

## Making the Holidays Easier and More Enjoyable for Individuals with Autism

*Janet Banks, GHA Autism Supports Psychologist*

The holiday season is a time filled with lights, laughter, and traditions—but it can also bring sensory overload, unpredictable schedules, and new social situations that can be challenging for individuals with autism. With a little planning and flexibility, families and caregivers can help make this time of year more manageable and meaningful for everyone.

Here are some helpful strategies to support individuals with autism during the holidays:

### **1. Maintain Familiar Routines Whenever Possible**

Consistency is comforting. Try to keep daily schedules—mealtimes, bedtime, and favorite activities—as consistent as possible. If special events require changes, talk about the schedule ahead of time or use a visual calendar to help prepare for what's coming next.

### **2. Prepare for Changes in Advance**

New decorations, holiday music, or visiting guests can feel overwhelming. Involve the individual in decorating or show pictures of how the home will look when decorated. Practice greetings or visits through role-play or social stories to reduce anxiety about upcoming changes.

### **3. Create a Quiet Space**

Designate a calm, quiet area where the person can go if the festivities become too much. This space should have comforting items such as noise-canceling headphones, weighted blankets, or favorite toys or books. Make sure they know it's okay to take a break whenever they need it.

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## 4. Choose Sensory-Friendly Decorations and Activities

Some decorations flash, make noise, or emit strong scents—all of which can be overstimulating. Consider using soft lighting, unscented candles, and simple décor. Likewise, opt for sensory-friendly holiday activities, such as baking, crafting, or taking a drive to look at lights from the comfort of the car.

## 5. Keep Gift Giving Simple and Predictable

Surprises can sometimes cause anxiety. Consider wrapping gifts in clear paper or showing the individual what's inside beforehand. When possible, choose gifts that align with their interests or sensory needs—like fidget toys, weighted lap pads, or favorite books and movies.

## 6. Prepare for Travel and Gatherings

If traveling or visiting relatives, bring familiar items from home, such as a favorite pillow, headphones, or snacks. Discuss the plan in advance, including how long you'll stay and who will be there. When possible, schedule downtime before and after big events to help with transitions.

## 7. Communicate with Friends and Family

If attending gatherings, let hosts and family members know what supports may be needed—such as having a quiet space, limiting loud music, or allowing flexibility in participation. Educating others helps create understanding and inclusion for everyone.

## 8. Focus on Meaning, Not Perfection

Every family's holiday looks different—and that's okay. What matters most is creating moments of comfort, joy, and connection. Allow traditions to evolve in ways that meet your family's needs. Sometimes the simplest celebrations are the most meaningful.

## 9. Reflect and Adjust

After each event or tradition, take note of what went well and what was challenging. These reflections can help you plan even smoother celebrations next year.

## Final Thoughts

The holidays don't have to be overwhelming to be special. By preparing thoughtfully and focusing on what brings comfort and joy, families can help individuals with autism experience the season in a way that feels safe, supportive, and full of meaning. At GHA Autism Supports, we celebrate the uniqueness of every person we serve and believe that every season—especially the holidays—can be a time of warmth, inclusion, and togetherness.



**GHA Autism Supports gratefully acknowledges the following individuals who made memorials and honorary gifts between August 24, 2025 and November 14, 2025. Every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of this list. If you feel an error has been made, please contact the Development Department at 704-982-9600, x 125.**

**In Memory of Ellen Brooks**  
Shawnee Sundquist

**In Honor of Samantha Messer**  
Allison Crotty

**In Honor of Jason Cory**  
Steven A. Cory

**In Honor of Justin Morrell**  
Kathy & Hal Baumann  
Tom FitzGerald

**In Honor of Deb Denton**  
Dr. & Mrs. Henry Cremisi

**In Honor of Ameshia Smith**  
Dr. & Mrs. Henry Cremisi

**In Honor of Seth Dickinson**  
Edward Dickinson

**In Honor of Thomas C.  
Southerland**

Thomas & Marie Southerland

**In Honor of Denise Drye**  
Dr. & Mrs. Henry Cremisi  
Mrs. Bobbilynne Garner  
The Larry Hupp Family  
Thomas & Marie Southerland

**In Honor of Marsena  
Williams & Staff at the  
Tanglewood Home**  
Dr. Linda Lawrence

**In Honor of Sandy Hinson**  
Dr. & Mrs. Henry Cremisi

**In Honor of Cody Zeller  
Townson**  
John Townson

**In Memory of Dru P. Martin**  
Mrs. Bobbilynne Garner



## Makes a Huge Splash in Donations to GHA



Tidal Wave Auto Spa's annual Charity Day event, held on Friday, September 19th, brought the community together to support a great cause. Thanks to the generosity of customers and community members, the Tidal Wave Auto Spa at 1825 E Main St raised \$4,121.31 for GHA Autism Supports! The funds raised this year for GHA will help create environments where people of all ages with Autism Spectrum Disorder are understood, valued for their diversity and are given opportunities to grow as well as contribute to the community. "GHA Autism Supports is so grateful to Tidal Wave Auto Spa for giving us the opportunity to participate in their company-wide Charity Day initiative," shared Beth Olivieri, Chief Development Officer for GHA Autism Supports. "We truly appreciate this wonderful partnership that not only helps raise funds to support our mission, but also brings greater awareness to autism and the vital services GHA provides in our community."

On Charity Day, each Tidal Wave location selects a local organization that will receive 50% of wash proceeds, plus all cash donations collected during the one-day event. The other 50% of wash proceeds are donated to Tidal Wave's corporate philanthropic partner, Annandale Village. Tidal Wave had 295 participating locations this year, making it the company's largest Charity Day event yet.



## Make Holiday Gift Giving and Meal Prep a Cinch this Season

Look no further than Second Street Sundries for holiday help from gifts to catering trays! We have an assortment of fused glass items made by our talented artists from the GHA Creative Arts

Department. From platters to ornaments and everything in between, you are sure to find the perfect gift for friends and family. Again, this year, we are offering a variety of catering trays. Trays are available in small and large sizes and feature sandwiches, deli meats, cheese, fruit, vegetables and chicken wings. Our catering tray order deadline is 2 p.m. on December 16, 2025. All trays must be picked up no later than 2 pm December 23<sup>rd</sup>. Don't forget we also have Take & Bake frozen meals. Please order ahead by contacting Second Street Sundries Manager Sandy at 704-983-CAFE.



# Celebrating a Season of Fun: Fall Highlights from Wilmington and Stanly County

Fall has been full of joy, laughter, and unforgettable moments for the individuals we support in both Wilmington and Stanly County. From festive dances to pumpkin-packed adventures, this season has given everyone plenty of reasons to smile!

Our Wilmington group kicked off the celebrations in spectacular fashion at the Special Olympics New Hanover County Halloween Dance on October 26th. The evening was filled with music, creative costumes, and a dance floor that never slowed down. It was a wonderful opportunity for everyone to express themselves, make memories with friends, and fully embrace the spirit of Halloween.

Back in Stanly County, the fun continued on November 6th with a delightful Fall Festival at Carolina Farms. The event brought together all of our individuals for a day of games, hayrides, friendly competitions, and seasonal treats. Highlights included the always-popular costume contest and a pumpkin-decorating contest that showcased the creativity and imagination of our participants. The festival was the perfect way to celebrate the crisp air and colorful scenery of the season!



## GHA Hosts Partnership Appreciation Dinner in Wilmington

What's Up in Wilmington?



grateful  
❤️



We appreciate  
all that you do

GHA Autism Supports proudly hosted a special Partnership Appreciation Dinner on Wednesday, November 12th, at the Harrelson Center Annex in Wilmington. This heartfelt gathering brought together the individuals served by GHA in Wilmington, along with their families, dedicated staff members, employers, clinicians, and valued community partners.

Guests enjoyed a delicious catered meal as they shared an evening filled with fellowship, gratitude, and celebration. The event highlighted the power of collaboration and the meaningful impact that strong partnerships have on enhancing the lives of individuals with autism.

"Partnerships are at the core of everything we do," said Executive VP/Chief Regional Services Officer Melissa Rivera. "This dinner was an opportunity to honor the people who walk alongside us each day—family members, employers who provide inclusive job opportunities, clinicians who support individual growth, and community partners who believe in our mission."

The evening was a reminder of how teamwork, compassion, and community support help create opportunities and promote independence for those served by GHA. The organization expressed deep appreciation for everyone who contributes to making Wilmington a place where individuals with autism can thrive!

## Visit from Japanese Professionals Highlights GHA's Impact

On October 13th and 14th, GHA Autism Supports was honored to welcome a group of professionals from Japan who traveled to North Carolina to learn more about our programs and services. During their two-day visit, the group toured several of our Albemarle and Wilmington sites, meeting with staff, observing daily activities, and gaining insight into our person-centered approach.

The visitors shared their appreciation for the time and information provided by GHA's team, emphasizing how valuable these insights will be as they work to replicate and expand similar services in Japan. Their visit offered a meaningful exchange of ideas, strengthening international collaboration in support of individuals with autism.



GHA Autism Supports was grateful for the opportunity to showcase our programs and to contribute to global conversations about autism services and best practices.



## GHA Autism Supports Welcomes Angela Turner-Cox as New Social Worker

GHA is pleased to announce the addition of Angela Turner-Cox as our new Social Worker. Angela brings more than 20 years of experience in the field of social work and a deep commitment to serving individuals and families with compassion, insight, and professionalism.

A Stanly Community College graduate, Angela went on to earn her Bachelor of Science degree from Gardner-Webb University and a Master of Arts degree from Liberty University. Her educational background, paired with decades of hands-on experience, makes her an wonderful addition to Team GHA.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Angela's dedication extends into her personal life. She is the proud mother of three children and grandmother to three grandchildren. Her passion for supporting individuals with special needs is especially meaningful, as she lovingly advocates for two of her own children with special needs. Welcome Angela!



## Celebrating Our Staff

On Thursday, November 13th, we celebrated our amazing team in Stanly County with a wonderful Staff Appreciation Day! From fun, food, and fellowship to plenty of laughter and some very competitive rounds of bingo, a great time was had by all! At GHA Autism Supports, we know that our staff are the heart of everything we do. Their dedication, compassion, and daily commitment make a difference in the lives of the people we serve each and every day. We look forward to celebrating our staff in Wilmington on December 16th, so stay tuned for more fun on the way. Thank you to all of our incredible employees - we appreciate you more than words can say!



## CEO MESSAGE

From the Desk of Dawn Allen

As we enter this holiday season, I want to take a moment to recognize the extraordinary people who make GHA Autism Supports the organization it is today. From our dedicated frontline employees to our support staff in the Central Office, each member of our team plays a vital role in ensuring we are able to provide the highest quality services to the individuals with autism whom we are honored to serve. Your compassion, professionalism, and unwavering commitment shine through in everything you do. It is your collective effort—day in and day out—that allows GHA to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others. During this season of gratitude, let us celebrate each of you for the positive impact you make throughout the year. Thank you for your hard work, your heart, and your dedication to our mission. You are the foundation of GHA, and we are truly

*so grateful!*

## Editorial Team

The GHazette Newsletter is released quarterly. For feedback or to share story ideas, contact:



Lori Ivey,  
Development Coordinator  
[loriivey@ghainc.org](mailto:loriivey@ghainc.org)



Beth Olivieri, EVP and  
Chief Development Officer  
[betholivieri@ghainc.org](mailto:betholivieri@ghainc.org)

Development Office  
704-982-9600, ext. 125

'TIS THE SEASON

*to be jolly*



*From our family at  
GHA Autism Supports to yours,  
HAPPY HOLIDAYS!*