



Insight

FALL 2021 | Vol. 5, No. 2



The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

FALL 2021 Vol. 5, No. 2

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Fall is a beautiful time to live in New England. From the changing leaves and crisp weather to the excitement of football games and the impending holiday season, there is so much to be thankful for this time of year.

At The New England Center for Children, we are thankful throughout the year for our teachers and staff who work tirelessly to provide to our students an engaging, fulfilling, and safe experience in their respective programs. The heart of NECC is our staff, and we are grateful for their willingness to go above and beyond in order to move our mission forward and serve the children entrusted to our care. As you will read in these pages, the teachers care deeply for their students.

We are also grateful for the parents of our students, such as Liz Rubin, who has been so inspired by her son's teachers that she is pursuing her own behavior analysis certification, and the several parents who helped raise crucial funds for the Center as part of #TeamNECC's Falmouth Road Race and Boston Marathon teams. Without your support, both emotional and financial, we wouldn't be able to do this important work.

On behalf of the Development Team and everyone at NECC, we wish you and your family health, happiness, and love, not just during this season of giving, but throughout the year.

Sincerely,

Jared Bouzan, M.Ed.
Chief Development Officer



Students enjoyed Field Day, see more photos on page 7.

**OUR MISSION IS TO CREATE
A GLOBAL NETWORK OF
EDUCATORS, RESEARCHERS,
AND PROGRAMS SO THAT
THOSE LIVING WITH AUTISM
MAY LIVE FULLER LIVES.**

Jared Bouzan, M.Ed.
Chief Development Officer
jbouzan@necc.org

Beth McGonagle
Director, Institutional Advancement
bmcgonagle@necc.org

Kimberly Ruscitti | Editor
Communications Specialist
kruscitti@necc.org



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NECCforAutism



The New England Center for Children



Teacher Feature

DOMINIQUE FISHER

Working with children with autism isn't an easy job, and when it's paired with a global pandemic and a national labor shortage, it only becomes more challenging. But for Dominique "Dom" Fisher, no matter how hard her job gets, she does it all for her students.

"I care so much about them, they really keep me going," said Fisher, a residential coordinator for the Intensive Treatment Team (ITT). "Sometimes we get so busy, and it isn't always the most fun, but they really motivate me to do what I do every day."

Fisher grew up in Colorado Springs, CO. She attended college and played Division I volleyball at SUNY in New York, where she earned a dual degree in sociology and human development. It was there, at a career fair, where she first learned about NECC and was intrigued by the educational and research opportunities. She came to Southborough for an interview more than two years ago and has been here ever since. Fisher was recently promoted from a level 2 teacher to residential coordinator, where she oversees the team and different systems within the ITT residence.

"I like to think of it as making sure the residence is homey and comforting for the students but also a productive environment for the staff," explained Fisher, who works evenings on everything

from scheduling and supporting staff to cleanliness and grocery shopping. "My students might say it's my most important role, making sure I have the residence fully stocked with snacks."

When not at work, Fisher is working on the Employee Resource Group committee she co-created, or she is studying. In her third and final year of the Western New England graduate program



for applied behavior analysis (ABA), she is researching her thesis —teaching children with autism how to respond appropriately in the presence of law enforcement officers. "I want to teach a safe and appropriate response so there is no confusion, no misinterpretation in each interaction," she explained. "It is an important skill for everyone, but especially this population."

As if finding time to study wasn't tricky enough, sometimes, with the staffing

shortages on her team, Fisher's schedule changes unexpectedly. One morning, after working her normal 12 to 9 p.m. shift, Fisher returned at 5 a.m. to accompany one of her students to a dental procedure. She has also been taking on additional shifts working directly with students hour by hour just like the level 2 teachers.

"This field is very demanding and it's a tough field to work in even without a global pandemic, but then you add a national staffing shortage, it's very stressful," she said. "I've had to work with students who have been sick, I've dealt with staff members getting sick, family members who have been sick, but that doesn't mean we can miss work. We have to come every day."

Fisher said that one of the biggest challenges is staying motivated and positive all of the time, even on days when teachers are feeling burned out. "I think seeing your peers and coworkers show up every day and still have a smile on their face and still with a positive attitude is what motivates me to keep going," she explained. "I think we motivate each other and support each other. It's heartwarming to know that we still come here every day, we still do our jobs, and we still care about the kids and that's what it comes down to. I think that's what sets this job apart from other fields."

Meet New Executive Director Jessica Sassi

In July, Jessica Sassi, Ph.D., BCBA-D, LABA, began her new position as executive director of NECC's Southborough location. Her 14-year tenure with the Center, in which she has served in several roles including program specialist, residential program director, and, most recently, clinical director, enables her to lead from a unique perspective. She is also a member of the clinical adjunct faculty in behavior analysis at Western New England University, and her research has been widely published in academic journals including the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis and Behavior Intentions*.



WHAT DREW YOU TO THIS PROFESSION?

I was introduced to applied behavior analysis (ABA) in college. I loved how the approach is grounded in basic science and is committed to addressing socially significant issues. The work that behavior analysts do in autism education is a great example of that.

IN YOUR 14 YEARS AT THE CENTER, WHAT ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

I am proud of the accomplishments of the students I've served, both directly (shout out to my original Ursula Drive students!) and indirectly as a senior clinician and administrator. I'm proud of the growth of the staff I mentored through NECC supervisory relationships and through the Simmons and Western New England graduate programs. Our program is amazing, and it's because of the incredible people that we have here.

WHAT IS YOUR MESSAGE TO CURRENT TEACHERS IN THE FIELD?

After almost two years of a health crisis and now a workforce shortage, this is a tough time to be a special educator. But the work that you do is transformative — every day, you change the trajectory of your students' lives. The work that you do is incredibly important and has a lasting impact, and you are so good at it because of your skills, commitment, and compassion. THANK YOU!

WHAT IS SOMETHING ABOUT YOURSELF THAT MIGHT SURPRISE YOUR COLLEAGUES?

I have a really low-brow sense of humor — like right on par with a first grader. (I have one of those, so I know about first-grade humor!).

AS YOU MOVE INTO THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ROLE, WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR NECC?

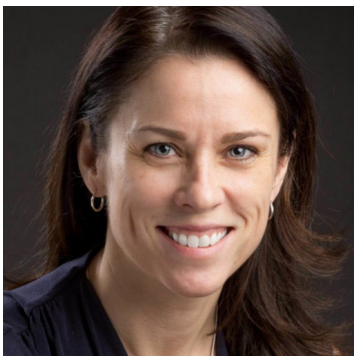
I'm proud to be part of an organization that offers the highest possible quality educational services, and I'm committed to continuing to hold us to the highest standards. I also think that our commitment to staff professional development is key to the quality of our services and something that makes us unique, so I'm excited to help further that aspect of our mission, as well.

“ Our program is amazing, and it's because of the incredible people that we have here. ”



NEW BOARD MEMBERS

This summer, NECC announced the election of two new members to the Board of Directors who bring decades of field, research, and academic experience as well as new perspectives to the Board.



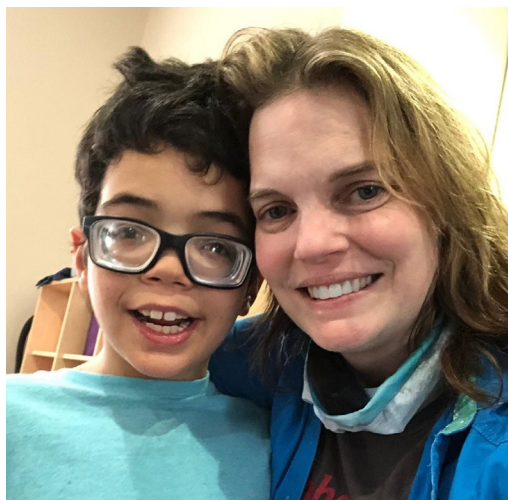
Laura Dudley, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, is an associate clinical professor and associate chair of the Applied Psychology Department at Northeastern University. Dr. Dudley began her career in special education and behavior analysis as an entry-level teacher with NECC in 1994. While with NECC, she earned her master's degree in ABA from Northeastern and was part of the development of the Autism Curriculum Encyclopedia® (ACE®) ABA Software System. Since leaving NECC in 2004, she has continued her education, obtaining her doctorate in ABA from Simmons College in 2015, worked in public schools around the state, and helped educate the next generation of behavior analysts through faculty positions at Northeastern, Simmons, and Hamilton College.



Stella R. Adu-Gyamfi, PMH-NP, is a psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner for Jamii Wellness and Behavioral Healthcare Services, with prior experience as a clinical nurse for the United States Air Force Reserves. She is the first psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner to serve on the Board and her expertise centers around assessing, diagnosing, and treating mental health needs. Adu-Gyamfi volunteers to help vulnerable populations. She serves on the Worcester Infant Mortality Reduction Task Force, a volunteer group organized by the Worcester Department of Public Health aimed at reducing infant mortality in the African immigrant community of Worcester. She was also a member of the 2019 #TeamNECC Boston Marathon team.

Acts of Generosity

A PARENT INSPIRED TO PURSUE A BCBA



Juggling the hectic world of executive recruitment and the needs of her autistic son Joey, Liz Rubin realized she needed help and turned to NECC. In 2018, Joey entered the residential program and although hard as it was to be separated, the progress he quickly made validated the decision. She was so touched by her son's improvements and his teachers that Liz was inspired to pursue a BCBA (board certified behavior analyst) certification.

"I'm able to be a mom again and not a case worker," said Liz. "NECC changed Joey's life and my own. The environment is safe and welcoming."

As a single mother, raising a child alone is hard enough, but Joey's severe autism made it even more challenging. "When you live it day-to-day it can be hard to realize the sacrifice, and in my case danger, to yourself and the child," said Liz, whose sister convinced her to enlist

the help of NECC. "It really does take a village, and NECC is that place."

Eleven-year-old Joey has been with NECC since he was 8, most recently in the Intensive Treatment Team (ITT) program, which serves students with the most challenging behaviors that may include aggression or self-injury. He was diagnosed with autism at 15 months old and received early intervention and other services in New York, all of which didn't help. Liz turned to NECC and its applied behavior analysis (ABA) approach. Joey thrived at NECC, going from an average of 18 aggressions per day to just a few, and some days none.

"All of the teachers made a big impression on me," said Liz. "They love Joey as if he was their own child. The teachers helped me better understand Joey, and they coached me on how to take him out in public most effectively. Parents of children with autism, particularly single moms, must be involved and active advocates. I'm the first person to complain, but I've had no complaints with NECC. Just the opposite. I really appreciate the details and transparency of Joey's teachers. I feel like they are friends."

Working with Joey's teachers inspired Liz to want to "talk their language" and better understand the ABA techniques that have been so successful with Joey. "I decided to pursue BCBA certification, which I feel is an extension of my master's in psychology and social work," she said.

"NECC has been wonderfully supportive."

Halfway through her BCBA certification at Manhattanville College, Liz looks forward to applying her skills not just with her son Joey, but in advocacy for other parents. Liz has already helped another family navigate the special education system to arrive at NECC.

"ABA can be abstract, being the study of the behavior of learning," explained Liz. "As an evidence-based science, it could be intimidating for beginners — it was for me — but it's really helping children learn in different ways and to build skills, to improve on behaviors getting in the way of social living."

From Liz's experience trying to find ABA services in her home state of New York, she realizes there is a critical need for qualified and trained professionals in ABA and autism education.

"I think that high schools and colleges need to do better in exposing students to the special education field," said Liz. "NECC teachers tell me, and I see it firsthand, that the work can be incredibly rewarding. In my ABA studies I've come to see how many teachers in the field started at NECC and benefit from their training and degree programs. NECC really is the gold standard in ABA."

"I couldn't ask for anything more of NECC," said Liz. "I'm so fortunate to have NECC as a part of Joey's life and my own."

YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

Your gift gives students opportunities to be a part of their community, practice skills outside the classroom, and have some fun!



28TH ANNUAL FIELD DAY

Annual giving makes many things possible for our students, including a number of engaging activities for students who have limited access to experiences and other entertainment in their communities. One of these events is the annual Field Day held in June, attended by more than 600 staff, students, and volunteers that presents a safe environment for NECC students to have fun participating in a wide variety of outdoor games and activities surrounded by their friends and teachers. This beloved tradition has grown to include physical activities ranging from tug of war to a rock-climbing wall, arts and crafts, a petting zoo, and an ice cream truck. This year, the students were joined by Worcester Red Sox mascot, Smiley, and Boston Red Sox mascot, Wally the Green Monster. This year's event was made possible through a grant from the Constance O. Putnam Foundation.



STAFFING SHORTAGES LEAD TO HOMEBASED CLOSURE



The ongoing pandemic has affected all facets of the global economy, but nowhere is it more obvious than in the historic teacher shortages in special education, particularly for children with autism and other developmental disorders.

Special education schools across the country are freezing enrollments, dropping students, and cutting back services. NECC, one of the largest providers of special education services, is experiencing unprecedented shortages across the day school and residential programs. With more than 195 BCBA's on staff, many of whom are in administrative roles, the school has been able to cover the needs of its students. However, this fall, NECC reluctantly closed its Homebased services, a program that has serviced children with an autism diagnosis aged 12 months to 3 years in their homes since 1997.

"Homebased services are so important for pre-school age children diagnosed with autism — our own research clearly demonstrates that early intensive behavior intervention yields the best outcomes," said Jessica Sassi, Ph.D.,

BCBA-D, LABA, executive director of NECC in Southborough. "The workforce shortage put a strain on all of our programs, with senior clinicians and administrators on shift and helping out in classrooms. With changes to how Homebased services were managed by the Department of Health, coupled with impending workforce losses, we felt our only option was to close the program. We are hopeful that this program will one day return and we will resume serving these youngest students."

The pandemic has exacerbated an already challenging situation accentuated by rising autism diagnoses, fewer teachers entering the field, and lack of state and federal funds.

"Special education schools play a vital role in the life of children with autism, providing specialized educational and behavior supports and, in some cases, 24-7 supervised care," wrote NECC Founder and CEO Vincent Strully, Jr. in a letter to the *Boston Globe* editor. "More investment in higher salaries, mentorship, and professional development is needed to ensure that children with autism receive the best care and education."



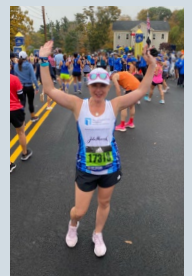
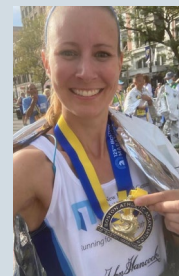
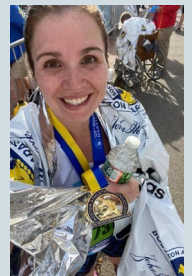
#TEAMNECC RUNS!

In August, a team of 15 runners comprised of staff, friends, and families of #TeamNECC ran (in person and virtually) the 2021 ASICS Falmouth Road Race, raising nearly \$20,000. And in October, four runners represented #TeamNECC at the Boston Marathon and raised more than \$48,000. NECC is so grateful to the runners of both races for their hard work in raising important funds that directly benefit the children of NECC.

Members of the Falmouth Road Race team (L to R): Erin Gildea, Stephanie Carlin, Lauren Zorovic, Becky Zorovic, Emily McKenna, Lori McKenna, Matt McKenna, Grant Jorgensen, and David Matisoff. Not

pictured: Jeff Arnold, David DiAntonio, Ashley Dodd, Megan Mohr, Fatou Njie-Jallow, and Emily Serio.

(Far right, clockwise) Sarah Conway, Ashley Arsenault, Jessica Farrell Mascia, and Kyla McHaffie, celebrate finishing the Boston Marathon.



NECC WELCOMES LARGEST SUMMER INTERN GROUP



The intern program at NECC is a critical aspect of the organization. Not only is the program a source of teacher recruitment, as many interns stay connected to and/or are hired by NECC, but the hands-on learning and working experience provided during the internship enhances comprehension of what is required of those in the applied behavior analysis (ABA) field and cultivates a passion for this work. This summer, NECC welcomed its largest summer internship group of 28 interns, which included students from Assumption and Clark universities as well as Regis College.

“The internship program is a way of disseminating information regarding the practice of ABA and sharing it with the wider community, ultimately creating greater understanding and interest in ABA and NECC,” said Ellen Graham, program director for graduate

studies and internships. “Interns at NECC are treated as part of the team and students are able to gain valuable skills during their time here.”

While summer is the time when most interns come to NECC, the program — which in addition to summer internships includes full- and part-time undergraduate internships; fall and spring semester internships; yearlong international internships; and graduate program internships and practicum — runs throughout the year and draws students from around the world. Each year, a handful of interns from Ireland and Spain live and work at NECC for a year completing research and training. In addition, NECC welcomes six to eight interns each semester from surrounding colleges and universities.

Susan Sabelli, clinical coordinator for Assumption University’s Department

of Human Services & Rehabilitation Studies has been placing students at NECC for more than 20 years. “Our students know that NECC is the best place for children with autism to be and really want to be part of the team there,” Sabelli said. “Students don’t feel like interns after a while. They really feel like members of the team, and they are treated that way. They really feel like they are part of something special.”

Sabelli explained that NECC staff is extremely supportive of Assumption interns and include them in staff meetings as well as “things they would never have considered possible before, such as data collection for research purposes. They get to see the inner workings of the organization and observe how the other specialist work together,” she said, adding that for students who don’t know what they are looking for, NECC is a great place because they’ll see occupational therapists, speech therapists, other special educators, and ABA in action, helping them make a choice.

“At NECC, interns get the applied portion of applied behavior analysis, and get to practice what they have learned in the classroom,” added Graham. “You aren’t watching someone else do it, you are implementing principles and working one-on-one with the children.”

DEVELOPMENT TEAM VOLUNTEERS AT POLAR PARK

On July 28, members of NECC’s Development Department volunteered at Polar Park to raise money for NECC. Serving hot dogs, pouring soft drinks, and counting change during the Woo Sox afternoon home game, the effort brought awareness to autism education and hundreds of dollars to support NECC’s Annual Fund. A few days later, the Woo Sox honored NECC on the field during its Autism Awareness Day game.



NEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD



Abu Dhabi - September 14 marked the first day of classes for 15 staff members from the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education Operated by The New England Center for Children (MRC-NECC) who are enrolled in the Simmons University Master of Science in Education (Moderate and Severe Disabilities) program. MRC-NECC staff have been provided a unique opportunity to attend live, virtual classes with professors from Simmons and NECC to complete this degree. Staff completing this degree will conduct two semesters of teaching practicum along with specialized coursework to graduate with the skills and knowledge to become the best-trained special education teachers in Abu Dhabi.

Dubai - "Doctor Advith," (left) a 3-year-old boy who has been enrolled at the NECC Dubai Clinic since July 2020, enjoys engaging in functional play with his favorite toy, Mr. Potato Head. Advith has transitioned from clinic-based sessions into a mainstream nursery where he is now working on fading out of the NECC Clinic program entirely. Advith has made significant progress in the last 16 months and his teachers could not be prouder of him and his achievements.

NECC STAFF APPRECIATION

As a sign of appreciation for everything the staff have done and continue to do for the students during this challenging time, in late October the NECC Staff Activities Committee hosted two events to thank the staff for all of their hard work. Apex Entertainment provided a grab and go catered hot dog lunch while Neal Faulkner, Board member and Dunkin' franchisee, donated more than 600 donuts that were delivered to team offices.





The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

33 Turnpike Road
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**After 15 years as a
student at NECC, Will
graduated in October.**

**YOU make it possible
to open doors and
transform the lives of
children with autism.**

**Change the life
of a child today.**

**SCAN TO
DONATE**

