

A Day of Joy on Lake Tillery

July 9th was a truly wonderful day on Lake Tillery as Wake the World Lake Tillery brought together individuals, families, boat owners, volunteers, and community supporters for an unforgettable day on the water. The annual event was filled with excitement from start to finish, with boat rides, tubing adventures, and plenty of laughter shared at the sandbar. For the youth and adults who participated, the day offered more than just fun on the lake—it created opportunities for connection, adventure, and memories that will last a lifetime. Making an event of this magnitude possible requires an incredible amount of teamwork and generosity. Event organizers, volunteers, and community partners worked tirelessly to secure boats, in-kind food and supplies, fuel, monetary donations, and countless other resources. Their willingness to give their time, talents, and energy helped create a day that was truly special for everyone involved.

Wake the World is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing water-sport opportunities for youth and adults with developmental disabilities, abused and neglected children, and wounded warriors. With more than 500 volunteer boats participating worldwide, Wake the World has grown into the largest all-volunteer event of its kind. Wake the World Lake Tillery has been making a difference since 2014, creating opportunities for participants to experience the freedom, excitement, and joy of being on the water. A very special thank-you goes to

volunteer organizers Robin and Melissa Lemons for their leadership, dedication, and commitment to making this incredible day possible. We are grateful to everyone who played a part—from the boat owners and volunteers to the donors and organizers. Because of you, July 9 was filled with smiles, laughter, adventure, and memories that will truly last a lifetime! Check out page two to enjoy photos from the event.



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"Wake the World Lake Tillery is a shining example of what is possible when we come together--creating meaningful experiences filled with joy, adventure and connection that enriches the lives of the individuals we support."

JOHN FIELDS, DIRECTOR OF RECREATION & SAFETY FOR GHA AUTISM SUPPORTS



GHA Autism Supports Announces Dee Pankey Thompson as New Chief Executive Officer

GHA Autism Supports is pleased to announce that Dee Pankey Thompson has been named the organization's next Chief Executive Officer, effective August 23, 2026. Thompson will become only the third Chief Executive Officer in GHA Autism Supports' 48-year history, succeeding current CEO Dawn Allen, who has led the organization for 45 years. Allen announced her plans to retire in April after an extraordinary career of service and leadership with GHA.

Thompson's appointment represents a significant milestone for GHA and reflects the organization's commitment to strong, experienced leadership and continuity of its mission. A native of Stanly County, Thompson joined GHA Autism Supports 29 years ago as a direct care support staff member. Over the course of her career, she has served in a variety of leadership and operational roles, including Community Service Coordinator, Qualified Professional, Residential Director, Chief Operations Officer, Chief Strategy Officer, and, most recently, Executive Vice President and Chief Quality Officer, a position she has held since July 2023. "I am deeply grateful to the GHA Autism Supports Board of Directors for their confidence in me and in my ability to lead this organization into its next chapter," said Thompson. "I am honored by this opportunity and incredibly excited to continue the work we have been doing for nearly five decades to provide quality care, support, and opportunities for individuals with autism and their families. GHA has been such an important part of my life for the past 29 years, and I look forward to building on the strong foundation established by those who have served this organization before me." Thompson earned her bachelor's degree from Catawba College and her Master of Science in Leadership and Organizational Change from Pfeiffer University. Her nearly three decades of experience with GHA have provided her with a unique understanding of the organization's mission, culture, programs, employees, individuals served, and families.

As part of the leadership transition, Dawn Allen will serve as a Legacy CEO, working closely alongside Thompson over the next year to support a smooth and thoughtful transition of leadership. Allen's 45 years of service have been instrumental in shaping GHA Autism Supports into the organization it is today, and her continued involvement during the transition will help ensure that her institutional knowledge and experience are carried forward. "Dawn's leadership and dedication to GHA have been extraordinary," Thompson said. "I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to learn from her and to have her continued support as we move through this transition. Her legacy will always be an important part of GHA's story."

Founded in 1978 as a five-bed children's home in Albemarle, GHA Autism Supports has grown into a comprehensive organization serving individuals with autism and their families across multiple communities in North Carolina. Today, GHA operates more than 25 programs, employs more than 250 people, and serves more than 100 individuals with autism through residential, vocational, educational, community, and in-home services.

GHA Autism Supports looks forward to this next chapter under Thompson's leadership while remaining firmly grounded in its mission of supporting individuals with autism to build skills, gain independence, and experience lives filled with dignity, purpose, and opportunity.



DEE PANKEY THOMPSON

Martha Sue Hall Joins GHA Board of Directors



GHA Autism Supports is pleased to welcome Martha Sue Hall as the newest member of our Board of Directors. With a remarkable career in public service, a deep commitment to her community, and a longstanding passion for supporting individuals with disabilities, Martha Sue brings a wealth of experience and perspective to GHA. Martha Sue is retired from a distinguished career in the North Carolina court system, where she served in numerous roles, including Family Court Administrator, the Guardian ad Litem, Program Administrator for the North Carolina Juvenile Court Improvement Project, and as a Victim/Witness Assistant. Her dedication to children, families, and the justice system has been a consistent thread throughout her professional career. Her commitment to public service extends well beyond the courtroom. Martha Sue has served more than two decades on the Albemarle City



Council and currently serves as Mayor Pro Tem. She has also served as a Stanly County Commissioner and has held numerous leadership positions with the North Carolina League of Municipalities, where she currently serves as Immediate Past President, as well as with North Carolina Women in Municipal Government. Since 2008, she has served on the Child Fatality Task Force. Martha Sue's connection to the special needs community also goes back decades. In the early 1980s, she helped with the original development and administration of Stanly County Special Olympics, reflecting a commitment to inclusion and opportunity that continues today. Beyond her professional and civic accomplishments, Martha Sue is a devoted wife to Dan, mother to two children, stepmother to three, and proud Mimi to eight grandchildren. She is also someone who believes strongly in giving her time and talents to others. She enjoys teaching second graders how to swim through the Stanly County Family YMCA, plays the piano each week at two Stanly County nursing facilities, and, of course, loves to dance. We look forward to the knowledge, passion, and energy she will bring to GHA and the individuals and families we proudly serve!

Cohen Construction Celebrates 35th Anniversary with GHA Benefit

A heartfelt thank you to Cohen Construction for supporting GHA Autism Supports during their 35th Anniversary celebration. As part of the festivities, a Poker Run was held, and the winner generously chose to donate the prize money back to GHA. Thanks to this incredible gesture, GHA received \$3,160! We are grateful for this wonderful support and partnership!

MANY
THANKS!



GHA Autism Supports gratefully acknowledges the following individuals who made memorials and honorary gifts between May 23, 2026 and August 24, 2026. Every effort has been 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 Thomas C. Southerland
Thomas Southerland

In Memory of Marie H. Southerland
Thomas Southerland

Making a Splash at Carolina Farms



Summer is in full swing at Carolina Farms, and the individuals we support are making the most of the enhanced pool area! With the addition of a beautiful new pool house and a brand-new pool liner, the pool experience has been better than ever for everyone this summer. Constructed over the course of the past year, the new pool house provides handicap-accessible bathrooms and a convenient changing area, making it easier and more comfortable for everyone to enjoy time at the pool. These thoughtful additions help create a more accessible and welcoming experience for the individuals we support and the staff who accompany them.

The pool house was made possible through generous donations from Mike and Lesley Graves and the Graves Enrichment Fund, Raymond and Eman Sundquist, First Lutheran Church of Albemarle, the Joy W. Pope Foundation, and the Fanning Foundation. We are incredibly grateful for their generosity and commitment to enhancing the lives of the individuals we support. The pool itself also received a wonderful makeover with a new pool liner donated by Hudson Pool Company, with installation generously donated by Pool Time Pools. Their contributions have helped give the pool a fresh new look and ensure that it remains a place where everyone can enjoy fun, relaxation, and meaningful time together. We extend our heartfelt thanks to all of our donors and community partners who helped make these wonderful enhancements possible. Your generosity goes far beyond a new pool house or pool liner—it creates opportunities for recreation, independence, connection, and joy!



We appreciate all
of our
**GENEROUS
DONORS!**



Celebrating America Through Art



GHA Autism Supports celebrated the spirit of America through creativity during our June painting workshops in Albemarle. Individuals and staff enjoyed expressing themselves through colorful artwork, while “Forks & Fireworks” art kits were distributed to each residential site, giving everyone agency-wide an opportunity to create their own festive fireworks displays using paint and forks.

We can't wait to showcase the rich tapestry of creativity created throughout GHA at our Annual Art Show Reception on Wednesday, September 16, from 1–3 p.m. at First Presbyterian Church in Albemarle. The artwork will remain on display in the church's art gallery through the fall.

We are especially grateful to the Stanly County Arts Council's Grassroots Arts Grant Program for funding our summer artist, Rebekah Crisco. Rebekah generously shared her talents with our individuals and direct care staff throughout the summer painting workshops, helping make this season of creativity and self-expression possible!



GHA Athletes Compete at States

More than 1,300 Special Olympics athletes competed at the 2026 Special Olympics North Carolina Summer Games May 29-31! Taking place in Triangle region, the Summer Games were the largest state-level event for Special Olympics North Carolina featuring competition in eight different sports. Special congratulations to the following GHA Autism Supports participants who earned medals and ribbons:

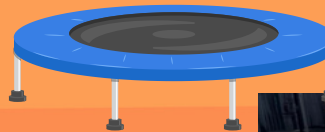
- Jonathon Martin
 - Swimming
 - 4th place ribbon in 50y backstroke
 - bronze medal in 50y freestyle
 - gold medal in 25y freestyle
 - bronze medal in 4X25 freestyle relay
- Sam Poplin
 - Athletics/Track & Field
 - gold medal for softball throw
 - gold medal for 25 m dash
 - gold medal for 50m walk
- Chris Walsh
 - Swimming
 - participation ribbon in the 4X25 freestyle relay
 - 4th place ribbon in the 25y backstroke
 - 4th place ribbon in the 50y freestyle
 - bronze medal in the 25y freestyle
- Michael Francis
 - Swimming
 - bronze medal in 4X25 freestyle relay
 - participation ribbon for 50y backstroke

Special Olympics North Carolina held its first games in 1970 with 400 participants and has since grown to be recognized globally as one of the largest Special Olympics programs in the world. Special Olympics North Carolina currently has nearly 53,000 registered athletes and Unified partners (people without intellectual disabilities), who train and compete in year-round programs in 20 different sports.

\$10,000 Speedway Grant Helps GHA Create More Active Play Opportunities

GHA Autism Supports is grateful to the Charlotte Chapter of Speedway Children's Charities for a generous \$10,000 grant supporting children and adolescents with autism. Exercise and physical activity are especially important for children with autism, helping strengthen balance, coordination, and gross motor skills while also providing opportunities to reduce stress and prevent challenging behaviors. Thanks to this grant, GHA was able to enhance the outdoor spaces at both our Children's and Adolescent Homes with equipment selected to meet the unique needs of the individuals we serve.

New sensory balls, balance stones, sports equipment, tables, and umbrellas provide opportunities for active play, sensory exploration, and social engagement while offering much-needed shade during the hot summer months. The grant also allowed GHA to purchase additional items for the classroom at Albemarle High School, including comfortable beanbags, sensory activities, and storage pieces to help create an organized, welcoming, and supportive learning environment. We are incredibly thankful to Speedway Children's Charities for investing in the health, development, and well-being of the children and adolescents we serve!



Tidal Wave Auto Spa Charity Day Returns!

GHA Autism Supports is excited to partner for the sixth consecutive year with Tidal Wave Auto Spa in Albemarle for their annual Charity Day fundraiser on Friday, September 18 from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. This special event brings together our community for a fun and easy way to support individuals with autism while getting your car sparkling clean! On Charity Day, Tidal Wave Auto Spa donates proceeds from qualifying car washes to a selected charity, with a special focus on organizations serving the special-needs community. This year, GHA Autism Supports will receive 50% of the cost of each individual car wash purchased that day, with the remaining 50% benefiting Tidal Wave's national corporate charity. There will also be collection cans at each self-service vacuum station, giving you another opportunity to support GHA by donating your spare change. Tidal Wave Auto Spa's Charity Day program has already raised more than \$1.4 million in donations, making a tremendous difference for nonprofit organizations and the communities they serve. We are incredibly grateful to Tidal Wave Auto Spa for continuing this partnership and for their commitment to supporting the special-needs community. We appreciate our GHA families, friends, employees and community supporters who come out year after year to make this event such a success. We hope to see you there at 1825 East Main Street in Albemarle—and don't forget to bring your dirty car!



GHA Welcomes Japanese Visitors

GHA Autism Supports was honored to welcome two special visitors from Japan on August 13 for a day of learning, connection, and sharing autism-support practices. Izumi Funahashi, who is studying abroad from Akita International University and attending High Point University this semester, visited GHA Autism Supports alongside her mother, Naoko Funahashi. Together, they toured several GHA programs in Albemarle with GHA Autism Supports Co-CEO Dee Pankey Thompson, including Morrow Valley Farmstead, Carolina Farms, our licensed Day Program, and Second Street Sundries. The visit was especially meaningful because of Naoko's professional background. She is a longtime educator at Kaugawa Seibu Shien Gakko School, a special-needs high school in Japan. Her experience working with students with disabilities provided a wonderful opportunity for GHA team members and the Funahashis to exchange ideas, experiences, and perspectives about supporting individuals with autism and other special needs. GHA Autism Supports has been privileged to host visitors from around the world throughout the years, including guests from Japan, Denmark, Germany, and many other countries. These visits are a wonderful reminder that while autism services may look different across cultures and communities, we share a common commitment to helping individuals with autism live meaningful, fulfilling lives!



Congrats to Eric Baldwin!

GHA Autism Supports proudly congratulates Senior Qualified Professional Eric Baldwin on being a recent graduate of the Stanly County Chamber of Commerce Leadership Stanly program! Leadership Stanly is a nine-month leadership development program designed to provide participants with extensive knowledge about Stanly County while fostering professional growth, networking opportunities, and community engagement. Eric was one of 24 graduates recognized as part of this year's class. The experience equips local leaders with a deeper understanding of the community while strengthening their ability to serve and lead within their professions. At GHA Autism Supports, Eric serves as Senior Qualified Professional, providing clinical oversight to all intermediate care facilities within GHA's Stanly County division. His dedication to the individuals supported by GHA, combined with his commitment to professional development and community involvement, makes him a valuable member of the organization and the community as a whole. Outside of his role at GHA Autism Supports, Eric is currently working toward the completion of his master's degree program in Applied Behavioral Analysis. He is also a proud father to his three children — Eriyanna (16), Eriyah (14), and Eric Jr. "EJ" (12). In his free time, Eric enjoys cars and considers automotive culture and car-related activities one of his favorite hobbies. GHA Autism Supports is proud of Eric's accomplishment and congratulates him on successfully completing the Leadership Stanly program!

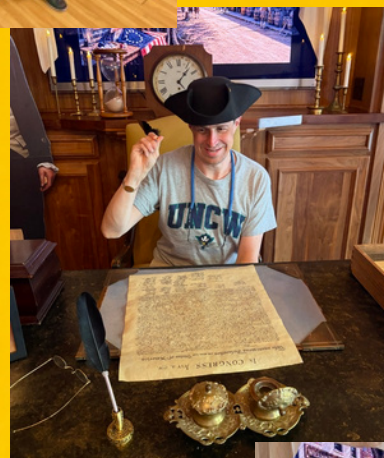


Eric Baldwin was a 2026 Leadership Stanly graduate, and he was also voted "Best All Around Personality" by his fellow graduates!

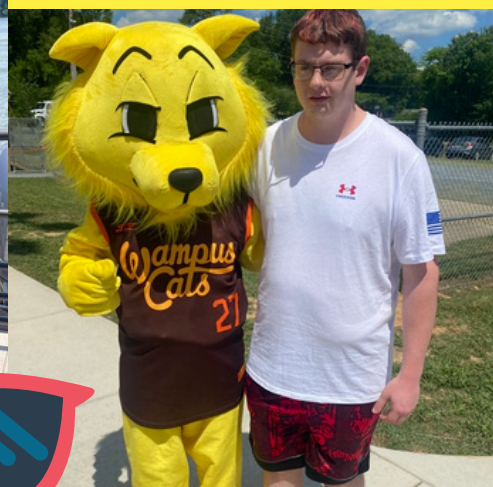
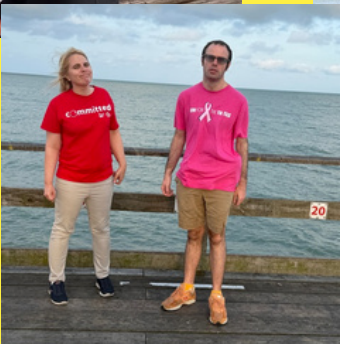
What's Up
Wilmington?



**SUMMER IS FULL OF
LOTS OF ADVENTURES!**



GHA'S GOT SUMMER FUN COVERED!!



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