



The ALL-STAR Newsletter

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Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities

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Jefferson County BDD

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National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

JCBDD Shining Spotlight on Inclusion

March is National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month and the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities is shining the spotlight on inclusion.

Officials are spreading the word through school visits and a social night to celebrate people in the community. JCBDD Community Navigator Cookie West said parents of children with disabilities are visiting local schools throughout the month to share the message with the theme, "Building a Community: Listen and Learn."

"The county Board of DD is presenting a speaker series and two dynamic mothers, Mindy Aleksiejczyk and Alycia Clark, are parents of school-age special needs children who attend the School of Bright Promise," West explained. "Both women are special needs advocates and founding members of Special Connections, an organization that hosts informational events for families of persons with disabilities while also hosting fun inclusive events for all ages and abilities."

She said the sessions will promote meaningful engagement, creating opportunities for students to listen and learn from shared experiences. The assemblies are interactive events and Aleksiejczyk and Clark will share their experiences; however, they want to hear from students as well.

"Both Mindy and Alycia want to hear from students on how to make life for special needs individuals more accepting and will share ideas with students on how they can become champions for a more unified community," she continued. "We are asking schools to wear orange that day to show solidarity of acceptance and inclusion. Orange radiates energy, determination and strength, all characteristics that describe persons



Alycia Clark, left, and Mindy Aleksiejczyk speak to students at Pugliese West Elementary in Steubenville about their special needs children and the importance of inclusion during National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month in a program through the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

with disabilities and their families."

Events kicked off March 6 with second-graders at Pugliese West Elementary and continued the visits on March 15 at East Garfield Elementary, March 18 at Toronto Elementary, March 20 at Wells Academy and March 27 at Indian Creek Middle School. The mothers are discussing the book, "The ABC's of Inclusion" by Beth Leipholtz, which depicts 26 kids with autism, epilepsy, Down Syndrome and more and that it is okay to be different, and they are also talking about their own children.

"We are excited about traveling around Jefferson County school districts in the month of March and it really is wonderful to connect with staff and students alike. They are always so welcoming; the school districts do such a spec-

tacular job of teaching their students and nurturing an environment of inclusion. We are giving each student an orange wristband that has 'Unified' written on the front and 'Side by Side' on the back because we want them to be reminded that they play a part in making our community more inclusive."

Aleksiejczyk, who serves as vice president of the JCBDD and created the Special Needs Parents Support in the Ohio Valley Facebook page, discussed her eight-year-old son, T.J., who is developmentally delayed and in a wheelchair. He is also nonverbal and has seizures, but she also described his various interests such as music, something he has in common with other kids.

(Continued as INCLUSION)

Rebecca Riffie Retiring from Shaffer Plaza

Residents and staff at the Shaffer Plaza Apartments are bidding farewell to longtime staff member Rebecca Riffie.

Riffie, of Steubenville, has served the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities for nearly 24 years but is planning to retire on March 22. She began as a residential aide in 2006 and has grown to adore the people with whom she works.

"A friend of mine worked in the office at the School of Bright Promise at the time and said they were always hiring at Shaffer Plaza, but I'd never heard of it," Riffie recalled. "I went to the School of Bright Promise and got an application, and a week later I'd been interviewed and hired."

From taking care of the clients to sometimes transporting them to doctor's appointments, Riffie has interacted with the residents on a daily basis and come to know their habits and personalities.

"I love it. I really do," she added. "I never thought I'd be able to know the clients' names, but I know them like the back of my hand. I enjoy the smiles on their faces and I have so many nice co-workers."

Riffie's caring nature stems from her own

personal ties to her mother, whom she cares for at home with help from her siblings. She plans to continue assisting her parent and enjoying time with her family, which includes twin daughters and four grandchildren. One daughter has already purchased her a ticket to visit her in Florida.

She said while it is tough to say goodbye, she would make sure to visit Shaffer Plaza often.

"I met so many friends. [The residents] are sad and give me hugs, but I say I'll see them again. It will be nice [to retire], but I will miss everybody. It taught me a lot about being calmer. Compassion means everything to me, and just making a smile on their face helps me through the day."

She also praised Residential Director Kasey Minor, saying she goes above and beyond for the staff and residents in the complex. Riffie looked back on her time at Shaf-



Riffie

fer with love and said she will cherish the memories.

"I have a lot of memories of taking them to the parks. We used to go on picnics a lot and church functions and the buddy walks at the Special Olympics were so enjoyable," she said. "I just knew it was maybe time for me to go."

Meanwhile, Minor was equally grateful for Riffie's work and said she made an immense impact upon everyone.

"Back in 2004, I had the pleasure of starting my career by working alongside Becky as a direct support professional (DSP). I knew then that she would be one of the most dedicated workers I would meet," Minor said. "She is not only dedicated to those at Home B, but is also an amazing coworker. She takes pride in her work and always goes above and beyond to make sure the residents get the care they deserve. Becky rarely missed a day of work in 23 years and was willing to pick up extra shifts to help out. She will be incredibly missed, and it will be difficult to find someone as dedicated and committed as she was to all of the residents over the years."

Getting to Know You...



*Elyzabeth
Grimm*



Elyzabeth Grimm began as a part-time job coach earlier this year with the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities' Community Employment Services.

The East Sparta native currently resides in Wintersville and said she has become acclimated to her new role. Her job entails working with individuals to make them job ready and teach them life skills.

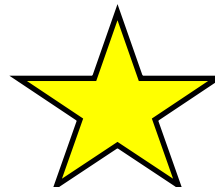
She currently assists a half-dozen people and does pre-employment transitions and license permit training.

"I love it," she said. "I love helping kids find their place in the community."

CES has been growing, particularly with 19 students being aided with their driving permits and transitioning to jobs, and the amount of services has also been increasing to help them. The addition of Grimm is ensuring the clients are being served.

Grimm, a 2005 graduate of Edison High School and the Jefferson County Joint Vocational School, attended the Kapleen Career Institute in Pittsburgh and majored in occupational therapy. She went on to work with J.W. Logistics in Michigan for three years but returned to Ohio in 2022 and worked at Northwood Health Systems before joining the JCBDD.

She is a widow with a three-year-old son, Christian Martin, who suffers from a rare genetic disorder known as Schindler's Block Compr Syndrome which affects speech.



*Michael Grant
Melko*



Michael Grant Melko is thankful to the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities' Service and Support Administration (SSA) for helping him live a full and enriched life.

Melko, a lifelong Steubenville resident, said the department has assisted him in many ways.

"Tracey helps my Mom get the things I need to make my life safer and easier. She is so nice to do everything she does for me and my Mom," he said.

Melko is a 2013 graduate and previously worked at the Jeffco Center, but these days he is all about enjoying life and bringing smiles to the faces of loved ones. He loves Nintendo video games, Big Red football and the Pittsburgh Pirates, plus he travels when his health allows and enjoys visiting the Sunshine State.

"I love going to Singer Island, Fla., with my mom, my friends and my sister. We haven't gotten to go in a couple of years, and I really miss it and wish we could go this year."

His family includes his mother Beth, father Mike, sisters Tiffany and Courtney and a nephew, Grayson.

"I am a very friendly guy. I like to have fun doing things like going to movies, dance parties, karaoke, dancing, walking, swimming and, of course, my favorite which is playing my Nintendo games," Melko concluded. "I also love to laugh, sing and make others happy because I am pretty much always happy. I love my family and my friends so much."

Youth Leadership Summit Held at Jeffco Center

More than 50 school students and educators gathered in Steubenville on March 13 to learn how sports and intentional activities could build inclusion during the Jefferson County Side-By-Side—Unified! Youth Leadership Summit.

Special Olympics Ohio Unified Champion Schools, in partnership with the Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities, held the event at JCBDD's Jeffco Center to help develop unified sports and related activities at area schools. The day included speeches, lunch and festivities all geared toward fostering leadership and inclusion in the schools. Unified sports programs join traditional students and athletes with developmental disabilities for fun games such as flag football, basketball, track and soccer, but they can also take part in clubs and other school activities to forge friendships and unbreakable bonds.

Kristi Peters, director of youth engagement for Special Olympics Ohio Unified Champion Schools, said Jefferson was the first county in Ohio to have all of its schools participate and representatives for Indian Creek, Edison, Steubenville and Buckeye Local were on hand for the summit. She added that officials have also reached out to Toronto and other schools and she was pleased to see those in attendance.

"The students are engaged. I'm so excited for what they're going to bring to the schools and share. When the sky's the limit, the possibilities are endless," she said. "Our goal is to create teams in each school and all over Ohio and to have lifetime involvement in Special Olympics. The average age is 33 and this is breathing new life into it."

Keynote speaker was Cookie West, community facilitator for JCBDD, who shared that everyone can contribute despite differences. She quoted tennis ace Martina Navratilova, who said: "Disability is a matter of perception. If you do one thing well, you are needed by someone."

"I encouraged them to use their abilities to be unified. Everybody can contribute to this effort of making a unified generation," West commented. "A year ago, we had a vision [of creating unified sports in the county], and now we're seeing the fruit of it with nearly 60 students and educators with a mindset of making this county more inclusive. It's not just talking the talk; they're walking the walk."

Other highlights included breakout sessions to gather ideas for school activities, giveaways, lunch and networking to meet each other and learn how they can bolster inclusion and make an impact. Officials sought ideas and responses included min-



More than 50 school students and educators from throughout Jefferson County joined the Side-By-Side—Unified! Youth Leadership Summit in Steubenville on March 13 to learn how they can develop unified sports teams and organizations in their schools. Jefferson County is the only county in Ohio to have all of its school districts involved and more interest is building. Pictured is Kristi Peters, director of engagement for Special Olympics Ohio Unified Champion Schools, speaking to representatives from Indian Creek, Buckeye Local, Edison and Steubenville.

ature golf to bowling and band.

"It doesn't stop there. There are so many things we can do in a unified way," Peters told the crowd, and shared the QR code to the A-Z Club Activity Guide for further ideas. "The execution of a unified inclusive club and a unified inclusive community...is easy. The adults with you will help lead the way and create opportunities for all students."

She said Special Olympics is known for its sports, but it has also spawned leadership through clubs, friendships and engagement. Opportunities range from volunteerism and youth ambassadorships to participation in the USA and World Games. Peters continued that participants gained grant funding and developed fitness challenges that have proven successful.

"The opportunities are endless. Imagine what you can do, imagine where you can go, somewhere greater. You're on the cusp of it today." Indian Creek High School has been leading the way with unified sports, creating its own football and basketball teams thus far with a track team also eyed. The school has received uniforms from the Cleveland Browns, which serves as UCS sponsors, which can outfit all of those teams as well as soccer. Advisor Tom Mort and about a dozen students attended the summit and were excited to be part of it all.

"I like it because it includes everybody," said student James Donaldson.

"It's fun and I like having sports activities," added student Kaleb Maniar.

Mort added that he's held discussions with Dr. Kaybeth Calabria of Franciscan University of Steubenville, who had OVAC funding put aside but offered to give \$5,800 toward unified sports. He chose to share the allocation with the other schools for future activities.

Edison is another district aiming to begin teams in its high school, and they have also garnered jerseys from the Browns. Advisor Jason Ensminger is looking to start a track team this spring and a football team in the fall. Several of his students were happy to see the program coming to life at their school.

Alaina Warren said it was cool to have unified sports at Edison High School and she hopes everyone gets involved.

"I like making friends," Warren added.

Schoolmate Kaden Eddy noted he likes sports and was excited to play, especially basketball.

Steubenville High School has already participated by joining ICHS in a Turkey Bowl flag football matchup in November. Students there were also excited to get the ball rolling and hold events at their school.

"It can impact our school for the better," said Emme Pierce.

"It will make them feel welcome," added Jalen Minniefield.

(Continued as SUMMIT)

Special Connections Hosting Easter Egg Hunt March 24

Community members of all ages and abilities are invited to the second annual Special Connections Easter Egg Hunt on March 24.

Things get hopping at 2 p.m. at Crossroads Ministry Center located at 200 Kragel Road in Richmond and participants can spring into action and collect eggs during the inclusive outing.

It is being coordinated by Special Connections, which is a collaboration between the Special Needs Parents Support in the Ohio Valley Facebook page, Jefferson County Board of Developmental Disabilities and Crossroads Christian Church, and will include light snacks and photos with a certain holiday hare.

Representative Mindy Aleksiejczyk, who founded the online support group and is vice president of the JCBDD board, said the free community event was organized with individuals with disabilities in mind, but all ages and abilities are welcome.

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Santa” event in December.

For more information about the Easter egg hunt, contact specialconnections740@gmail.com.

The hunt is also customized for wheelchair users to make the event more inclusive. Aleksiejczyk added that residents from the Shaffer Plaza Apartments attended the inaugural activity, which was also held at the Richmond site, and Special Connections provides other adaptive events including its successful “An Evening with

Summit

(Continued from Page 3)

“I think it will be beneficial for the people of this community,” commented schoolmate Abdul Smith.

Meanwhile, Buckeye Local High School was gaining interest and hoped to begin activities in the near future.

“We are very hopeful to get things started at Buckeye Local,” said student Lexie Leach. “We’re looking at a golf team like Indian Creek mentioned and different club

ideas.”

Steve Forte, activities director for JCBDD and Jefferson County Special Olympics, said Indian Creek led the way and he was pleased to see the program spreading to other school districts.

“[Indian Creek has] done very large events and we are serving as connectors to other schools to get them started,” Forte added. “They were excited [at the leader-

ship summit] and it’s something they can call their own.”

Peters said zoom meetings will be held each month as the unified sports teams develop in the schools, while the leadership summit will be held on an annual basis.

Unified Champion Schools includes grades PreK-12 and more information is available at www.soo.org.

Inclusion

(Continued from Front)

“We are discussing how some kids can be different from them but can be interested in the same things. We’re talking about inclusion and answering questions,” she added. “The kids are very attentive and open. We had a great assembly [at Pugliese West] and talked about differences and getting along with people who are different.

“We’re going to schools throughout the month and talking to various age groups, but mostly we’ll be at the elementary schools. I think it’s really great that we can try to bring these assemblies into the schools and the district are very receptive. We need to be unified and inclusive. Everyone has something different, so we need to help each other through life and understand that differences are good.”

Clark spoke about her son, Oliver, who is in third grade and has autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). She shared that although he appears to be like other children, he is different.

“Our biggest challenge is that he has an invisible condition. My goal is to make sure

they know when he is doing something different that it’s OK and to treat him like anybody else,” she added.

Clark said students were interested during the Pugliese assembly and she was happy to see the program making a difference.

“They had some really good questions. I’m excited to see what questions they all have and I hope we get to do this every year.”

Meanwhile, the observance will close with “An Evening of Gratitude” on March 28 from 6-8 p.m. at the Jeffco Center at 250 John Scott Highway in Steubenville for a night of pizza, fun and fellowship. Invitations have been sent to individuals with RSVP’s due by March 20.

“It’s a night of music, dancing, karaoke, socialization and fun,” noted JCBDD Superintendent Michael Zinno.

West said while the school visits focus on community inclusion, the social event celebrates the people themselves.

“It’s an opportunity for fellowship and gratitude,” she added. “It’s a social event to celebrate each other, connect and have some fun. We want to build a community of be-

longing and outside of our normal circles. It’s good to spend time getting to know each other and the more time you have to talk and socialize, you are able to build that relationship.”

National Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month is observed every March with a campaign by the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities (NACDD), and its partners that highlights the many ways in which people with and without disabilities come together to form strong, diverse communities. The campaign seeks to raise awareness about the inclusion of people with developmental disabilities in all facets of community life, as well as awareness of the barriers that people with disabilities still sometimes face in connecting to the communities in which they live.

This year’s theme is “A World of Opportunities” and celebrates people and working together to remove obstacles. The overall goal is to build a community that is committed to creating a world where everyone can do well and succeed.