

JUNE 2026

# GHazette

Official Newsletter of  
GHA Autism Supports

## New Poolhouse to Enhance Summer Experiences

We are excited to announce the completion of the new outdoor pool house located adjacent to the swimming pool at the Carolina Farms property in Albemarle. This wonderful addition represents another meaningful investment in improving accessibility, comfort, and the overall recreational experience for the individuals we serve. The newly constructed pool house features two handicapped-accessible bathrooms, including one equipped with a shower. The facility also includes convenient changing areas and a dedicated storage room designed to safely house pool equipment and supplies. This project became a reality through generous support from the Joy Pope Foundation, the Fanning Foundation, the Graves Enrichment Fund and numerous private donors whose contributions helped make this important enhancement possible. Their generosity will positively impact individuals for years to come. Prior to the construction of the pool house, there was not a convenient restroom facility available for individuals utilizing the pool area. The addition of these amenities significantly improves accessibility and convenience, ensuring a more enjoyable experience for everyone. The Carolina Farms pool serves as a popular summer destination and is typically open to all GHA residences in the Stanly County area from Memorial Day through Labor Day. As another pool season approaches, we look forward to seeing individuals gather, create memories, and enjoy all the benefits this enhanced space now offers. We extend our sincere appreciation to every donor and supporter who helped make this project possible and continue to invest in creating meaningful opportunities for the individuals we serve!



### This issue:

Completion of Pool House  
PAGE 01

Autism Acceptance  
Month Festivities  
PAGES 02-03

Special Gifts  
PAGE 04

CEO Message  
PAGE 05

18th Annual Rubber Duck Derby  
PAGE 06

Ways to Support the  
GHA Autism Supports Foundation  
PAGE 07

Spotlighting GHA Special  
Olympics Athletes  
PAGE 08

GHA New Board Members  
PAGE 09

Candid's for Fun  
PAGE 10

# Autism Acceptance Promoted and Celebrated During Month of April



April was a month filled with awareness, education, and celebration as GHA Autism Supports proudly recognized Autism Acceptance Month throughout the community. Through educational outreach, public presentations, literacy events, and social media engagement, GHA staff worked diligently to promote understanding, inclusion, and acceptance of individuals on the autism spectrum. One of the highlights of the month included three special children's reading events hosted in partnership with the Albemarle Main Public Library as well as the Badin and Norwood branch libraries. During each event, participants enjoyed the heartwarming story *All My Stripes*, which tells the story of Zane the zebra, a young zebra with autism who learns that his autism is just one of the many unique stripes that make him special. The readings created meaningful opportunities for children and families to discuss acceptance, kindness, and embracing differences.

Members of GHA's management team also spent the month sharing their expertise and experiences throughout the region. Staff presented to faculty members at Pfeiffer University, offering valuable tips and strategies for supporting students on the autism spectrum in higher education settings. GHA representatives additionally spoke to the Albemarle Rotary Club, where they highlighted the latest exciting developments and initiatives taking place across the organization. Chief Quality Officer Dee Pankey Thompson and Chief Learning Officer Janet Banks further represented GHA Autism Supports by presenting to the Work Together NC Housing and Community Living Work Group, sharing information about GHA's programs and ongoing commitment to enhancing services and opportunities for individuals with autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition, Dee Pankey Thompson hosted an informational booth at the Stanly Community College Transition Fair, helping connect students and families with valuable resources and information as they plan for the future.

Throughout Autism Acceptance Month, GHA Autism Supports also utilized every opportunity to educate and engage the public through social media blitzes featuring autism facts, figures, and information designed to increase awareness and foster greater acceptance within the community. By combining education, advocacy, and community engagement, GHA Autism Supports continues to make a lasting impact while promoting a more inclusive and accepting world for individuals with autism.



# EMPOWER ADVOCATE



# CELEBRATE



**"Different,  
not less."**  
--TEMPLE GRANDIN



*Scenes from*



**Autism  
Acceptance Month  
April**



GHA Autism Supports gratefully acknowledges the following individuals who made memorials and honorary gifts between February 16, 2026 and May 22, 2026. 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 Honor of Dawn Allen**  
Thomas Southerland

**In Honor of Lindsay Leggett**  
Dale O'Neill  
Mr. & Mrs. John Williams

**In Honor of Dawn Allen and the  
Entire GHA Staff**  
Carroll & David Holbrook

**In Memory of Mrs. Ann Madre**  
Bobbilynn Garner

**In Memory of Ellen Brooks**  
Shawnee Sundquist

**In Memory of Bertha "Bert" Peck**  
Dr. & Mrs. Henry Cremisi

**In Honor of Jerry Lee Carriker, Jr.**  
Cindy Burrell

**In Memory of Marie Southerland**  
Thomas Southerland

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

**In Honor of Thomas C. Southerland**  
Thomas Southerland

**In Honor of Liam Kennedy**  
Mr. Owen Alexander

**In Honor of  
Cody Zeller-Townson**  
Jane Zeller & John Townson

# CEO MESSAGE



## *From the Desk of Dawn Allen*

For the past 45 years, it has been my life's work and greatest privilege to serve individuals with autism and their families. Following my recent announcement on April 21st regarding my intention to retire as Chief Executive Officer of GHA Autism Supports in mid to late 2027, I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude and reflect on the incredible journey we have shared together.

This work has shaped not only my career, but who I am as a person. The relationships built over the decades with the individuals we support, their families, our dedicated staff, community partners, and advocates have left a lasting impact on my life. I remain deeply grateful for the opportunity to have walked alongside so many extraordinary people throughout the years.

While I have had the honor of serving in leadership roles, this mission has never been accomplished alone. The success and growth of GHA Autism Supports has been made possible through the unwavering dedication and compassion of our staff, the trust placed in us by the individuals and families we serve, the leadership and guidance of our Board of Directors, and the strength of the partnerships throughout our community. Together, we have built something truly meaningful that continues to make a difference in countless lives.

As we move forward, I remain fully committed to GHA Autism Supports and the important work that lies ahead. In the coming months, I will be working closely with our Board of Directors to ensure a thoughtful and strong leadership transition that continues to advance our mission and position GHA Autism Supports for continued success well into the future.

Although retirement will mark the closing of one chapter, my belief in this organization and its mission has never been stronger. I look forward to continuing this journey together over the next several years and celebrating all that we will accomplish ahead.

With sincere gratitude,

*DAWN ALLEN*

Dawn Allen, Chief Executive Officer

GHA Autism Supports

## 18th Annual Rubber Duck Derby Huge Success

The 18th Annual GHA Rubber Duck Derby made a big splash at the Stanly County Family YMCA on May 16th! We had an incredible time watching 7,617 ducks race to the finish line, creating an exciting afternoon filled with fun, laughter, and community spirit. Congratulations to all of our lucky winners! Events like the Duck Derby would not be possible without the dedication of an amazing team of volunteers. GHA Autism Supports is fortunate to have an army of volunteers who help move, dump, sort, and count thousands of rubber ducks each year. We are deeply grateful for our families, GHA staff, and our incredible network of volunteers who always show up when we need them most. A special thank you also goes to the Stanly County Family YMCA for the use of their facility and to all of our generous sponsors who helped make this year's fundraiser an incredible success. Your support continues to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the individuals and families we serve.

**We are incredibly grateful and humbled by the generosity of this year's Rubber Duck Derby winners, Al Sadowsky and Lisa Burris, who both chose to donate their winnings back to GHA Autism Supports. Thank you for turning your good fortune into an opportunity to support individuals and families we serve.**



**AND THE WINNERS ARE...**

**THE OWNER OF THE 2ND PLACE DUCK WINNING \$1,000 - LISA BURRIS**

**AND THE OWNER OF THE 1ST PLACE DUCK WINNING \$3,000 IS...**

**AL SADOWSKY**

### Presenting Sponsor



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In Memory of Ellen Brooks  
Stan & Annette Leggett

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### Patron Sponsor

Thomas Southerland



# Supporting the Future: Ways to Support the GHA Autism Supports Foundation

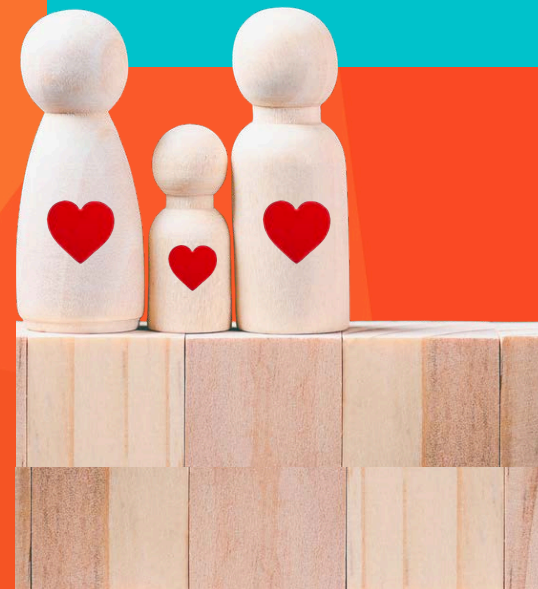
Creating a lasting impact for individuals with autism and their families takes vision, commitment, and a community of supporters who believe in building a brighter future. The GHA Autism Supports Foundation was established with that mission in mind—to strengthen and sustain the future of GHA Autism Supports and ensure resources are available for generations to come. The Foundation officially launched in June 2024 following the hard work and dedication of a task force appointed by the GHA Autism Supports Board of Directors. Shortly after its formation, the Foundation established its own separate Board of Directors to provide leadership and guide its mission forward. The creation of the Foundation marked an important milestone in ensuring long-term sustainability and creating opportunities for individuals and families served by GHA Autism Supports. There are many meaningful ways individuals can give back and leave a lasting legacy through the GHA Autism Supports Foundation:

- One of the most common ways to support the Foundation is through cash gifts. Direct financial contributions provide immediate support and flexibility, allowing the Foundation to address current needs while investing in future initiatives and opportunities.
- Supporters may also choose to make gifts of appreciated stock or securities. Donating stock can provide potential tax advantages while allowing donors to make a significant contribution that benefits the Foundation’s long-term mission.
- Another impactful option is planned giving, which allows individuals to make charitable commitments as part of their long-term financial or estate planning. Supporters may name the GHA Autism Supports Foundation as a beneficiary of a life insurance policy, retirement account, will, or trust. These gifts create enduring support while allowing individuals to leave a legacy that reflects their values and commitment to the autism community.
- Additional giving opportunities may include donor-advised funds, memorial and tribute gifts, employer matching gift programs, charitable distributions, and other creative giving options that align with a donor’s financial goals.

Every gift—regardless of size or type—helps strengthen the Foundation’s ability to support individuals with autism and create opportunities for meaningful lives and brighter futures. Through the generosity of donors and the vision of supporters, the GHA Autism Supports Foundation is building a legacy of care, inclusion, and support that will continue for years to come. To learn more about giving opportunities and how you can make a difference, contact GHA Autism Supports Chief Development Officer Beth Olivieri at 704-982-9600, ext. 125 or by email at [betholivieri@ghainc.org](mailto:betholivieri@ghainc.org) to discover how your support can help transform lives and create lasting impact.

**“By supporting the GHA Autism Supports Foundation, you are helping build a strong framework for the long-term sustainability of GHA as an organization. Your generosity creates lasting opportunities, strengthens essential programs, and ensures we can continue providing support and services for generations to come.”**

—Beth Olivieri, EVP and Chief Development Officer, GHA Autism Supports



# GHA Residents Shine at Spring Games

GHA Autism Supports participants enjoyed a wonderful day of fun, competition, and celebration at the Special Olympics Stanly County Spring Games held on April 23rd at Albemarle High School. The annual event once again brought together athletes, staff, volunteers, families, and community supporters for a day centered on sportsmanship, encouragement, and achievement. One of the highlights each year is the Parade of Athletes, a favorite tradition among our athletes, staff, and community volunteers. The excitement and pride displayed as participants entered the field created an unforgettable atmosphere and set the tone for a day filled with joy and celebration. We are incredibly proud of all of our athletes and the effort, enthusiasm, and heart they brought to the day. Events like the Spring Games also create meaningful opportunities to connect with local high school student volunteers. Through these interactions, students learn valuable lessons about inclusion, acceptance, and the understanding that different doesn't mean less. These experiences help build stronger communities and inspire future generations to recognize and celebrate the unique strengths each individual brings. Congratulations to all of our athletes for making the day such a memorable success. Your determination and spirit continue to inspire us all!



# GHA Welcomes New Board Members

GHA Autism Supports is pleased to welcome two outstanding professionals to its Board of Directors. At the organization's most recent May board meeting, Markl Kies and Dr. Crystal Gaddy officially began their terms, bringing decades of experience in education, special services, healthcare, and advocacy to the organization.

Originally from Stanly County, Markl Kies devoted much of her professional career to serving students and families through Cabarrus County Schools and a variety of specialized educational programs. Kies earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Special Education as well as a M.ED in Educational Leadership and Administration. Throughout her distinguished career, she has served in numerous educational and leadership roles supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her career experience includes work at the Greenwood Center in Albemarle and the Howell Center in Charlotte. She also served at the Tammy Lynn Center, where she worked with both an adult residential program and an offsite vocational day program. Over the years, Kies has held positions as a teacher serving students at the Piedmont Residential Development Center (PRDC), Program Specialist for Intellectual Disabilities, Assistant Director of Special Education, Director of Special Education, and High School Assistant Principal. Following her retirement from Cabarrus County Schools several years ago, Kies continued her passion for education and advocacy by becoming a PRDC Educational Consultant. Kies resides in Concord with her husband, Tom, and their dachshund, Chloe. The couple has two grown daughters: Jamison and her husband, Garrett, who live in Baltimore, Maryland, and McKenna and her husband, Tanner, who reside in Raleigh. Outside of her professional work, Kies enjoys traveling, shopping, spending time with family and friends, and tackling a variety of home improvement projects.



**Markl Kies**

Joining the board alongside Kies is Dr. Crystal Gaddy, a highly accomplished occupational therapist, educator, and advocate with more than two decades of experience in the healthcare and education fields. Dr. Gaddy entered the field of occupational therapy after earning her Bachelor of Science in Occupational Therapy from East Carolina University in 2003. Over the course of her 22-year career, she has practiced in numerous settings including acute care, inpatient services, behavioral and mental health, skilled nursing, outpatient adult and pediatric care, and school systems. Approximately half of her career has been dedicated to working with pediatric populations ranging from ages 3 to 21, helping support developmental growth and educational participation throughout childhood and adolescence. In pursuit of continued learning and leadership, Dr. Gaddy earned her Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree and a Certificate in Healthcare Ethics from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, in 2019. Dr. Gaddy has been an active advocate and presenter at regional and state levels through the North Carolina Occupational Therapy Association, focusing on evidence-based pediatric research, healthcare ethics, and interprofessional education and practice. Her research has explored school

participation and examined occupational therapy's role in supporting children's classroom engagement and educational experiences. She currently serves as Program Director and Associate Professor for Pfeiffer University's Occupational Therapy MSOT program. A North Carolina native born in Fayetteville, Dr. Gaddy lives in Concord with her husband, Marek, and their three children: Maison, Maliyah, and Christian. Outside of work, she enjoys spending time with family and friends, playing games, traveling, and dancing. She is also an active member of her church, where she serves through membership care services and as a special-needs buddy in the children's ministry. GHA is excited to welcome both Markl and Crystal to the Board of Directors and looks forward to the experience, leadership, and passion they will bring in support of the organization's mission and the individuals and families it serves.



**Dr. Crystal Gaddy**



CAPTURING SOME

FUN



### OUR EDITORIAL TEAM

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