfect, unpredictable, and beautiful harmony with the sky. In Austin's words "It's ok to be a little worried just not a whole lot worried".



“I am the proudest mother ever. To have a daughter who wants to be like me is the biggest compliment I could receive. She volunteers at the dentist office where I am employed. We were so blessed with that opportunity. She makes hygiene bags; shreds paper and delivers schedules to the dentist. She travels with us to our local schools to pass out toothbrushes and dental information. This allows her to interact daily with her community. It is a dream come true for her to find her place and feel important and independent.

Universal has been such a huge part of her life. It is the only place we have ever received services because the care and support is just so impressive. Her caregiver Donna, goes above and beyond to teach and contribute to Courtney’s life. As a parent you work continuously to help your child, and with additional help from Universal, you can reach your dreams if you remember one thing. Never say “I can’t.” Set goals, work on yourself daily and trust God.”



Sometimes a hardworking girl needs a little pampering!

Keano says, “I stopped at Speedway one morning to grab a cup of coffee. When I got out of my car, I realized I didn’t have my phone or my wallet. As I was walking toward the entrance, I noticed a lot of commotion coming from a vehicle to my left. There were people standing around, and I could hear what sounded like screaming and crying. In my head, I kept telling myself, “Don’t go over there. Just go inside and get your coffee.” But something told me otherwise, so I walked over to see what was going on.

As I approached the vehicle, I saw a man sitting in the passenger’s seat with his seatbelt still on. He had a 20-ounce Coca-Cola and a red bag of Skittles in his lap. His head was hanging down as if he had fallen asleep. I asked, “What’s going on?” The woman in the car told me he had just come out of the store, gotten into the car, buckled his seatbelt, and suddenly became unresponsive. The first thing I asked was, “Has anyone called 911?” Everyone answered, “No.” So, I pointed to a woman wearing a black Adidas coat and said, “Ma’am, you call 911 and tell them what’s going on? Give them our location.” I laid the seat back as far as I could because I couldn’t get him out of the vehicle. I could tell he wasn’t breathing. His lips had turned blue, and his skin was pale. Without thinking twice, my training took over. I started chest compressions, and in my head all I could hear was the song “Stayin’ Alive,” keeping the rhythm.



While doing compressions, I looked at the woman in the passenger seat and said, “Ma’am, when I get to the rescue breaths, I’m going to need you to do that part.” She looked at me like I had said something crazy and replied, “That’s my ex-husband.” I said, “Well, ma’am, I’m not putting my mouth on him because I don’t know why he’s unresponsive.” Then I remembered that continuous chest compressions were the priority, so I kept going without stopping until a police officer arrived and took over. The moment I stepped away, the adrenaline wore off. I was physically exhausted and emotionally drained. When I got back into my car, I completely broke down. I just sat there and cried. A couple of days later, I went back to Speedway and asked the clerk what had happened to the man. She told me the responding police officer administered Narcan. The man woke up... and refused to go to the hospital.

I was overwhelmed with gratitude. That day reminded me that training matters. Even though I felt a little rusty, when someone needed help, my skills kicked in. I didn’t hesitate. I simply did what I knew to do. You never know when an ordinary stop for a cup of coffee can turn into a moment that gives someone another chance at life. I’m thankful I listened to that little voice that told me to walk toward the commotion instead of away from it. It may have been the difference between life and death.”

We are so proud of you Keano ! What you did made a difference. Remember, something is better than nothing!

Regional I/DD Services Manager, Sherry D. Wilkins says “I want to recognize **Denisia Harper** for her remarkable dedication, loyalty, and compassionate service.

On **July 17, 2026**, Denisia marked an incredible **19 years with Universal** as a Direct Support Professional (DSP).

Her commitment to supporting individuals and making a positive difference in their lives is truly commendable.

Equally inspiring is her long-standing relationship with **Renee**.

On **August 28, 2026**, Denisia will celebrate **18 years of dedicated service to the same member**,

providing consistent support **five days a week and six days every other weekend**. This extraordinary level of

commitment reflects not only her professionalism, but also her passion for supporting/helping others.

Denisia's longevity, reliability, and unwavering dedication exemplify Universal's values and mission!

**Congratulations Denisia, on these outstanding milestones!** Thank you for your 19 years of service with Universal and for the exceptional care and support you have provided to **Renee** over the past 18 years. Your dedication is appreciated, admired, and worthy of celebration. “ 🎉 🙌 🥳 💜



Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), particularly those with Down Syndrome, face a significantly higher and earlier risk of developing Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia compared to the general population.

## Risk Factors and Prevalence

- **Down Syndrome:** Adults with Down syndrome have an extra copy of chromosome 21, which carries the gene for amyloid precursor protein (APP). This genetic link drives an exceptionally high prevalence of Alzheimer's, affecting 10% to 25% of individuals in their 40s and up to 50% to 75% in their 60s.
- **Other IDD Populations:** Individuals with other intellectual disabilities (such as cerebral palsy or autism) experience age-related dementia at rates roughly comparable to the general aging population, though diagnosis is often complicated by lifelong cognitive baselines

## Early Signs and Symptoms

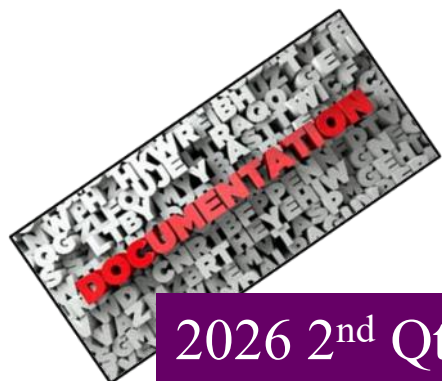
Detecting Alzheimer's in people with IDD is difficult because pre-existing cognitive limits can mask early changes. Caregivers should look for a decline relative to the person's own past baseline rather than standard external milestones. Early indicators often include:

- **Loss of Self-Care Skills:** Struggling with familiar, multi-step daily tasks like dressing, grooming, or hygiene routines.
- **Behavioral and Attention Shifts:** Noticeable changes in attention span (such as increased distractibility or intense hyperfocus), new personality shifts, or withdrawal from favored activities.
- **Disorientation and Wayfinding:** Getting lost in familiar environments or showing confusion during routine transitions.
- **Physical Changes:** The late-age onset of subtle seizures, balance issues, or unexplained weight loss.





# Top Ten Note Writer Winners



2026 2<sup>nd</sup> Qt

| Name                       | Office      |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Nadezhda Kuzmich</b>    | Asheville   |
| <b>Ruth Torres Mercado</b> | Raleigh     |
| <b>Kelley Ludwig</b>       | Raleigh     |
| <b>Alfreda Burnette</b>    | Raleigh     |
| <b>Latasha Corad</b>       | Winston     |
| <b>Kimberly Michaels</b>   | Morganton   |
| <b>Cheyenne Clontz</b>     | Forest City |
| <b>Jennifer Hunt</b>       | Raleigh     |
| <b>Jaye Degree</b>         | New Bern    |
| <b>Michelle Michalak</b>   | Raleigh     |

You guys  
ROCK!

## REV UP

REV UP North Carolina is a non-partisan, statewide coalition working to ensure and empower people with disabilities and our allies to get more involved in electoral politics. REV UP North Carolina works with people with disabilities, their family members, supporters, professionals, the general public, and policymakers on issues affecting the integration of people with disabilities of all ages into every aspect of community living.

[Visit the REV UP North Carolina website](#) for volunteer opportunities, upcoming events, and other ways you can become involved.



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.



This year's scholarship winner is Wilson's Aniyah Pridgen. When submitting her application for the scholarship Aniyah said, *"Receiving this scholarship would help erase the financial burden of higher education, allowing me to focus more on my studies and campus involvement. I also value giving back to my community and making meaningful connections with others. I believe success is measured not only by personal achievements but also by the positive impact we have on others. I will continue working hard, maintaining my dedication to my education at Barton College, representing the values of this scholarship with integrity and gratitude. Thank you for investing in students who are determined to make a difference."*

*Pictured is Aniyah and QP, Monique Simmons.*





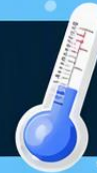
# 5 tips to stay safe this winter!

**1**

Dress warmly. Dress in layers before taking on the great outdoors.

**2**

Check the weather and road conditions before going out.

**3**

Prepare an emergency kit for your car.

**4**

Wear good footwear with anti-slip soles.

**5**

Keep your steps and walkway clear and salted.



**Scammers are constantly finding new ways to trick people through email, text messages, AI-generated content, and phone calls. A few moments of caution can help protect both your personal information and our organization.**

### **Watch for Red Flags**

- Urgent requests demanding immediate action
- Requests for passwords, verification codes, or payments
- Suspicious links or attachments
- Messages that seem too good to be true

### **Be Aware of AI Scams**

**Scammers now use AI to create convincing emails, voice messages, images, and videos that appear to come from trusted individuals. Always verify unusual requests through a previously known phone number or trusted communication channel.**

### **Protect Yourself from Phone Scams**

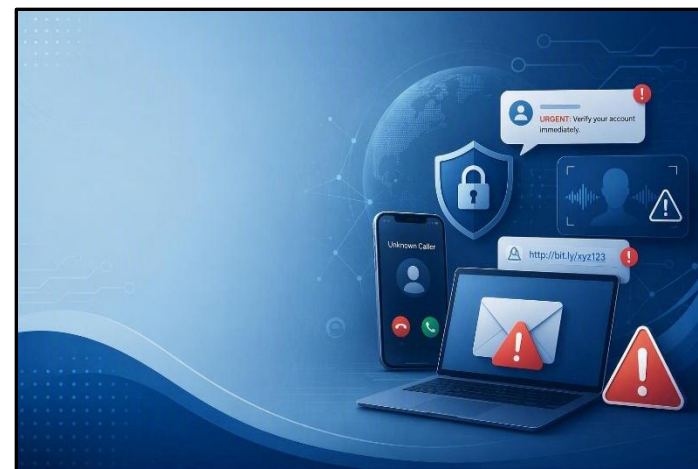
Be cautious of callers who:

- Demand payment or sensitive information
- Pressure you to act quickly or ask you to keep the conversation secret
- Threaten consequences if you do not comply
- Claim to be from a government agency, bank, or technical support provider

### **Four Simple Safety Tips**

1. Think before you click.
2. Verify before you trust.
3. Never share passwords or authentication codes.
4. Report suspicious emails, texts, or calls immediately.

**Remember: If something doesn't seem right, stop and verify before acting. A healthy dose of skepticism is one of the best cybersecurity tools you have. As always, if you have any questions or need assistance, please contact Universal's IT Department by emailing: [trackit@umhs.net](mailto:trackit@umhs.net)**



Welcome Winston's  
**Nazyra Bradley, OA**



Welcome Morganton's  
**Taylor Williams ~ ITFS**

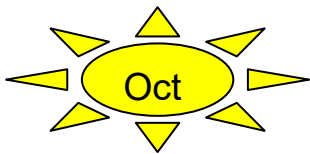


Raleigh's CQI Specialist,  
**Amaya Melvin**



# 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."



**World Inclusion Day**



**International Men's Day**



**Kwanzaa**





Raleigh's Danielle Swicegood says *"I came back to Universal as a QP in April. I'm so grateful to be back and the Raleigh team that Tony has put together is stellar. I have the utmost respect for all my colleagues, and I just love working and collaborating with each of them (Tony Yingling, Sarah Gupta, Lori Wyde, Emily Richardson, Brittany Mebane, Justin Rock, Garland Green, Brianna Taylor, Ms. Zsa Zsa Johhson, Ms. Audrey, and Ms. Barbara.) Kudos to Brittany Mebane: she always goes above and beyond to help QP's, assisting with scheduling, and finding staff. She is so good at finding staff, I just am very appreciative for how she has helped me with staffing on my case load. A special Kudo to **Barbara Hardy**: This woman is always smiling, and she is the first face that everyone sees when they walk into the office. Even if she's having a bad day, you would never know it because she is such a positive person and it's so very genuine."*

Tonja McLean says **"Nazyra Bradley**, our new OA is a breath of fresh air! She came onboard and is rocking it! She is efficient and is such an asset here in the office. I see great things happening here with her. Again, welcome Nazyra!"

Burlington's **Zada Jones** says, *"I would like to give a special shoutout to all the **Burlington QPs** for consistently stepping up and supporting one another whenever extra help is needed. While things can sometimes get a little chaotic, everyone comes together, stays focused, and keeps each other grounded. Since our two new QPs joined the team, we haven't skipped a beat. They have jumped right in, and the entire team has worked together to ensure continuity and success."*

*The teamwork, flexibility, and willingness to lend a hand do not go unnoticed. I couldn't be more grateful to be part of such a supportive group. Thank you all for your dedication, positivity, and commitment to one another and the people we serve! ... & Thank YOU, **Drema!** ❤️ "*

Sherry Wilkins says, *"Kudos to **Ryan Freeman** for stepping into the Intake/Supervisor position, your adaptability, and commitment is incredible and greatly appreciated, to our Western Region QPs: **Ryan Freeman, Taylor Smith, Genell Carson, Sheila Moore, Johnea Littlejohn, Shannan Herndon, and Dana Zimmerman**. Thank you for your flexibility, teamwork, and positive attitude as our department navigates organizational changes. Your collaboration and continued support have been essential to our success during this transition. Thank you all so much!"*

*Kudos to **Patra Lowe and Ingrid Freeman** for your ongoing support and assistance with our Western Region restructuring. Your insight and support have been instrumental in helping ensure a smooth transition., and to **Heather Everhart** for her assistance during a weekend emergency. Her support allowed one of our RADSE employees to maintain billable services for her son. "*



## **Team Spotlight: Celebrating Achievement and Excellence**

This month, I am proud to recognize several team members for their dedication, accomplishments, and commitment to personal and professional growth.

### **Congratulations to Ward Wray!**

A special congratulations to **Ward Wray** on earning his **Bachelor's Degree from Winston-Salem State University (WSSU)**. Ward's achievement reflects his hard work, perseverance, and determination to succeed. Throughout his journey, he has demonstrated remarkable growth and an unwavering commitment to reaching his goals. We are incredibly proud of this milestone and look forward to seeing all that Ward accomplishes in the future.

### **Kudos to Paris Wagner!**

We would also like to recognize **Paris Wagner**, who recently began her studies in **Business Administration at Forsyth Technical Community College**. Taking the next step in higher education requires dedication and courage, and we applaud Paris for investing in her future. We wish her continued success as she embarks on this exciting educational journey.

### **Recognizing Top Note Writers**

Accurate and timely documentation is essential to the quality of our services and our ongoing compliance with UMHS standards.

I would like to recognize our outstanding **Top Note Writers** for their exceptional attention to detail and commitment to excellence:

Michelle McCormick, Andre Hairston, Catherine Hauser, Christina Moore, Codou Diouf, Mouhammed Fall and Alexis Wilson. Your dedication to maintaining high-quality documentation helps ensure the success of our team and the individuals we serve. Thank you for consistently setting a high standard of professionalism and accountability.

Keep up the good work team !



Laura Hargitt says, "**Thomas Phillips** has been an Employment Specialist in Asheville for over three years now! He is dedicated to making sure the people he supports are truly successful in their placements. He is also a model employee himself - sharing his experiential knowledge with other coaches, adapting to necessary workplace changes as they occur, and initiating his own self-improvement regularly. We are grateful everyday to have Thomas on the team - thank you, Thomas!"

Are you aware of ALL the resources NAMI has – just for you? Check it out at the link below!  
<https://www.nami.org/kids-teens-and-young-adults/school-resources/back-to-school-resources/>



This may have been in September but  
Universal sure does appreciate our  
direct care folks all the time!

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Crossword Puzzle Answers

Let's end on an inclusive moment:  
<https://www.facebook.com/reel/1081142147738598>

