



Insight

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The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

FALL 2024
Vol. 8, No. 2

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Dear Friends,

As we embark on a new academic year — our 49th as an agency — we're excited for another year full of learning, growth, and memorable experiences.

The last few months have been a testament to the incredible spirit of our community. Thanks to your generosity and support, our fundraising efforts surpassed expectations, allowing us to enhance our programs and resources for the students. Whether you attended one of our events, such as the NECC Art Show or NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism, volunteered at Field Day or Special Olympics track and field event, or donated to one of our Falmouth Road Race runners, your contributions had a significant impact.

In this issue, you'll read about the incredible teachers and staff who go above and beyond for NECC, like Linda Donahue, a longtime staff member who supports NECC in many ways, and the innovative ITT staff who created a dynamic curriculum to help their students flourish this summer.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership. Together, we're building a vibrant, nurturing community where our students can grow, learn, and succeed.

Here's to a fantastic year ahead!

Warm regards,

Jared Bouzan, MEd
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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Teacher Feature

MIRIAM RAMIREZ-GARCEAU

When Miriam Ramirez-Garceau came to Massachusetts from her home in El Salvador in 2019, she arrived intending to enroll in a program to learn more about special education and working with children with autism. It didn't take her long before she found her place at NECC.

"I had been living in Massachusetts as an au pair for a couple of years when a friend told me about Western New England University and its partnership with NECC," she explained. "I genuinely thought that both WNEU and NECC offered excellent opportunities for learning and professional experience, so I decided to apply. The rest is history."

Ramirez-Garceau's journey began as soon as she first learned about autism and witnessed the services being offered in her native El Salvador. "I knew I wanted to get involved working in the field because I was deeply moved by the warmth and dedication of those efforts, and I wanted to contribute in any way possible," she said. "I was determined to learn how to deliver quality services to children with autism. With this in mind, I actively sought out opportunities to fulfill this aspiration."

Ramirez-Garceau came to the U.S. through the Au Pair in America program and worked as an au pair — a job she calls both personally and professionally rewarding — before joining NECC as a teacher in the residential program in January 2022. She chose NECC because of the shared vision of improving the

lives of individuals with autism and their families. She also appreciated the exceptional opportunity NECC offers staff to expand their knowledge and engagement in ABA and research, particularly through the on-site graduate programs.

"When I enrolled in the WNEU program and joined NECC, I had no background in ABA," she explained. "Every bit of knowledge I've acquired has not only enhanced my abilities as a teacher but also provided me with a clinical perspective and deeper understanding of the work I do every day. The impact has been overwhelmingly positive."

This past spring, Ramirez-Garceau received the Myrna E. Libby Scholar Award, which honors one staff member enrolled in each of NECC's onsite graduate programs — Simmons University and WNEU — whose work exemplifies Myrna Libby's vision that research guides the education and treatment of individuals with autism. Myrna Libby, Ph.D., BCBA, was a director at NECC for 20 years and the principal program architect of NECC's internationally recognized curriculum before she passed away in 2008.

While Ramirez-Garceau considers winning the Myrna Libby Award a tremendous honor, she credits her colleagues for getting her here. "This moment encapsulates the profound impact of having an exceptional advisor, outstanding professors from

WNEU, and remarkable supervisors and mentors at NECC," she said. "Their guidance has fueled my growth in the field — as an educator, a professional, and an aspiring BCBA. They've equipped me with invaluable tools that will enable me to offer the best services to enhance the quality of life for individuals living with autism."

Through her work with WNEU, Ramirez-Garceau has been involved in research for her practicum and thesis, including projects focused on improving the quality of video calls between families and individuals with autism living in residential settings — one she calls a "crucial aspect for families" — and one that focuses on self-advocacy and autonomy for individuals with autism. She was also recently given the opportunity to serve in a clinical role as a WNEU graduate assistant as part of her job as a teacher at NECC, which affords her opportunities to participate in clinical projects and gain experience in clinical decision-making.

"I find these areas of research both interesting and important," she said, adding that she hopes to pursue work related to skill acquisition in the future. For now, Ramirez-Garceau will continue to enjoy everything about her job, particularly working with her students every day and helping them progress and achieve their goals, just as she always imagined.

Acts of Generosity

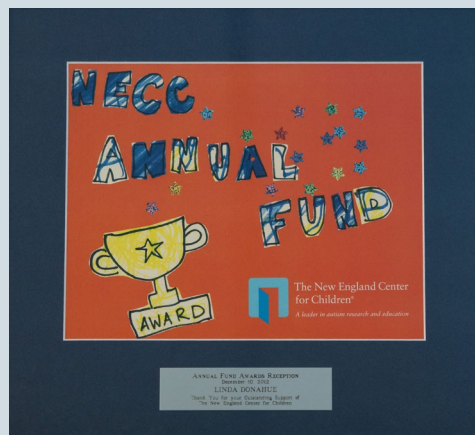
LINDA DONAHUE'S LEGACY OF GIVING



Linda Donahue's journey with NECC spans over three decades, during which she has become a cornerstone of the agency. With a calm demeanor, a friendly personality, and an unwavering commitment to the mission of NECC, Donahue has left an indelible mark on the countless students and fellow staff whose lives she has touched.

Donahue's generosity is not just measured in the more than \$15,000 she has donated through the staff giving program and various fundraising events over the past 20 years, but also in the time and energy she has tirelessly devoted to volunteering. Donahue started volunteering the moment she joined NECC as a college graduate in 1990, first as a volunteer for NECC's A Night at the Boston Pops, progressing from there to annual golf tournaments and the NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism.

"Now you can find me in a mascot uniform on occasion," said Donahue, who's donned a costume or two at Field Day events the last few years.



For Donahue, these events are opportunities for her to connect with the NECC community, reconnect with staff and student alumni, and witness firsthand the joy her efforts bring to students and their families. "I find joy in being in the midst of donors, fellow staff, our students, and their parents at these community-based events. It's heartwarming and is always time well spent," she shared, adding that dressing as a Field Day mascot has definitely been one of her favorite highlights. "Seeing the students' smiles when interacting with me in costume is priceless."

Donahue began her career at NECC as a teacher, but her natural affinity for human engagement led her to transition into various roles within the organization, eventually landing in the Human Resources Department, where she's served as a college recruiter, senior specialist, director of recruiting, and now as an international support specialist.

For the past year, she has served as the international support specialist, a role she describes as both challenging and rewarding. "It was time for a fresh perspective and to take on new challenges," she explained. "I've met some incredibly courageous individuals who have moved away from their family and comfort zone to join NECC. It's inspiring to hear their backgrounds and what has brought them here."

Donahue's responsibilities in this role include greeting and transporting new international staff upon their arrival in

the U.S., helping them settle into NECC housing, and assisting with essential logistics such as visiting the Social Security Administration office, setting up bank accounts, and navigating their new environment. For many, she is the first friendly face they see in a new country, and her support goes a long way in helping them feel welcome and part of the NECC community.

Throughout her 34-year tenure, Donahue has remained steadfast in her belief in NECC's mission and is grateful for what her time here has given her in return. She said she's always felt supported, has grown professionally and personally, has had the opportunity to be mentored and mentor others, and made some lasting friendships along the way.

"NECC is my community; it's a big part of the fabric of my life," she said. "The students I've worked with over the years have had a lasting impact on me. If I can make a difference in the students' quality of life, my giving is all worth it."



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 spring and summer, students enjoyed lots of fun activities, including our annual Field Day, summer dance, and ice cream truck visits!





NECC WELCOMES LARGEST-EVER CLASS OF SUMMER INTERNS

For ten weeks over the summer, 60 interns from 36 colleges and universities nationwide received hands-on learning and training through NECC's award-winning programs. For two of NECC's interns, this summer helped them realize the potential the field of autism education holds.



Needham, MA native Lily Klein was looking for a meaningful summer internship in the area of her psychology major before she entered her senior year at Syracuse University. When she discovered the first-hand experience offered to summer interns at NECC, she was energized for an "incomparable" experience that would help shed light on what she'd like to do after graduation.

"I have always known I wanted to work with people in a field that is making a difference, however, I often find myself struggling to decide the specific avenue I want to pursue," she said. "After learning about NECC, I was optimistic that not only would I be able to gain a unique experience working within such a great organization, but that I would also be able to gain more clarity regarding my future potential career decisions. As my summer internship is unfortunately coming to an end, I can say with absolute certainty that not only has NECC helped provide me with this clarity but that it also has exceeded all expectations I had coming into this internship."

Klein explained that she learned a tremendous amount over the past several weeks and grew both personally and professionally. In fact, many of her previous anxieties about what the future looks like have been replaced with optimism.

"What I found to be so unique and special about NECC's intern experience were the constant opportunities for growth created for the staff, interns, and students alike," she said, citing the seminars designed for interns to learn more about NECC, the significance of their work, the life-changing research being conducted, and more. "Everyone's passion for what they do and their care for the students are incredibly contagious and create a fun and welcoming environment."

Klein shared that working at NECC this summer was "life-changing," and she has discovered a desire to continue working within the autism community. "I have developed a real enthusiasm for what this field can and is accomplishing. I will carry everything I have learned with me into this upcoming school year, accompanied by a newfound passion for NECC and the kind and caring community I have been fortunate enough to grow with, and the support I will have as I move forward."



For Amy Shanahan, this was her second summer interning at NECC. The Marlborough, MA, resident and biochemistry major at Hamilton College spent last summer working on a residential team. She was inspired by the rewarding educational experience to return this summer to gain a different perspective of NECC, this time interning with Cohort B on the IIP team.

"I was hoping to learn more about applied behavior analysis and how it operates in practice," said Shanahan. "And I was definitely given ample opportunity to learn and observe this. The work being done at NECC is incredible and getting to play a role in that has been a great experience."

She shared that her biggest takeaway from the summer was witnessing “that teamwork and cooperation are essential to the success of the work being done here. People collaborate across all teams and departments at NECC, and I have learned how important it is to be able to communicate and work together with my coworkers for the success of our students.”

According to Shanahan, these are important skills that can be transferred to almost any career, including her desired

profession, which isn’t teaching. She plans to pursue a degree in medicine, with the goal of specializing in and working with children with autism.

“It was so special to watch the students I work with learn and grow so much over just the summer,” she shared. “My favorite part of the internship was the bonds I formed both with the students and staff at NECC. It is a great environment, and I will always be grateful for my time at NECC and this opportunity!”

NECC STUDENTS PARTICIPATE IN SPECIAL OLYMPICS EVENT

The spirit of community and celebration was palpable on August 13 as the NECC Special Olympics Track and Field event took place at Marlborough High School. This marked a significant return to local competition after a hiatus, bringing back the excitement and camaraderie that defines the Special Olympics.

For many years, NECC students traveled to Harvard University in Boston for the Special Olympics of Massachusetts (SOMA) track and field event, but the challenges of long travel and the logistical complexities of larger state-sanctioned events prompted a change in 2019 when a NECC-only event was first brought to Marlborough. The local setting, just 15 minutes from NECC Southborough, proved to be a game-changer, making it easier to tailor the event to their needs and, in turn, allowing more students to participate.

“Our relationship with the Special Olympics has been great,” said Lauren Kot, APE teacher at NECC. “They’ve really let us adapt to what we need to be successful. By minimizing travel time and wait times, it allows our students to get outside and to be active and engaged for the full hour they are here. This smaller, more intimate event helps them leave with a positive experience.”

After being sidelined due to COVID-19 and staffing challenges for the last few years, the event’s return was met with joy and enthusiasm this year. Students participated in a range of activities, including a 50-yard dash, “javelin” throw, softball toss, and long jump. A medal ceremony filled with high fives and smiles capped off the day.

“There is so much joy and enthusiasm that comes when you get to experience a Special Olympics sporting event,” added Kot. “For our students, it creates an opportunity to come together as a school community and participate alongside one another. For some, this may be in competition; for others, it may be in individual skill practice. Both of which help to build and foster an appreciation for physical activity and sport, along with the enjoyment of being part of a community.”

One of the highlights of the event was seeing the students so excited and active. “It feels great when we can offer an experience outside of school that our students can take part in. We see a lot of heightened engagement from getting to be outside in a different setting. It brings the energy and excitement to a new level,” said Kot.

Throughout the year, NECC students also have an opportunity to participate in Special Olympics Soccer in the fall and Special Olympics Basketball in the winter and spring.



ITT'S SUMMER OF FUN



This summer, NECC's ITT students had the opportunity to explore more of their community — including taking a hike at Chestnut Hill Farm, blueberry picking at Cordelia Farm, and an ice cream trip to Uhlman's — thanks to an initiative developed by the team to increase student opportunities for academic and social enrichment.

"Sometimes when students engage in severe behavior, it is natural and easy for the priority to become treatment of that behavior," shared Kaitlin Walker, MS, MEd, BCBA, LABA, education director of the ITT. "At NECC, we have worked to ensure there is a balance between a focus on treatment of severe behavior AND a focus on enrichment. We want to make sure our students experience various community locations and expand their interests. We also want to provide them with lots of ways to learn important skills and also knowledge in areas they may not typically access."

Walker worked with her fellow teachers and education coordinators to develop multi-faceted experiences for the students. "We were brainstorming different summer activities to do with the students and one of the teachers suggested blueberry picking," she shared. "From there, we worked together to develop lessons surrounding the activity including making parfaits."

Walker explained that many of her students have goals on their IEP targeting discrimination (matching, sorting) and simple math skills (following a recipe, using measuring cups). And because their students learn best when participating in an activity that is hands-on and engaging, the team created a lesson where they could discriminate between blueberries that are ripe or still growing to prepare for the trip, while the parfait was a fun (and delicious!) way to practice simple math skills and use the blueberries they picked. As a bonus, Walker stated that it was another way to encourage making healthy, nutritional snack choices.

"Blueberries grow in big, open spaces, so there is the opportunity to be out in nature and a low stakes exposure to a healthy food," Walker explained. "We also have a lot of local blueberry farms and wanted to bring our students into the community to visit the farms."

Similar to the blueberry lesson, the ITT team also created lessons on nature and ice cream, which were followed by a hike at Chestnut Hill Farm and a sweet trip to Uhlman's for ice cream. Walker shared that there were several things the team hoped to accomplish with this trio of lessons, including practicing their IEP goals in the community as opposed to tabletop in a classroom.

"We also hoped that the students would be exposed to the community in a new way and maybe enjoy coming back to pick different fruits or visit the farm for a hike in the future," said Walker. "We don't necessarily know what we like until we try it - and that's the same for our students!"

Walker shared that she thinks the students enjoyed the lessons and the trips. "It definitely accomplished what we were hoping for, and we are looking forward to continuing our trips in the future!"



"MED BOX GUY" JOE O'NEIL RETIRES AFTER 35 YEARS



When Joseph O'Neil, MEd, MS, CCC-SLP, was painting houses as a 20-something young man, he had no idea what speech pathology was. Fast forward nearly 35 years, and O'Neil recently retired after a three-plus decade career at NECC as a teacher and speech language pathologist. He began his career at NECC in 1991 as a teacher, a position he held for 10 years before spending the next 23 years in the Speech and Language Department. O'Neil was a true team player, even stepping into the role of "Med Box Guy," helping residential teams with bringing in their medical boxes upon arrival each morning. His dedication to NECC and his students has had an incredible impact on the NECC community. While we bid O'Neil a happy retirement, he will be deeply missed.

SPRING FUNDRAISING EVENTS

NECC had a busy spring, hosting a trifecta of community events that brought in more than half a million dollars for the Annual Fund, which provides funding for costs not covered by tuition.

On April 25, nearly 100 parents, staff, students, and community supporters attended the **6th Annual NECC Art Show**. The event, which was hosted by David and Elizabeth Wetherbee Klein, chair of the NECC Board of Directors, showcased more than 80 pieces of original art and raised over \$16,000 in support for NECC. The incredible art works were largely donated by our talented students, three staff members, and a handful of generous local artists.



It was a historical year for the **18th Annual NECC Walk/Run for Autism presented by BJ's Wholesale Club**, which took place on May 11 and raised more than \$300,000. Over 1,000 students, staff, family, and friends of NECC gathered at the Neary School in Southborough, while numerous teams across New England and the world participated virtually. More than 70 members from Team Cape (staff and families in the Public School Services programs around Cape Cod) walked a portion of the Cape Cod Rail Trail while several members from a partner classroom in New Hampshire completed the 3.1 miles together. And in Abu Dhabi, a dozen staff from the consulting team walked to show their support for autism education from afar.



On June 5, 124 golfers gathered to celebrate the **26th Annual Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic for Autism**. Established by Neal Faulkner, a Dunkin' franchisee and member of the NECC Board of Directors, the annual golf tournament, which was presented by Epsilon this year, raised \$160,000, bringing the overall total to nearly \$3 million.



On August 18, 18 runners — including NECC staff, family, and friends — represented Team NECC at the **ASICS Falmouth Road Race**. Throughout the summer, the runners raised awareness for autism and crucial funds for NECC, collecting nearly \$38,000 along the way.



FRUITS (AND VEGETABLES) OF THEIR LABOR



This summer, the Edible Schoolyard, an on-site garden where students plant and cultivate herbs and vegetables as part of their educational and vocational experiences, was back and bigger than ever.

In June, the three wooden beds were replaced with eight large metal raised Vego Garden beds, three of which were donated by the company. This doubled garden space gave NECC students the opportunity to grow a wider variety of produce and expand their gardening and harvesting skills throughout the summer. It also yielded a bounty of produce that was used by the Food Services team in student and staff meals.

“We love working with the students on this project,” said George Moser, director of Food Services. “The students are excited to bring us what they have picked from the garden, and we are able to incorporate the fresh vegetables into our student and staff lunches, including soups, pasta salads, and in the salad bar.”

The garden beds were donated as part of Vego Garden’s Giving Back Program. According to their website, Vego Garden, a leader in gardening innovation, is committed to giving back to communities. Since the program’s inception, Vego Garden has partnered with a total of 100 impactful community organizations.

Earlier in the year, NECC students grew a few of the vegetables from seeds and learned about the growing process before planting them in the Edible Schoolyard. Throughout the summer, students cared for the gardens, including watering, weeding, and harvesting, all of which were overseen by the Vocational Department.



NECC NAMED A 2024-25 NASET SCHOOL OF EXCELLENCE

NECC has been selected as a National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET) School of Excellence for the 2024-25 school year, the highest honor NASET bestows upon special education schools.

“At NECC, we strive to provide the highest-level of education, care, and support for our students,” said Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, president and CEO of NECC. “Receiving this honor is a testament to the commitment and dedication of the entire NECC community, including the teaching staff who work directly with our students, to accomplish our mission of enriching the lives of individuals with autism.”

Since 2008, NASET has acknowledged accomplished private special education schools across the United States with this honor. Recipients of this award meet strict professional criteria and embody remarkable dedication and achievement in their field. This is the fourth time NECC has been named a NASET School of Excellence.



MASS AUDUBON VISITS NECC



In August, Mass Audubon, the largest nature-based conservation organization in New England, visited the students at NECC Southborough as part of a science enrichment activity. The event provided a unique opportunity for students to engage with the natural world in an interactive and hands-on way. The students were able to feel and examine various animal furs, feathers, bones, and skulls, providing a tactile way to learn about different species and their adaptations. The highlight of the day was meeting Cleopatra the Turtle and Carter the Garter Snake.





The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

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SAVE THE DATES

- 11/15/24** Children of Promise Gala
- 4/10/25** NECC Art Show
- 4/21/25** 129th Bank of America Boston Marathon
- 5/10/25** NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism
- 6/2/25** Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic



GALA

CHILDREN
OF PROMISE

11 | 15 | 24

INTERCONTINENTAL BOSTON

www.necc.org/gala