



Insight

SPRING 2024 | Vol. 8, No. 1



The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

SPRING 2024

Vol. 8, No. 1

Remembering Cathy Welch 1

Teacher Feature 2

Acts of Generosity 3

Your Gift, Your Impact 4

NECC News 5



**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
Senior Director, Development & Communications
bmcgonagle@necc.org

Kimberly Ruscitti | Editor
Associate Director of Communications
kruscitti@necc.org

Elizabeth Stroka | Designer
Graphic Designer
estroka@necc.org

www.necc.org
www.neccuae.org

**Follow us for inspiring
stories and news!**



@NECCforAutism
@mrcnecc
@aceabasoftware

Dear NECC Community,

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of Cathy Welch, MEd, a cherished member of the NECC family. Her kindness, warmth, and unwavering love for our students and families illuminated every corner of our community for more than four decades.

She was a supportive colleague and invaluable resource to us all. From her first role as a certified teacher in 1980 to her position as Director of Admissions, which she held for 32 years, Cathy personally knew every student and every family we served. The consummate professional and dedicated advocate, she treated everyone with dignity and respect.

Cathy touched the lives of so many in our community and the three years she spent in Abu Dhabi as Chief Operating Officer for the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education enabled her to impact hundreds more students, families, and colleagues in the Middle East. She treasured her time there and the relationships she cultivated.

Cathy was a wonderful human being – selfless and reliable. She embodied the heart of NECC, and we are all better for having her in our lives. We love you, Cathy, and your commitment and dedication will continue to guide us.

Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA
President & Chief Executive Officer



Teacher Feature

HELEN HEDMAN



Helen Hedman, MEd, would do anything for her students. Including running 26.2 miles while raising money as a member of NECC's Boston Marathon team.

"I decided to run the Boston Marathon for Team NECC to give back to my students who have taught me so much about myself, and to give back to the school that has allowed me to advance in my education and career," said Hedman, a senior education coordinator for the West 1 residential team. "I wanted to run to help raise funds that will directly impact our students."

Through this experience, Hedman learned just how passionate she is about advocating for her students, a feeling that has grown exponentially in the six years she has worked at NECC.

"When I initially started at NECC, I had never worked with students with autism," she explained. "I knew I wanted to work with children but was not sure in what capacity. I quickly grew to love working with my students and have been able to see the positive impact the school has on so many students' lives and the families who support them. I have learned so much from every one of my students."

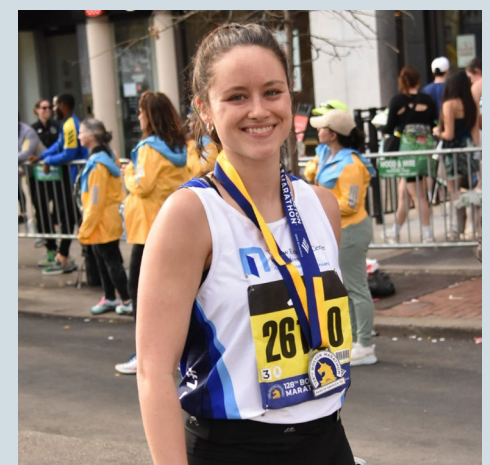
Hedman learned about NECC through family and friends who had previously worked at the school and was hired upon graduating from Hartwick College in 2018. She joined the Higley residential team, working as a level 2 teacher, core shift manager, and education assistant before moving to West 1. "I was lucky to have great mentors and experiences on Higley who taught me a lot about what I wanted to do at NECC," she said.

During that time, Hedman invested in her professional development; she completed the Simmons University Master of Science in Education with an autism specialization program in May of 2021 and is currently taking courses through Western New England University's specialized program in applied behavior analysis (ABA). Now,

as an education coordinator, she focuses on developing and implementing individualized education plans (IEP) for all nine students on her team and helps train staff on how to implement student programs and be case managers.

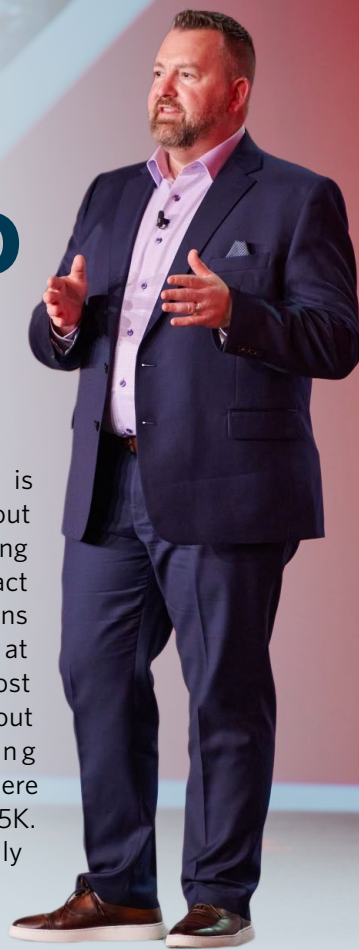
"My favorite part about my job is my students," Hedman said. "I love celebrating their successes, no matter how big or small. Seeing them grow and how their growth impacts so many aspects of their lives is the most rewarding part of my job. I also work with an incredible team of staff who go above and beyond to make their students' days better."

Though the physical marathon from Hopkinton to Boston is done, Hedman isn't. "I hope to stay at NECC and possibly explore other career opportunities that NECC has to offer," she said.



Acts of Generosity

SCOTT SCHMADEKE AND BJ'S WHOLESALE CLUB



Three years ago, Scott Schmadeke was talking with his neighbor when he first learned about NECC. Kevin Coleman, vice president of Ross Mortgage Company and a member of NECC's President's Council, encouraged Schmadeke to take a tour.

"Once you enter the doors, walk the halls, and understand the mission and purpose of NECC, you cannot resist being part of supporting the organization. That's how it all began," Schmadeke explained.

Schmadeke, senior vice president of operations for BJ's Wholesale Club, immediately joined Coleman on the President's Council. "I felt that in addition to donating to NECC, my experience, both personally and professionally, could serve as a resource," Schmadeke said. "My goal in joining the President's Council was to make an impact and become a catalyst to create more support for autism and NECC."

Although Schmadeke doesn't have a direct family connection with autism, he's been close to it throughout his career. He said that he's supported several team members with autism over the last 30 years working in retail and has worked with several leaders who have connections to autism in their families. Involving his employer in his mission to support NECC was an easy sell.

"At BJ's, our purpose is to take care of the families that depend on us. I believe that our purpose directly ties to the mission

and purpose of NECC and together we can make a positive impact in our communities," he said. BJ's Wholesale Club, which is headquartered in neighboring Marlborough, MA, has over 240 locations in 20 states.

In just three years, BJ's Wholesale Club has become a valuable community partner. In addition to sponsoring events, BJ's has donated goods and supplies, pumpkins for the decorating contest at Halloween, literacy kits for students, and is one of NECC's newest vocational partners.

This year, BJ's signed on as the presenting sponsor of the NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism. All funds raised through this beloved community event benefit NECC's programs and services including vocational opportunities, student outings, specialized equipment and technology, research, and professional development. Schmadeke and his colleague, Chris DeSantis, senior vice president of merchandising, are serving as the 2024 Corporate Co-Chairs for the NECC 5K, soliciting corporate support for the event. The pair has already brought in 17 new partnerships for NECC.

"My ultimate goal is to leverage my experience, network, and energy to help bring awareness and resources that will allow people with autism to live fuller lives," said Schmadeke. "If I can make a meaningful impact on a single student at NECC, or any individual with autism, I will be happy."

Although he is excited about the fundraising and the impact the donations will make at NECC, he's most excited about experiencing the atmosphere of the NECC 5K. "I personally cannot wait to see the community, the students, and our own team members participate in the event itself," he shared. "It should be a fantastic day with a meaningful impact!"



In October 2023, BJ's Wholesale Club donated 50 literacy kits to NECC as part of its Read for the Record event. The kits featured the book, *With Lots of Love*, as well as activity pages and coloring supplies.



YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

When you give to NECC's Annual Fund, your gift provides students with opportunities to be a part of the community and to have fun outside of the classroom. Throughout the fall and winter, students enjoyed lots of fun activities, including apple picking, Special Olympics sports, a visit from Mass Audubon, and gifts from Santa, Elsa, and Olaf!



NECC GALA RAISES \$1.23 MILLION



On November 10, 2023, the NECC community celebrated the annual Children of Promise Gala, shining a spotlight on its robust research program and raising more than \$1.23 million.

The event, held at Boston's InterContinental Hotel, provided heartwarming stories of hope and inspiration and a lively auction hosted by NESN's Jenny Johnson. However, the highlight of the evening was the nod to the incredible impact of NECC's research.

"Tonight, we are going to shine a light on the fundamental cornerstone of everything we do. It's what brought me and countless others from academia to a small town 26 miles west of Boston, where the great minds of behavior analysis were putting the science into practice," shared NECC President and CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA.



NECC started as the Efficacy Research Institute, a research project to help (and learn from) six teenage students with profound autism. Now an internationally recognized and award-winning research powerhouse, NECC staff have published 326 studies and delivered 2,600 presentations in 21 countries, all of which are highly respected and inspire or guide other research studies.

NECC is also committed to training the next generation of researchers and educators, granting more than 1,785 master's degrees through its university partnerships. Kiah Lyons, an NECC teacher enrolled in the Western New England University graduate program in applied behavior analysis, was on hand to share what NECC means to them.



"I came here specifically for the graduate program and high-quality clinical experience, but I had no idea the abundance of opportunity that would be showered upon me while working and studying here," shared Lyons, who grew up in a small Pennsylvania town and found a new home at NECC. "I have never felt more fulfilled in my career, academia, or life as I do by teaching and caring for the kids that I work with at NECC."

Funds raised from the Gala are being used to create collaborative workspaces for staff like Lyons to meet, study, and relax during their long workdays.

NECC CELEBRATES OPENING OF ABU DHABI CLINIC



On March 6, NECC celebrated the opening of a new clinic in Masdar City, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The newly opened NECC Clinic-Abu Dhabi provides session-based, applied behavior analysis (ABA), and speech and language services to clients in school-, home-, and center-based programs. For teens and young adults, the clinic provides vocational training and job opportunities with partnering employers in Masdar City.

"This occasion marks the expansion of the life-changing services that we offer to individuals and their families who are impacted by autism, and it also embodies the spirit of collaboration and community that has brought us here," shared NECC President and CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA. "This clinic is more than just a physical space; it is a place of hope and compassionate innovation. Within these walls, our team of professionals will work tirelessly to provide personalized care and support to individuals with autism."



Mohamed Al Breiki, Masdar City's executive director of sustainable development, was on hand at the ribbon cutting for the new clinic. "We're privileged to welcome NECC as an important member of our ecosystem," he said. "The invaluable education and support services they provide to children, young adults, and their families will strengthen our community and the whole of the UAE."



The NECC Clinic-Abu Dhabi has eight board-certified behavior analysts (BCBAs), two speech therapists, and an occupational therapist, with plans to grow to meet the demand. NECC's current workforce in the UAE exceeds 550 educators, clinicians, and support staff, with over three dozen enrolled in a graduate program through Simmons University in Boston.



MRC-NECC CELEBRATES FIRST SIMMONS COHORT



The Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education operated by NECC (MRC-NECC) recently celebrated a significant milestone in the lives of many of its staff as they graduated from Simmons University with their master's degrees. On February 26, MRC-NECC held a ceremony honoring the 15 staff members who earned their Master of Science in Education (non-licensure program), the first international cohort to complete the program through NECC.

"This achievement marks a pivotal moment in the lives of these new graduates, signifying both their dedication to their profession and the bright future that lies ahead," shared Chris Evans, MEEd, professor of practice and the graduate program director for Simmons University at NECC.



While the Simmons University partnership has been available to staff members at NECC's headquarters in Southborough for more than 30 years, the program at MRC-NECC launched in fall 2021. Daniel Gould, PhD, BCBA-D, who was the executive director of MRC-NECC until his untimely passing in August 2021, was instrumental in conceptualizing a degree program for their local teachers. Though he never got to see his hard work come to fruition, his spirit lives on in the **Dr. D. Daniel Gould Award for Global Excellence in Special Education Teaching**. The award, which honors Dr. Gould's legacy and commitment to NECC's mission, was presented to Alya Al-Suwaidi at the graduation ceremony (left).

"I was extremely honored to be given this award," said Al-Suwaidi, who joined NECC in 2017 as an intern and currently serves as one of the school's therapists. "I met Dr. Dan when I was fresh out of college and his passion and vision always stuck with me and shaped the way I view working at the Centre. Dr. Dan was a great leader, and I can only hope that by receiving this award I made him proud." The second Simmons UAE cohort, which has 26 students, will graduate in December.

TEAM NECC CONQUERS BOSTON MARATHON

On April 15, 10 runners completed the 128th Boston Marathon® presented by Bank of America on behalf of Team NECC in order to shine a spotlight on the importance of autism education. These runners — a mix of NECC staff, family, and friends from across the U.S., including Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Texas — raised more than **\$118,000** for NECC's Annual Fund while spreading awareness of autism and NECC in their own communities.



SOLOMON POND MALL SHARES THE WARMTH WITH NECC STUDENTS



Christmas came early for NECC students when the Solomon Pond Mall in Marlborough donated a generous shopping spree, which was used to purchase winter clothes and jackets for our NECC students.

Last summer, Mark Willand, marketing director for the Solomon Pond Mall, took a tour of NECC, during which he learned that students are always in need of new clothing, particularly during the winter months. With this in mind, he knew NECC “would find good homes for this clothing,” he shared. “The most meaningful part for us was seeing firsthand the students’ priceless reactions to receiving these early holiday gifts.”

In addition to the shopping spree, the Solomon Pond Mall hosted NECC staff during its summer craft beer and music series last year and a Boston Bruins watch party in March. Willand said that the mall is happy to support NECC because of its “stellar reputation in our community and beyond,” and its commitment of the staff.

“After taking a personal tour of the facility, I was inspired by the compassion, professionalism, and dedication of everyone in the organization,” said Willand. “The NECC team is doing the unglamorous — but crucial — day-to-day work that is making a huge impact on its students and families. We consider it a privilege to give back to the NECC community whenever we can.”



WNEU COLLOQUIUM

During their spring semester, NECC staff enrolled in the Western New England University (WNEU) doctoral program have been presenting their research at the monthly WNEU Colloquium series. Four NECC staff volunteered to participate in the series, which has returned to NECC after a brief hiatus.

“We want to showcase ongoing research in the program and provide an opportunity for students to present their research, get feedback, and collaborate with peers,” shared Sara Peck, PhD, BCBA-D, assistant professor of psychology at WNEU.

Irene Looi, MS, BCBA, LABA, a program specialist for NECC’s Intensive Instructional Program (IIP), presented her research on generalization at the March colloquium, calling it a valuable learning opportunity. “I look forward to engaging in constructive discussion and improving my study,” Looi shared. “I also think publicly speaking about my research is such a confidence booster. The dissertation journey can be daunting, so the assurance and support that I get from a squad of quality-control experts goes a long way.”



NECC HELPS CREATE SENSORY/CALMING ROOM

This past fall, Massport celebrated the opening of Logan International Airport's newly renovated Terminal E, which includes the airport's first sensory/calming room — a project with which NECC was heavily involved.

“Over a year ago, Massport reached out with an idea to build an autism-friendly space in Terminal E of Logan Airport,” shared Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, president and CEO of NECC. “We assembled a small group of individuals from NECC who then worked with Massport to ensure they constructed a space that best served children with autism and their families who would be traveling through the airport. We were both honored and elated to assist in this important endeavor.”

The NECC team led consultation efforts to ensure the project was a success, sharing recommendations with Massport regarding materials, safety, durability, and the overall issues facing children and adults with autism and their caregivers during travel. The space includes a flight simulation room, comfortable/flexible seating, interactive features (such as lights, bubble tubes, and tech based games), and a number of charging ports for devices.

This is the first autism-friendly space located at Logan Airport — and one of just a few of its kind in the U.S.



NECC RECOGNIZES PSS TEACHER SARAH BRYLLE



This fall, Sarah Brylle, MS, BCBA, LABA, was named the winner of the 2023 Maria Felix Lonergan Memorial Award in recognition of her commitment to NECC and her students. The award honors 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 in November 2015. It is issued annually to an NECC teacher who exemplifies mentorship of new professionals, advocacy for students' effective education, and professionalism.

“Winning this award is deeply meaningful, as it represents my dedicated work with children with autism,” said Brylle, a senior lead teacher in the Partner Program. “It acknowledges my commitment to professionalism, mentorship, and delivering a high-quality education. This recognition inspires continued advocacy for the well-being and development of these exceptional individuals, celebrating collective strides toward a more inclusive and supportive community.”

Brylle started as a teacher in the Residential Program 15 years ago. She served as a core shift manager and residential coordinator for five years before moving to the Partner Program where she has been for the last 10 years. Brylle uses her position working in the public schools as an opportunity to offer essential support to students, enabling them to flourish within their home community.

“The most gratifying aspect of my role is the daily interaction with students, forging meaningful connections and witnessing their achievement of milestones,” she said. “Observing their progress over time is a source of profound joy and fulfillment.”

LONGTIME STAFF RETIRE



This fall, two longtime staff members retired after multi-decade careers with NECC.

In December 2023, **Steve Madden** retired from NECC after 43 years. Madden was one of the individuals who helped build the program that NECC is today; he began his journey in November 1980 as a weekend counselor at ERI Braintree. Over the years, he moved through the ranks and held a number of positions, settling in as a professional development specialist in the later part of his career. Over the last four decades, Madden helped train countless staff and his dedication, expertise, team-building skills, and knack for developing talent will have a lasting and positive impact on the NECC community.



During her 20 years at NECC, **Peggy Smith** held various roles working in the areas of benefits and payroll. At the time of her retirement in August, Smith was a payroll specialist, a position she held for a number of years. Her wealth of knowledge and helpful nature was invaluable to the HR office during her tenure, and her warm smile and supportive attitude will be missed. Smith moved back to her home state of Ohio to spend more time with her family.

NECC PILOTS EIBI PROGRAM

In the summer of 2023, NECC began piloting the Early Intensive Behavior Intervention (EIBI) project with two toddlers from the study.

“Research from Dr. Becky MacDonald and Dr. Erin Michaud’s Early Markers of Autism Infant Sibling study has identified the importance of early diagnosis and treatment,” shared Amy Geckeler, MS, BCBA, LABA, executive director of Global Consulting.

Geckeler shared that because services for the youngest learners are funded through insurance companies, NECC has invested resources to develop a system to contract with insurance companies to serve these children under 3 years old. “This has paved the way for NECC to be able to pilot the provision of intensive EIBI services,” she explained. “Providing these services offers a way for the young participants in the Early Markers of Autism Infant Sibling study to receive services as quickly as possible.”

The roster of EIBI clients has grown to serve five toddlers and their families. These patients work with Dr. Stefanie Upshaw, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, the senior clinician overseeing clinical services and staff training; and three RBTs who provide direct services to the patients at home or day care. Christine Morse, PhD, BCBA, LABA, is the senior director overseeing the project business and systems.

Each child is formally assessed at the onset of services and every six months following the start of services. “We have observed considerable improvements in their scores for the two assessments we use,” said Dr. Upshaw. “Assessment results have shown remarkable progress including increases in age equivalence by as much as one year in only six months. We have also seen great improvements in vocal communication such as increases in frequency and length of utterances.”





The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

33 Turnpike Road
Southborough, MA, 01772-2108

BOSTON | ABU DHABI

SAVE THE DATES

- 6/3 Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic
- 8/18 Falmouth Road Race
- 11/15 Children of Promise Gala

— 26TH ANNUAL —

CARLOS PLACIDO

DUNKIN'®

GOLF CLASSIC FOR AUTISM
Supporting The New England Center for Children

MONDAY, JUNE 3, 2024
FRANKLIN COUNTRY CLUB

WWW.NECC.ORG/DUNKINGOLF



REGISTER NOW!

