



Thompson's Impact Felt for Years to Come



GHA Autism Supports lost one of its founders and biggest long-time supporters on December 8, 2019. Robert W. Thompson, whose impact to the organization will be forever recognized, died at the age of 84 in Albemarle. Robert and his wife Joyce had two children with autism that were diagnosed at an early age. As the needs of the Thompson children increased and Robert recognized a number of families in Stanly County experiencing similar challenges, he began meeting with Albemarle City Schools Exceptional Children's Director Marie G. Smith.

After extensive discussions with State and legislative officials, the volunteers recognized the need for more 24-hour wrap-around services. Robert was elected President of the newly found organization "The Group Home for the Autistic" in 1978. As the name stated, the organization was founded with legislative monies totaling \$78,000 to open a 5-bed children's residential facility. As the initial five children aged, an adolescent home was developed, appropriately named the Robert W. Thompson Home.

Current GHA Autism Supports CEO Dawn Allen was hired as a direct support staff person in 1981. The two worked together upon her hiring and throughout her tenure as CEO in 1984 to the present. Robert served on the Board of Directors for 41 years, 27 of those years as Board President. "Robert was a passionate man and guiding force with a steady hand that was incredibly supportive of our agency's growth. He supported our vision that took GHA Autism Supports from serving five children to an organization that serves over 100 individuals with autism in over twenty-five programs," shared CEO Dawn Allen.



A Sweet Celebration Hosted By Pine Grove UMC

Many individuals from GHA Autism Supports, along with individuals supported through Monarch, Elite, Easter Seals and Lifespan, attended the annual Sweetheart

Dance on Saturday evening, February 15th. In its 11th year, the event is hosted by volunteers at Pine Grove United Methodist Church in Albemarle, and is specifically organized by the Young Women's Fellowship Group. Although the event itself kicked off at 6:00 pm, the pampering began far earlier in the day! Many attendees had their hair and makeup done through the Cosmetology Department at Stanly Community College. Upon arrival, attendees danced to music and enjoyed a variety of food prepared by church volunteers. Over 50 individuals supported by GHA took part in the day's events that made this year's Valentine's Day festivities a little more special! Event organizer Kathy Odell shared, "Many events may come and go, but our church members are committed to ensuring that this outreach program continues for years to come."



Autism Leadership Delegation in Qatar

Lori Ireland, who serves as the President of the Ireland Family Foundation, and GHA Autism Supports CEO Dawn Allen were members of the eight-person Autism Leadership Delegation in Doha, Qatar on February 28th through March 5th. Presenters and participants were honored to meet Her Excellency Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al Thani, who serves as the Vice Chairperson and CEO of the Qatar Foundation. Under her leadership, she spearheads the Foundation's mission to support the economic and social development of Qatar through initiatives and programs in education, science, research and community development. For over two decades, the Qatar Foundation has been driving regional innovation and entrepreneurship, fostering social development and a culture of lifelong learning, to tackle tomorrow's biggest challenges, including autism.



Construction has continued to progress on Morrow Valley Farmstead, GHA's newest program that will serve individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities with pressing medical needs. Aside from construction, GHA staff has been working diligently on grant writing and developing protocol and procedures for the new endeavor! Visit our website for fundraising updates and make sure you "Like" the Morrow Valley Farmstead Facebook page!



Morrow Valley
FARMSTEAD

The GHazette is a quarterly publication. If you would like to submit story ideas, please contact a member of the GHazette Editorial Team: Beth Olivieri, betholivieri@ghainc.org or Denise Drye, denisedrye@ghainc.org.

Retirement on the Horizon for Jutta Benjamin

After over 25 years of employment, Jutta Benjamin will step down from her position as Clinical Coordinator at GHA Autism Supports the end of April to entire retirement. Jutta was born and spent her childhood in Nittenau, Germany. She met her husband Larry when he was stationed with the US Air Force in Germany. Both relocated to South Dakota when he was stationed at Ellsworth Air Force Base. Jutta received her secondary education degree with a concentration in history and social studies from Black Hills State University. Her husband's family roots brought them back to Stanly County in North Carolina in the early 90s.

Jutta sought "temporary employment" with the organization that was known as Group Homes for the Autistic at that time. She fondly remembers her interview with GHA Autism Supports CEO Dawn Allen twenty-five years ago. She initially served as a House Counselor Aid at the Gary Cowan Group Home in Albemarle for two years, and then she became the first manager of Starr Apartments in 1997. Soon thereafter, Jutta transitioned to more clinical duties in nature, a position that she has held ever since. She has provided clinical support to countless individuals with autism and their families at numerous homes including Wall, Burrell, Cowan, Doby, Lowder, Durrett, Starr, Morrell, Holbrook and Taylor, and even worked with individuals at the licensed Day Program and Community Services Program in Albemarle.

To all at GHA Autism Supports that know Jutta well, her love for diversity and international culture was always evident in numerous programs that she organized over the years. Often times, she worked tirelessly to plan "Cultural Day" where each residential program would be assigned a country to spotlight with a native culinary dish.

Although her retirement is quickly approaching, Jutta plans to stay connected to the individuals that GHA supports, many of whom she has worked with from their date of admission to the present. "GHA has never been a job to me. I consider myself an eternal idealist, and I have always seen the potential in every individual that I have worked alongside. It's important to never lose sight of the human connection in this work. Whether you have an autism diagnosis or not, I feel it is a natural instinct to connect with people in our own way," shared Jutta.

In her spare time, she hopes to rekindle her love for reading non-fiction works focusing on Native American history and the Old West. Most importantly, she is looking forward to spending more time with family, including her husband Larry, her daughter Erica and her 1-year-old grandson Alexander. "Jutta's passion for autism and the people we support is seen in the care and compassion she exhibits daily. She will be greatly missed by our entire GHA team and by the individuals and numerous families she has worked alongside for over 25 years," said Melissa Rivera, GHA Chief Regulatory Officer.



Welcome to GHA's Spring Intern!

We are pleased to have Leanne Mansfield interning this spring at GHA Autism Supports. Leanne is a graduate student from the University of North Carolina – Charlotte, who is studying to become an English as a Second Language teacher. She graduated from Wingate University in May 2019 with a BA in Mathematics, as well as three minors in Spanish, International Studies, and Educational Studies. Leanne has a wide variety of interests including Spanish music, children's books, the New York Yankees, and crocheting. "I am volunteering at GHA to learn more about people with autism and ways to engage them in a variety of settings. I am very excited about this opportunity," shared Leanne.

GHA Receives Speedway Children's Charities Grant



GHA recently received a grant in the amount of \$5,000 from the Charlotte Motor Speedway Chapter of Speedway Children's Charities (SCC) in Concord. The funds will be used to purchase iPads and cases for the individuals at the Robert W. Thompson Home during the spring of 2020. The organization was founded in 1982 by Speedway Motorsports and Sonic Automotive Chairman Bruton Smith as a memorial and legacy to his son, Bruton Cameron Smith,

who passed away at a very young age. Speedway Children's Charities is focused on funding a wide range of programs that focus on children in need and their families. Dollars are raised annually by the organization through the hosting of events and promotions geared around race weeks and other activities at Charlotte Motor Speedway, as well as events within the Charlotte community.

GHA Autism Supports is pleased to have received on-going support through SCC's grant program for more than fifteen years. In a special grant distribution ceremony in early December, Speedway Children's Charities (SCC) announced that the nonprofit's Charlotte Motor Speedway chapter distributed \$957,323 in grants to 68 deserving charities located throughout the Charlotte region including GHA Autism Supports. More than 250 children were joined by Santa Claus and Lug Nut, the world's fastest mascot, for the grant



reception in the Speedway Christmas presented by Cook Out village at Charlotte Motor Speedway. "We consider it a true privilege to be able to give back to local nonprofits whose mission, like ours, is to improve the lives of children in need," Speedway Children's Charities Vice Chairman and Charlotte Chapter President Marcus Smith said. "The hard work these organizations do is greatly appreciated. It's an honor for Speedway Children's Charities to support their efforts."



A "Night to Shine"

Residents in the GHA program in Wilmington put on their best attire for the "Night to Shine" sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation. The event provides an unforgettable prom night experience for people with special needs, ages 14 and older. Several churches in Wilmington, NC served as part of more than 650 churches in 24 countries around world that hosted "Night to Shine" events simultaneously on Friday, February 7, 2020.



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MISSION

GHA Autism Supports provides quality, community services to meet the unique needs of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder.



Survey Designed to Help Individuals Express

Feelings about GHA

Exactly what does the Quality Management Department do? Yes, we monitor many areas (such as medication errors, accidents, and concerns-complaints) to be sure we are doing a good job. But, we also look for ways we can help to improve GHA. A recent QM project, developing a new survey for spring 2020, provides an example. Each year, we survey every individual we support to be sure they are satisfied with their services. In the past, our Individual Satisfaction Survey has asked six yes–no questions. For some individuals, the survey was completed independently, while other individuals completed the survey with staff reading each question and providing prompts. Some of our results from the 2019 survey are shown in the table below.

2019 GHA Autism Supports Individual Satisfaction Survey: Results from Three Questions

Survey Questions	Yes Responses	Total Responses	% Yes Responses
Are the people you see every day nice to you?	75	76	99%
Do you feel safe almost all the time?	72	72	100%
Overall, are you happy with your life?	73	74	99%

Our basic challenge—how could this survey be improved? Our answer was to craft another version of the survey to meet the diverse needs of the people we serve! In 2020, we will identify individuals who might find it easier to respond to a picture version of the survey. The interviewer will present a question and ask individuals to point to the emoji which represents how they feel. An example is shown below.

Very Happy	Pretty Happy	Sad	Mad
How do you feel about what you do every day?			

We hope our new survey will match the needs of more individuals we support!

GHA creates and maintains an environment that respects and supports individuals' and staffs' diverse backgrounds (i.e.: culture, ethnicity, beliefs, age, race, gender, etc.)

Introducing Our IT Team



GHA is pleased to have an Information Technology Team that creates strategies that align with GHA's organizational goals, while analyzing data to optimize every tactic along the way! Melinda Graham, who serves as the Chief Information Officer, joined GHA in April of 2016. Melinda holds degrees from Stanly Community College in both Microcomputer Systems Technology and Computer Operations. She loves focusing on projects tied to server configuration, taking the lead on strategic organizational projects and meeting GHA's telecommunication needs. Melinda lives in Oakboro with her husband Paul and loves cooking, traveling and spending time with her family, including her two grown children Chris and Dylan.

Amanda Howell joined GHA as the Director of Information Technology in June of 2019. Amanda earned her degree in Computer Information Systems from Pfeiffer College. Her background focuses on Application Support, and she currently spends lots of time meeting the agency's hardware maintenance needs! In her spare time, Amanda enjoys reading and spending quality time with both her husband Kenny and their son Garrett. Ironically, over the course of the last twenty years, GHA's two IT professionals worked together previously at Stanly Memorial Hospital and Iatric Systems. "Both Melinda and Amanda work daily to identify the day to day technology challenges experienced by our staff and by the individuals that we support, and work diligently to craft effective approaches to meet those needs," said Dawn Allen, GHA CEO.

PORT CITY ACADEMY PARTICIPATES IN TRILLIUM HEALTHY MOVEMENT CHALLENGE

Using the slogan "New Year, New You", Trillium Health Resources organized a challenge for all groups that were recipients of the Peloton bike grant program. Port City Academy, GHA's licensed day program located in Wilmington, was pleased to have been

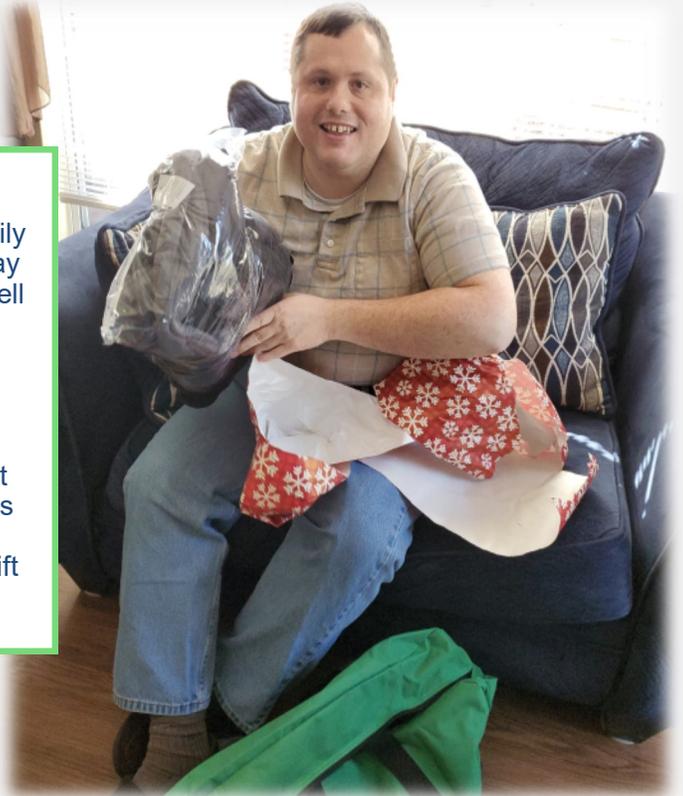
chosen as a location to receive a Peloton bike and participated in the Healthy Movement Fitness Challenge. The Port City Academy Team logged and reported the number of miles that they rode on the Peloton bike weekly. The contest wrapped up on February 29th. Although the winners' names have not been released, we are super proud of all of our Port City Academy participants. Keep up the good work!



Chris and Katie have been active participants in the Trillium Healthy Movement Challenge at Port City Academy!



Special thanks to the Barringer family for bringing holiday cheer to the Morrell Home. The Barringers met several of the residents through Special Olympics events throughout the year. Fun was had by all with a pizza party and gift giving!



Paula enjoyed time with her GHA family at Little Tokyo to celebrate her 65th birthday!

SAVE THE DATE !!!!

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		1 Thanksgiving	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20 Thanksgiving Day	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

Mark your calendars for our two upcoming fundraising events for 2020:

12th Annual GHA Rubber Duck Derby
Saturday, May 16th
from 11:00 am – 2:00 pm
at the Stanly County Family YMCA Park

7th GHA Gala Auction
Saturday, November 7th
at the Atrium Health Stanly Family & Education Center

FOCUSING ON STAFF AT APPRECIATION EVENTS

During the month of December, all GHA staffers were honored at appreciation events in both Albemarle and Wilmington. Both groups enjoyed food and a wide array of prizes.

Thanks to the generosity of GHA and many GHA families, all employees received a monetary gift just in time for the holiday season. Staff service awards were also given at both locations. On behalf of all of the GHA employees, we send special thanks to our families for the support and for your show of appreciation throughout the year. Fun times were had by all at the Staff Appreciation Days in Wilmington and Albemarle!

