



# Insight

SPRING 2022 | Vol. 6, No. 1



The New England Center  
for Children®  
*Autism Education and Research*

### SPRING 2022 Vol. 6, No. 1

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Here at NECC, we are excited for spring. With COVID seemingly mostly behind us, we are enjoying the nicer weather and the smiling faces of our students without masks. There is much to look forward to this spring and summer at NECC.

In May, after two years of virtual races, we will be holding the 16th Annual 5K Walk/Run for Autism in person on May 21 at 10 a.m. at the Neary School in Southborough. This year, registration is FREE for all who would like to participate and we have some great fundraising incentive prizes. We are hoping that this family-friendly and much-loved event will be an opportunity to bring the community together—something we have all surely missed during these last couple of years—while raising important funds for the Center.

We are so grateful for the support from the NECC community over the last few months. After a record-breaking Children of Promise Gala in which we raised \$1.1 million dollars, we had an incredible showing from our four Boston Marathon runners, and our community rallied around one of our own. You can read about all of these inspiring stories (and more) in this issue. I remain grateful for your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jared T. Bouzan".

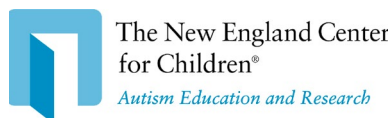
**Jared Bouzan, M.Ed.**  
Chief Development Officer

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

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**The New England  
Center for Children**



Students and staff enjoyed a day of bowling at Apex Entertainment in Marlborough in March. See more on page 9.



## Teacher Feature

# ASHLEY PARKIN, MSEd

During her 10 years at NECC, Ashley Parkin, MSEd, education coordinator for NECC's Higley Road team, has made a lasting impression on her colleagues. It's one of the reasons she was chosen as the recipient of the 2021 Maria Felix Lonergan (MFL) Award, named for Maria Felix Lonergan, who dedicated her career to improving the lives of children with autism at NECC for nearly 20 years before losing her battle with cancer.

"It means so much to win this award because the [characteristics of] this award are things I fight for every day and are the things that I hold near and dear to my heart," said Parkin. "It is an honor to be able to continue with everything that [Maria] fought for and everything she worked so hard for. Hopefully [I can] continue to live up to the standard and the excellence that she strived and worked for."

Parkin's dedication to improving the lives of students with autism isn't the only similarity she shares with the late Lonergan—Parkin fought her own battle with cancer during the spring of 2021. After experiencing memory problems as well as visual and auditory issues last summer, Parkin saw a slew of specialists before an MRI revealed she had a tumor in the central part of

her brain. Parkin's tumor was removed last March and turned out to be a low-grade cancer.

"I'm very fortunate and nothing about that is lost on me," she said. "The fact that I get to carry on Maria's legacy and do what I love is what makes this award even more special."

Parkin discovered her love for helping students with special needs while volunteering at a preschool during her senior year of college. "It was during that experience that everything I had planned for was no longer what I wanted to do," she said.

Parkin joined NECC as a level 1 teacher (the equivalent of what is now called a behavioral health technician) before moving to a level 2 teacher in a case manager position, then to the day school, and ultimately to the residential team of Higley. A year into her tenure, Parkin took advantage of NECC's onsite graduate programs and enrolled in Simmons University's master's in education with a focus in severe disabilities, followed by the two-year program at Western New England University (WNEU).

"I really wanted to better myself as an educator," said Parkin, who majored in

biological psychology with a minor in neuroscience at the University of Maine Orono. "My undergrad isn't related to education, so I knew I needed to push myself in that area and build the skillset required to make a meaningful impact in my students' lives."

Both the Simmons and WNEU programs helped Parkin expand her knowledge about teaching and develop skills. And she continues to learn every day.

"I love what I do here. It is extremely challenging and a place in which I can continue to better myself and learn from other people," she said. "There isn't a moment or day that goes by that I don't learn something from one of my teachers or my students. It's neat to have an experience to better yourself as an educator through all of these different modes and people."

Though the pandemic made the last two years the hardest of Parkin's career, there isn't anywhere else she'd rather be. "When I signed up to educate these students, I meant it," she said. "Through the good times and the challenging times, and the times that we never saw coming, this is what I was meant to do, this is what I said I would do, and this is what I love doing."

# Meet the Emergency Management Team



In March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Massachusetts, NECC was forced to act fast to protect its students and staff. These important decisions were made by the Emergency Management Team (EMT), a group quickly formed and comprised of leaders across the school who worked tirelessly to ensure NECC was in accordance with the guidelines and safety protocols put forth by the Commonwealth. On March 15, when all schools in Massachusetts were ordered to close, EMT was there to navigate the challenges of providing services to NECC students and ensuring the livelihood and safety of the staff. Heather Morrison, MS, BCBA, LABA, director of administration, shares how NECC, led by the EMT, continued to serve the NECC community during an unprecedented, worldwide health crisis.



*EMT coordinated several COVID vaccine clinics for staff and students, helping the NECC community achieve a 95 percent vaccination rate.*

## HOW DID EMT GET STARTED?

We started meeting a week or two before the shutdown, falling back on protocols we used for the flu and other illnesses, such as increased cleaning, etc. We quickly realized we needed to form a group because there were many conversations happening across the organization, and there needed to be one point of communication. Everything changed so quickly. It went from 'did you hear about this virus' to 'we're shutting down,' within a week. We started meeting all day, every day, including weekends and were eventually able to reduce to twice a day. We now meet once a week, but it changes as needed.

## WHAT GUIDED YOUR DECISIONS?

We are regulated by a variety of state agencies, and they provided guidance throughout the pandemic: DESE, EOHS,

EEC, and DPH. Staff working with students were supplied with surgical masks to full PPE dependent on exposure and illness, similar to health care workers in other industries so the guidance for health care workers and from the CDC was also important.

What we did and continue to do is look at all of the guidance and decide what works best for us based upon what we know, what worked and what didn't work, and then created our own plan. That continual evaluation of our protocols has served us well.

## HOW HAS EMT CHANGED THROUGHOUT THE PANDEMIC?

We know so much more now. We knew nothing at the beginning. There was no good understanding of how it spread, recommendations of what to do or not do, PPE was very limited, and testing was completely unavailable. It made a huge difference to us once testing was available, first through community sites and then here as we purchased our own testing machines. Our nursing staff didn't hesitate to don PPE and test our staff and students whenever necessary. The state was also very generous in providing various test kits, and now we have enough for staff to test themselves at home when they experience any symptoms.

Many departments helped keep NECC going. Human Resources supported our employees as they continued to come to work. Enrollment and Family Support found creative ways to help residential families stay in touch with their children. The cafeteria became a restaurant, they prepared and delivered food to the houses while departments that could go remote helped deliver food and supplies. Many necessary items were



*Core EMT members (center) Morrison and (clockwise) Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, executive director of Southborough; Kimberly Keogh, MEd, BCBA, senior director of program services for IIP; Jean Waitneight, PMHNP-BC, PNP-BC, director of Health Services; Susan Langer, MS, BCBA, LABA, chief program officer; Kayla Abeling, MEd, BCBA, LABA, executive assistant to the CEO; and Kyla McHaffie, MS, BCBA, LABA, director of Enrollment and Family Support. Not pictured: Amy Geckeler, MS, BCBA, executive director of global consulting; Kimberly Michel, administration coordinator; and Catherine Welch, MEd, executive advisor.*

in short supply, so families donated hand sanitizer, PPE, and homemade masks. IT had about 48-hours' notice to convert us all to Zoom and our day school created a remote-learning program. But the teachers were the heroes. They kept coming in knowing their students depended on them, some completely relocating to extended stay hotel rooms or self-isolating for weeks at a time.

We were one of the first schools to reopen when the state allowed on July 5. There were still restrictions, which took much discussion and some rearranging to meet. Our space is not designed to accommodate the six-feet-apart guidance, nor do our students understand that concept very well. When those restrictions were eased up, we were able to bring more staff and students back full time.

NECC was a model for public schools in how to reopen and get their students back in session, showing that it could be done safely and effectively.

### **WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO BRING STUDENTS BACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE?**

There is so much value to in-person education and having access to all that being at school can offer. Our IIP students were at home trying to manage remote learning, which is not a feasible model for them. It is extremely difficult for them to pay attention to a screen and follow instructions, and very difficult for parents to provide that additional support.

The upheaval of the last two years is still causing some challenges and we're still having to keep residential teams at home when we have a positive case. Because they live in a group home and because our kids don't have the skills to

wear a mask as they need to, we have not been able to be as flexible as you can be in a public school. Our students continue to experience disruptions in their schedule and routines and that's hard for anybody, but it is particularly difficult for kids with autism.

### **HOW DO YOU MAKE STAFF FEEL COMFORTABLE EXPRESSING THEIR CONCERNS & ASKING QUESTIONS?**

The EMT email goes to the whole group and an appropriate person responds. We have also tried to continue to communicate with staff as regularly as possible and in a variety of ways. Updates are reviewed in directors' meetings, and regular emails go out keeping all staff aware of what's happening here at NECC and in Massachusetts. We try to issue reminders of what's available, as well as changes in guidance and the rationale behind it.

### **ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?**

It really was absolutely a team effort across the board, whether it was staff at NECC or parents also working to support us, we succeeded because we were a team. We were also lucky to be in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We had the support and resources we needed, many other states did not. The availability of testing, PPE, and the guidance we were getting from the state was all very critical. Governor Baker and his administration were very supportive of schools like ours.

# Acts of Generosity

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE



Cameron McDonnell enjoys time at home with his sisters Emma (left) and Sadie (right).

Cameron McDonnell was a typical 4-year-old student at NECC, enrolled in the on-site daycare's integrated preschool program. He was silly, energetic, and a good friend to everyone in his class. The youngest of three, he was always active. But it wasn't until last June during Field Day that something seemed drastically different about Cam.

"We were waiting for the bus and playing Simon Says and he kept falling, couldn't hop on one foot, and had trouble keeping up with his friends," said Jessey McDonnell, Cam's mother and a practicum supervisor for NECC's Simmons University graduate program and a longtime academic specialist. "He wasn't doing it to be silly."

Jessey consulted Cam's teachers, who agreed his behavior warranted a call to the doctor. "Cam had tried to walk down the stairs of the school bus that day and almost collapsed in my arms because he

couldn't balance," said Erin Carmody, the director of NECC's day care and Jessey's close friend. "Jessey and I looked at each other and, in that instant, we knew something was wrong."

Two days later, after Cam failed all his pediatrician's neuro tests, he was rushed to the emergency room via ambulance. After more tests, it was discovered that Cam had a germ cell tumor in his brain.

"In one second, our world was completely flipped upside down," Jessey said.

Extensive chemotherapy (six rounds lasting three weeks each) began immediately and in mid-August Cam underwent a 14-hour surgery to remove a tennis ball-sized tumor from his brain. "After the surgery, he couldn't talk, walk, feed himself, or eat," explained Jessey.

Cam was sent to Spaulding Rehabilitation,

where he suffered setbacks and didn't make much progress. Adding insult to injury, the McDonnell family was separated due to COVID protocols—Jessey stayed with Cam at Spaulding while her husband, Patrick, cared for their two girls at home in Northbridge. With medical expenses piling and Jessey and Patrick forced to take leave from their jobs, the NECC community stepped up to help. Carmody led the charge by starting a GoFundMe for the family. Donations from the community poured in and quickly amassed nearly \$73,000, with significant contributions from Jessey's NECC family, both financially and emotionally.

"Sometimes it's hard to believe that someone as young and innocent as Cameron could be fighting cancer," said Carmody. "Jessey and Pat have a long road ahead of them. Caring for Cameron is going to be a full-time job for quite some time, and there will be bumps in the road. The GoFundMe page has certainly put Pat and Jessey in a better position to care for Cameron, their daughters, and to keep their family moving forward in life."

"We were so grateful for everyone's support," Jessey said. "So many people reached out and called. Teams got together and donated, like Health Services and the kitchen staff. I couldn't even wrap my head around it. People I didn't even know were reaching out. We felt a lot of love and it helped us move forward. We felt like we could do this because we had so many people behind us cheering us on."

She added that colleagues like Carmody visited, while departments sent food and gift baskets to the hospital, and the Specialty Services department hired a

cleaning service for the family. Family and friends outside of NECC set up meal trains and fundraisers, golf tournaments, and made t-shirts, all to help support Cam and the McDonnells.

“So many people stepped up in ways we never expected, in important ways that made us feel our family was important and safe,” Jessey said. “We didn’t have to worry about anything except our family.”

Jessey’s experience at NECC has also played an important role in Cam’s recovery. “I have learned so much about OT/PT and speech since I started as a teacher, I felt I

could do what he needed at home because of my experience,” she said, adding that this allowed their family to be together again. She leaned on the friends and resources she had at NECC in these areas and has deepened her friendships with colleagues she “might not have gotten close to” otherwise.

On November 7, a month after Cam turned 5, he started talking again. He can now eat on his own and is more mobile and making more gains each week. In February, he completed 30 days of radiation treatment at Massachusetts General Hospital, a specialized treatment one of Jessey’s

advisees in the NECC Simmons program connected her to.

“Cam has surpassed everyone’s expectations thus far,” she shared.

As far as the outpouring of community support, both at NECC and in the wider community, the McDonnell family plans to pay it forward. They’re planning to make Cam’s Jam Golf Tournament an annual event, with proceeds donated to a charity.

“It has meant so much to us that these supports exist,” she said. “Every kind word has made a difference.”

# YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

Your gift gives students opportunities to be part of their community and have some fun. In December, students enjoyed visits with Santa and Olaf, who presented them each with a gift.



## NECC RAISES RECORD \$1.1 MILLION AT GALA



On November 12, more than 300 business leaders, philanthropists, and NECC families and friends gathered at Boston's InterContinental Hotel for the first in-person fundraising event in two years due to the pandemic. The 2021 Children of Promise Gala achieved unprecedented fundraising results, raising more than \$1.1 million dollars.

The night featured heartwarming stories of hope and inspiration, a lively auction hosted by NESN's Jenny Johnson, and a special recognition of Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker and Secretary of Health and Human Services Marylou Sudders for their tremendous support of Massachusetts approved, private, special education schools during the pandemic.

"From the first day a public health emergency was declared, Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders provided NECC and all the other Chapter 766 schools with access to testing, protective equipment, and additional funds to fight the virus," shared Vinnie Strully, Jr., founder and CEO of NECC. "Over the last 46 years, there has never been an administration more supportive of children with autism and other special needs than the Baker administration."

Gov. Baker expressed his and Sec. Sudders' appreciation for being recognized, "but mostly tonight what I want to say is how much we appreciate who you are, what you've done, and what you've been through," he shared.





## #TEAMNECC RUNS BOSTON, RAISES MORE THAN \$46,000

On Monday, April 18, #TeamNECC runners (bottom L to R) Rachel Vick (level 2 teacher), Ashley Lagas (NECC friend), Jennifer Loring (consulting specialist), and Alexa DiAntonio (NECC friend) ran the Boston Marathon. In addition to completing the grueling 26.2 miles, the four runners raised more than \$46,000 for the children of NECC.



## HAVING A BALL!

From March 22-24, Apex Entertainment hosted NECC students for an afternoon of bowling and fun. More than 200 students and teachers visited the Marlborough complex over the three days for an opportunity to engage in a community activity, something that has been limited during the last two years because of the pandemic.



# STAFF ALUMNI DELIVER ABA EDUCATION THROUGH PODCAST



Staff alumni Jackie MacDonald, PhD, BCBA-D, Robert Parry-Cruwys, BCBA, and Diana Parry-Cruwys, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, never would have guessed that their six-plus years working at NECC would have led them to where they are today. For Robert

and Diana, that includes a marriage and children, and for all three, successful careers in the ABA field and a joint project that has exceeded their expectations. Jackie, Robert, and Diana are creators and hosts of the *ABA Inside Track*, an ABA-topic centered podcast with more than three million total downloads.

“Our podcast allows people to listen to something that’s relevant but in a way that should feel like another podcast they listen to about their hobbies,” said Rob. “We always wanted it to have that vibe that this is three friends talking about research. The topics are serious, the discussion is serious, and the vibe is respectful, but a little bit loose.”

According to Diana, the podcast was “a marriage between all of us because everyone really had ideas about it.” Rob had started an ABA journal club in which attendees could talk about behavior analysis with the bonus of earning continuing education (CE) credits, but it was sparsely attended. Jackie suggested he turn the journal group into a podcast.

“We thought that if we had a journal discussion on our own and it’s freely available wherever one happens to be, they might listen to it. And after about a year, some people did,” said Rob.

The trio aired their first podcast in March 2016 and it grew exponentially in the first couple of years. Today, about three to five thousand listeners tune in each week. Each podcast focuses on a topic in behavior analysis and is supplemented with peer-reviewed research and literature that pertains to that topic. Each host tackles an article and breaks down the important components of the research; sometimes there is a guest host to help. Listeners can earn CE credits for a small fee, a trailblazing attribute of the podcast.

“With each episode we try to make [the topic and research] more engaging and fun for the people who are not experts in the field,” Jackie explained. “We try to make the research consumable and digestible in a fun way. We want to put a fun spin on it so when they read articles they can understand and enjoy the material.”

Diana shared that while most of the topics discussed on the podcast are related to working with clients with autism or developmental disabilities, they also “think it’s really important to examine where our science works in other areas. We are trying to ensure we give our listeners a real breadth and range of topics to review such as environmental sustainability, classroom management, and cultural diversity within the field,” she said.

The hosts spend an estimated 40 hours a week producing a single episode including researching, recording, and sending out CEs. It’s quite a heavy lift given all three have full-time jobs in the ABA field. Rob is a BCBA for Shrewsbury Public Schools while Diana and Jackie run the Regis College Master in ABA program and co-direct the Regis Autism Center.

“Like anything you do on the same schedule for six years, it becomes work,” Rob said when asked about the future of the podcast. “When we’re recording, we have a lot of fun. And as long as we can sit in a room and talk research and feel like we’re learning new things, I think we will keep

on going. It’s a privilege that we have so many smart people producing such high-quality research, and we have so many more answers than we did when any of us started in this field.”

His cohorts agreed. “Even coming into this with a PhD, I feel like I have learned so much about so many different topics,” said Diana, who, along with Jackie, earned her PhD through NECC’s graduate program with Western New England University; Rob earned his MEd through the Simmons University program and his BCBA through NECC’s Northeastern University program. “It’s given me a chance to grow and appreciate what we have in our science as well as thinking about ways in which we can continue expanding and improving what we do.”



On February 9, Jackie and Diana returned to NECC’s Southborough campus to present “Quality-of-Life Goals,” during which attendees had the opportunity to earn continuing education credits.

## THANK YOU, BEV



After 37 years, Beverly Luacaw, accounts receivable bookkeeper, has retired from NECC. She joined NECC in 1985 and was an invaluable member of the Business Office team. While in her tenure the tools of accounting changed and the workload on the business side grew exponentially as NECC expanded, Luacaw adapted and thrived. She also exemplified the principle of staff giving, having long been a generous donor to NECC. Her support of the annual fund through staff giving, capital campaigns, gala fundraisers, bake sales, and craft fairs amounted to more than 500 donations. The entire NECC community wishes Luacaw well in her retirement, which will allow her to spend more time with her family.



Staff at the NECC Clinic in Dubai celebrated Autism Awareness Day on April 2. The month of April is Autism Awareness Month, an opportunity to increase understanding and acceptance of people with autism worldwide.



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