Sights & Sounds

The Magazine of Alabama Institute for Deaf & Blind  
Fall 2022

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ON THE COVER

Tomecia Caver, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility, receives training on the Aira app from Victoria Martin, Assistive Technology Trainer, E. H. Gentry Facility.

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Sights & Sounds is published by the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind Office of Institutional Advancement, P.O. Box 698, Talladega, Alabama 35161.

**A LETTER FROM DR. MASCIA**

Dr. Mascia smiles to camera.

As 2022 draws to a close and 2023 begins to dawn, I pause to reflect upon the things for which I am thankful.

I am very thankful for the donors who support the mission of Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) to prepare individuals to reach their limitless potential by providing superior staff, facilities, training, and programs. Those who support AIDB with their treasure and talent are such a blessing to our students and consumers throughout Alabama.

I am thankful for an outstanding Board of Trustees and Foundation Board of Directors who believe in our mission and guide our work. I am also thankful for Governor Kay Ivey and the State Legislature for their continued support. Without you, AIDB would not be able to transform the lives of those we serve beyond all expectations.

I am thankful for the students and consumers of AIDB. You have taught AIDB to use adversity as a motivator for creativity and ingenuity, and reminded us during these recent years that we can learn more in hard times than in good. You are a continual source of inspiration for all of us, and a reminder of why the work of AIDB is so important.

I am thankful for the staff and employees of AIDB. Helen Keller once said, “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” AIDB has been on the ultimate adventure these past few years thanks in large part to COVID-19. AIDB’s limitless spirit continued to thrive due to the dedication and hard work of the AIDB staff. We have added new programs like RISE Autism, the nation’s only program uniquely designed for individuals who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and are deaf, blind, or deafblind. Our facilities in Talladega and across Alabama have continued to expand and improve, but we know the most important part is what those buildings will make possible — new and innovative programs, more opportunities created, more people served, and futures changed. To the staff, thank you for your unwavering commitment to those we serve.

I am proud to be part of the AIDB team and look forward to the good things that 2023 will bring to AIDB.

Together we truly are Deaf. Blind. Limitless.

**PARTNERS IN ACCESS**

**BELIEVING THAT ACCESS TO INFORMATION IS A RIGHT, AND NOT A PRIVILEGE, ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND HAS PARTNERED WITH AIRA TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS TO ACCESS.**

Jonesti Steele, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility, taking a walk with the aid of Aira

Aira has been my eyes to help me see the world around me. Together, we tackle everyday obstacles, big and small, which helps me to live an independent life."

— Jonesti Steele, E. H. Gentry Facility (EHG) student

JONESTI STEELE has access to Aira thanks to E. H. Gentry Facility (EHG) and Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) statewide network of regional centers. The two have partnered to bring Aira — a live, human-to-human visual interpreting service — to all Alabamians who are blind or visually impaired. “Our commitment to providing high-quality programs and services for our students and consumers is what led us to our partnership with Aira,” said Doug Nixon, Computer Specialist, EHG. “By working with a world-class organization such as Aira, we’re able to continue to lead the way in breaking down barriers to access and inclusion.” Aira uses the camera and an app that is available on both iOS and Android smartphones to connect AIDB consumers who need visual information with a trained agent who will visually interpret the surroundings. Services range from reading signage for social distancing, managing interactions on a computer, and describing events or sports; to helping with ordering food at a cafeteria, and using printers or vending machines. AIDB consumers have already used Aira for everyday tasks like reading their mail, shopping online and navigating their surroundings as they walk into classrooms and meetings.

Craig Jackson, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility shopping for something to drink.

Austin Henderson, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility uses Aira for personal banking.

“Aira helped me find products and navigate a new area with great description and direction. Compared to most apps that I use for daily life this is by far the easiest and most convenient.”

— Craig Jackson, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility

AIDB consumer Zippora Jones has already put the app to work supporting her as a business owner in the Business Enterprise Program (BEP). “As a BEP vendor, I use Aira to read the displays on my vending machines and to ensure the automated programs count the money correctly,” said Jones. “I also use Aira in everyday life! I have used Aira to perform hardware maintenance on my personal computer and in navigation to make sure I haven’t gone too far while walking down my walkway. The app is very easy to use and to navigate!”

“The AIDB partnership with AIRA is a game changer,” said Rod Skene, Director of Services for the Blind at EHG. “The services provided by AIRA promote greater independence for individuals who are blind or have low vision in Alabama. This enables them to complete a variety of tasks through the visual descriptions provided by Aira’s trained team of professionals. This partnership is a great example of AIDB’s commitment to being a national leader in the field and providing comprehensive service delivery options to the people we serve.”

WHO ARE AIRA AGENTS?

Aira agents are individuals who have been trained and certified by Aira to provide immediate information about someone’s surroundings. They are not a replacement for a white cane or guide dog, but rather an additional source of visual information. Agents are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and do not require advanced reservations.

To protect the safety of those served by Aira, agents must pass a background check and sign a non-disclosure agreement requiring them to maintain confidentiality about their engagement with each consumer. Agents go through extensive training on orientation and mobility, which are the knowledge and skills used by people who are blind or visually impaired to move through any environment with dignity, safety, and confidence.

"Aira’s mission is to remove barriers and make the world more accessible with visual interpreting,” said Troy Otillio, Aira Chief Executive Officer.

“This on-demand access to information is a right, not a privilege. We're proud to partner with AIDB in bringing access to visual information to the residents of Alabama."

HOW TO ACCESS AIRA

The Aira program is a complimentary service provided to all Alabamians who are blind or have low vision. It is designed to empower them to interact and participate in important, daily activities with enhanced independence, on their own terms.

To sign up for the service, contact the Case Manager for the Blind at your local AIDB Regional Center.

Regional Center locations can be found by visiting [www.aidb.org/RegionalCenters](http://www.aidb.org/RegionalCenters).

Porsche Patrick, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility, entering a board room.

“My productivity has increased because of Aira. I use Aira while cooking, using my laptop, doing laundry, shopping and many other times as I continue to live as efficiently and independently as possible. I can trust the Aira agents with personal things such as reading mail, homework assignments, and many other things that require vision. I sometimes use Aira to read a recipe off of a box or instructions. I feel more certain after working with an Aira agent because they never get tired of me asking questions when I call in. I sincerely appreciate their genuine cooperation.”

— Porsche Patrick, Student, E. H. Gentry Facility

**THE WORK OF CHILDHOOD**

*THE ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND FOUNDATION BRINGS THE POWER OF PLAY TO THE STUDENTS OF HELEN KELLER SCHOOL OF ALABAMA.*

HKS students enjoying their new accessible swings.

WITH A BACKDROP OF JOYFUL SOUNDS and excited laughter the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation held a ribbon cutting on August 16, 2022, to open a brand-new, fully-accessible playground at Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS). AIDB worked with KOMPAN, a global leader in designing play equipment to install the 7,000 square foot playground, which is the only one of its kind in the state and is designed to offer state-of-the-art opportunities for play.

The playground represents an investment of over $500,000 in the students of HKS. It was made possible through a combination of state funds and philanthropic dollars raised by the AIDB Foundation, including lead gifts from Alabama Power Foundation, Hillcrest Foundation, The Daniel Foundation, and North Shelby Baptist Church.

“This is the state’s only fully accessible playground, and it is right here in Talladega for our students at Helen Keller School of Alabama,” said Allen Cope, President, AIDB Foundation. “This playground will support the varying developmental goals, objectives, and needs of the students.”

To accommodate the needs of HKS students, the playground uses various flooring textures such as engineered wood fiber and recycled bonded rubber. The play equipment includes easy access ramps, long arch bridges, gyro pod spinners, disc swings, wheelchair swings, a spin max tower, activity panels, and numerous play stations that make physical therapy a fun and engaging activity.

In addition to meeting accessibility needs, the playground was designed to meet the additional specific needs of HKS students. Did you know that the static electricity generated when students slide down playground slides can shut down a cochlear implant in an instant? The play styles of students with various exceptionalities can also vary greatly. HKS and KOMPAN worked together to understand and meet the unique needs of all HKS students. Sensory-rich activities such as play panels with different textures, sound implements, and pathways with slight changes in grade or texture were installed to enrich the play for students who are blind. Students who have low vision benefit from color-coded elevations that empower them to navigate the playground independently. A poured rubber floor allows complete access to the play area for students with motor difficulties or who use a walker or wheelchair. The playground is also equipped with wheelchair ramps along with paths and entryways that are wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs.

“We are grateful to be part of this, and many other meaningful and life-changing projects at AIDB,” said Terry Smiley, Vice President, Eastern Division, Alabama Power Company. “Today, we bring the power of play to the students at Helen Keller School of Alabama who will now be able to fully access the developmental benefits offered by accessible play and activity.”

AIDB Foundation partners have joined together, once again, to exemplify the AIDB motto of Deaf. Blind. Limitless. Through barrier-free play, HKS students will learn about the world and themselves. By being able to play on the playground with their peers, they will develop confidence as well as social and cognitive skills. Imaginations and creativity will thrive while dexterity and problem solving skills will grow. Through this playground, students now have a fun, safe, and accessible place to learn and grow together.

Members of the AIDB Board of Trustees and AIDB Foundation Board of Directors join HKS staff, students, and John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB, to cut the ribbon and officially open the new accessible playground.

“HKS students enjoying their new accessible playground. Helen Keller once said that ‘every child has a right to be well-born, well-nurtured, and welltaught.’ Helen Keller School of Alabama, with its dedicated staff and state of the art programs and facilities, is the embodiment of those words. Today, we celebrate the opening of the state’s only fully accessible playground – right here in Talladega!”

—John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB

**OFFERING BILINGUAL EDUCATION**

*ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF PREPARES STUDENTS TO REACH THEIR LIMITLESS POTENTIAL BY PROVIDING ENGAGING BILINGUAL EDUCATION.*

By Amy E. Locke, High School Director, Alabama School for the Deaf

Students in Woods Language Arts Center, Avaeya Hawkins, Kindergarten and Gunner Hartman, Preschool

Third Grade ASL Class signing.

THIS SCHOOL YEAR, Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) is continuing its focus on building a solid foundation of skills to support students as they further their understanding and use of both American Sign Language (ASL) and English through bilingual instructional practices. Widely considered to be a best practice across all subject areas in the field of Deaf Education, bilingual instruction promotes the acquisition and maintenance of both the receptive and expressive skills used when communicating in American Sign Language as well as the knowledge needed for reading and writing in English.

To support the focus on bilingual instruction, two renowned bilingual instruction curriculums have been added to the course of study at ASD. The Bilingual Grammar Curriculum was purchased for ASD by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf Regional STEM Center, a program offered through Special Projects at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB). The purchase of the Bedrock Literacy Curriculum, was funded by ASD. ASD also arranged for intensive training for its American Sign Language and English Language Arts instructors provided by curriculum developers Todd Czubek and Kristen Anderson DiPerri. They taught instructors about the practices embedded within the curriculum and helped them develop a comprehensive implementation plan. AIDB’s National Technical Institute for the Deaf Regional STEM Center also provided specialized training by one of its own staff members, Lynn Dunn, an outreach provider who focuses on English and literacy.

ASD’s instructional teams will provide engaging lessons with various activities based on the developmental or language needs of its students. This endeavor will be a refreshed approach to English Language Arts programming. "Using these curricula, which are rich in visual aids, helps our students learn both American Sign Language and English,” said Margie Hutto, ASD K-3 ASL teacher. Tusi Silas, ASD sophomore, said, "ASL and English can rely on each other. ASL has visual strength that can correlate, in some ways, to the English form."

Margie Hutto, ASL Teacher, teaching her class.

ASD teachers and administrators are eager to begin gathering baseline data on the knowledge and abilities of its students in both American Sign Language and English to target areas for growth. For example, vocabulary and sentence structure in both languages, reading comprehension, independent writing, and spelling are areas where students may need additional education and support. Overall, gathering the data and understanding its educational implications will help ASD ensure that it is continuing to provide the exemplary education that our students need and deserve.

“ASL and English can rely on each other. ASL has visual strength that can correlate, in some ways, to the English form.” — Margie Hutto, ASD K-3 ASL teacher

**TRUE FREEDOM**

By Ashlei Banks, Student, Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind

ALABAMA FREEDOM Center for the Blind (AFCB) is a residential training center in Birmingham that shows what is possible when people come together and believe in the power of blindness. AFCB is turning heads and opening minds wherever it goes – just like recent AFCB graduate, Hope Williams. Williams came to AFCB hoping to gain confidence, independent living skills, and work experience. As she began successfully completing core classes, she found that confidence and began to thrive. Using her new-found knowledge and skills, Williams began to work with her peers at AFCB, giving instruction in Braille and Assistive Technology with support from AFCB mentors. “I came here to the Freedom Center for independence,” stated Williams. “I learned how to be independent – and much more!”

As a student at AFCB, Williams worked closely with AFCB staff and AIDB Job Developers to hone her job interview skills and build a professional résumé. Williams gained work experience by working alongside her peers at the Alabama Industries for the Blind satellite shop in Birmingham. Williams also became active in her local community, being named Secretary for the Birmingham Magic City Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind.

One of Williams’ final projects required for graduation from AFCB was to plan and execute a solo trip to a location outside of Birmingham, using only $300 for all expenses. “My favorite activity was the final out-of-town travel requirement to the Alabama Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Disabled in Montgomery,” said Williams. “I had to budget the trip to include transportation, hotel accommodations, and food. I also had to troubleshoot the logistics involved. Upon arrival, I had to complete various assignments provided by my instructors. I then traveled back to AFCB to report to the rest of the students and staff about my success. It’s hard to state the many ways this program has impacted my quality of life, but one thing I would tell anyone coming here is: Just give it a chance, maybe it’ll

change your life.”

In the community, the goals of AFCB students are to show that they can, that they should, and that they are capable of anything a sighted person can do. It should be no surprise that they want to – and can do – these things. Being blind isn’t who the students are, it’s just a different way of being.

Hope Williams with Jeff Wilson, former AFCB Assistive Technology Instructor and current AIDB Birmingham Regional Center Case Manager for the Blind, and Jessica Edmiston, Director of AFCB and Executive Director of E. H. Gentry Facility.

A MISSION FOR INDEPENDENCE

The mission of AFCB is to guide adults who are blind through the necessary skills and processes of adjustment to blindness so that the student can lead the independent, productive, and fulfilling life of his or her choice.

For more information visit [www.aidb.org/AFC](http://www.aidb.org/AFC).

**MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF SUCCESS**

*BAND STUDENTS FROM ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND PREPARE FOR THE LIONS CLUB INTERNATIONAL PARADE OF NATIONS IN BOSTON.*

By Alan Nunn, Principal, Alabama School for the Blind

THIS SPRING the Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) band was invited by the Lions Club All-Star Band Committee to represent Alabama Lions Clubs in the Lions Club International Parade of Nations in Boston on July 7, 2023. After much discussion on whether to march or ride on a float while playing, Chad Bell, Band and Choral Director at ASB, along with the ASB band students chose to make history at ASB by learning to march!

The band took its first step on the march toward Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) history at the beginning of the school year by attending the inaugural summer band camp. The students arrived on campus on Sunday afternoon and got to work immediately! Bell and the ASB athletic coaching staff worked together to develop a schedule that would prepare the students to march several miles in a summertime parade. To begin preparing for the journey, each morning the students and staff were up early for a 3-mile run!

“They have been working very hard to prepare themselves to march in the parade and represent the Alabama Lions Club,” said Bell. “It’s an honor to be part of helping them move into the spotlight where they belong. Each and every one of them are inspirational on their own. They work around any challenge to make themselves limitless.”

Since the majority of ASB’s students had never marched before, Bell taught the band from scratch. He started by teaching the basics: how to stand at attention, how to step off with the correct foot and how to remain in step with the tempo. The band members also used PVC pipes to create a framework to learn how to stay in straight lines while marching.

This school year, the ASB band has marched at Alabama School for the Deaf football games and the National Veterans Day Parade in Birmingham. They also performed at Jazz in the Park at the Orion Amphitheater in Huntsville. “I am so excited to have the opportunity to participate in representing the Alabama Lions Club in Boston this summer!” said Breana Gardner-Braxton, junior, ASB. “I feel valued and supported just as much as my non-disabled peers that march. As a visually impaired person, people don't expect much. I will raise the bar and create an expectation.”

ASB’s students have the ability to do anything their sighted peers can do, including learning how to march while playing their instruments in less than a week! “Forget about limitations. Forget about eyesight. Live life to the fullest!” said Rin Pollard, senior, snare drum player.

Nyzier Posey, junior, ASB, marches with the ASB band during a halftime performance.

ASB band performing during halftime.

**A LIMITLESS LEGACY**

*WILLIAM GAMBLE HONORS THE MEMORY OF FORMER AIDB TRUSTEE THROUGH ENDOWMENT.*

“BUNNY NEVER LOST HER SMILE.”

The Bunny Gamble Student Life Endowment was established by Bunny’s husband, William Gamble, in memory of Bunny and her love for the mission of Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB).

She served as a member of the AIDB Board of Trustees from 1997 to 2014, dedicating 17 years to the people of Alabama whose lives are improved by AIDB services. “The work of AIDB is so important, and just as important are the outcomes and how people’s lives are improved. Bunny sincerely believed in the work of AIDB,” said William Gamble.

Her life was marked by a dedication to the service of her community and state. Gamble was the first female chair of the Selma City School Board, where she served 12 years. She was a member of the first class of Leadership Alabama, which led to her service on the AIDB Board of Trustees.

“AIDB was so important in Bunny’s life. She was active in many groups locally and statewide, but AIDB was closest to her heart,” said William Gamble. “Education and reading were very important to her, and she brought that passion and commitment to AIDB. Her smile and joy [are two] of the things that people remember most about her. By starting this endowment to provide funds for college scholarships, she will bring smiles to the faces of AIDB students, and her joy will be shared for decades to come.”

“It was a pleasure to work with Mr. Gamble to establish this endowment in memory of Bunny. We are so thankful for her commitment and service to the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind. She was a remarkable woman and remembered fondly by all that worked with her and knew her in the AIDB family. She was dedicated and loyal to the mission of AIDB and continued investing her time and resources even after her tenure as a Trustee. This gift will ensure that Bunny’s legacy will continue in perpetuity and allow our students to continue their college education once they graduate from AIDB. We are very appreciative of this gift for our students,” says Becky Watson, Executive Director, AIDB Office of Institutional Advancement.

Bunny and William Gamble smile off to the sunset.

“AIDB was so important in Bunny’s life. She was active in many groups locally and statewide, but AIDB was closest to her heart.” — William Gamble

**IN MEMORY OF JESIKA KITCHENS**

*SUPPORTING THE LIMITLESS POTENTIAL OF STUDENTS & CONSUMERS.*

IN 2021, a new endowment was established at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) in honor of Jesika Kitchens who, at the time, was a seventh grader in public school and a former Alabama School for the Deaf (ASD) student. Sadly, Jesika lost her life this fall after a brief illness. The endowment, which was started by Jessica’s grandfather, Jimmy Kitchens, will honor Jessica’s memory by benefiting the ASD student life department.

Jesika’s family credited her academic success to the foundation of excellence she received while at ASD. “She learned to interact with other young, deaf students and how to communicate,” Jimmy Kitchens said. “Everyone here did an incredible job, and when I had an opportunity to give back, this was absolutely at the top of my list. We want to be able to help give others the opportunity that she had.”

The $25,000 donation that established the endowment came from the Kitchens Family, NASCAR Foundation, Randy Dye of Daytona Dodge 71 MVP Inc. Foundation, Kurt and Charlene Greer at Jeep Beach, and close friends.

Jesika Kitchens, 2022, smiles to camera and makes a heart shape with her hands.

Photo from 2021: Karissa Twymon, Executive Director, Health and Clinical Services; Kay Zarzour; Jimmy Kitchens; Jesika Kitchens; John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB; Paul Saunders, Principal, ASD; Vera Hendrix (retired) Vice President of Instructional Programs

“Until you’ve been in a position where you needed to bring a child to Alabama School for the Deaf, you don’t realize the impact the teachers, the staff and the other students can have on your child ...I am extremely grateful that we made the decision to send Jesika to Alabama School for the Deaf.” — Jimmy Kitchens

**TRANSFORMING TRANSPORTATION**

*AIDB AND HONDA GET BEHIND THE WHEEL TO ENHANCE MOBILITY.*

E. H. Gentry Students benefit from accessible transportation.

FOR 20 YEARS, the Alabama State Rehabilitation Council has named transportation as one of Alabama’s top five unmet needs. This year, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s (AIDB) longstanding partnership with Honda has expanded to help bridge that gap. Honda provided financial support to AIDB to dispatch a transportation and community access service designed to empower people to participate in community activities, take advantage of employment opportunities and be active in local markets within the AIDB Talladega Regional Center service area.

“Our relationship with Honda began in April 2002. Since then, Honda has donated over $300,000 to the AIDB Foundation to support a wide array of programs. In addition to financial support, Honda associates have given their time and have made a tremendous difference on our campuses in Talladega by volunteering to paint, landscape, and do whatever was needed. They are ready to lend a hand and heart to AIDB,” said John Mascia, Au.D., AIDB President.

“This transformational initiative will add a new element to our partnership as the program expands AIDB services to more individuals in the community. AIDB is very thankful for corporate partners like Honda who share our vision of an inclusive community.”

AIDB understands that individuals who are deaf, blind, or deafblind are valuable members of the community. AIDB’s own statewide network of regional centers was designed with that premise in mind, yet participation in community activities, training, employment, and mental or physical health services is limited due to a severe lack of accessible transportation. The program's long-term goal is to expand these critical transportation services statewide through AIDB’s network of 10 regional centers, aligning AIDB with Honda’s strategic focus of expanding mobility options in marginalized communities. “We believe in supporting initiatives that benefit communities where our associates live and work,” said Allen Cope, Senior Managing Counsel, American Honda Motor Co., Inc., and President, AIDB Foundation. “As a mobility company, it is a natural fit for Honda to partner with AIDB on a program that aims to expand mobility solutions for those who need them most.”

Honda’s goal to create a safer, smarter world in which people can experience the joy of mobility aligns with AIDB’s purpose to transform the lives of those we serve beyond all expectations. Together we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless!

Donté Little, Assistant Director, E. H. Gentry Facility; Allen Cope, Senior Managing Counsel, American Honda Motor Co., Inc., and President, AIDB Foundation. Jessica Brummett, Interim Director of Development.

AIDB’S GOT TALENT

Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) kicked off the new school year at Convocation, AIDB’s annual welcome back to school celebration for the faculty and staff. This fun-filled program was themed as AIDB’s Got Talent. Convocation featured Garrett Miles, an AIDB consumer since first grade and contestant on Season 14 of American Idol; and Matt Maxey, founder of DEAFinitely Dope. Convocation was also livestreamed to all five Talladega Campuses as well as the 10 regional centers throughout Alabama.

Garrett Miles, an AIDB consumer since first grade and contestant on Season 14 of American Idol, performs with his backup musicians.

Matt Maxey, founder of DEAFinitely Dope, performs visual artistic music interpretation.

Hosts Kelley Clarkson (also known as Kelley Park), Director, AIDB Human Resources, with Princeton Jackson (also known as Princeton Reeves), Production, Alabama Industries for the Blind.

A SPECIAL EQUESTRIAN PROGRAM

THEY SAY THAT once you experience the limitless spirit of Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), that AIDB finds a permanent home in your heart. That sentiment is true for Iris Hamlin, a dedicated volunteer for the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program (MGH).

“I was a teacher at Alabama School for the Blind and retired from there in 2011. AIDB enables students to have so many experiences that they would not have otherwise; from specialized education to the opportunity to participate in sports and activities,” said Hamlin. “When my husband and I decided to downsize and sell our farm and horses, I knew that MGH, the equestrian program at AIDB, would be the perfect home for my Foxy.”

Foxy, a Haflinger measuring at 14 hands, joined the MGH herd two years ago when he was donated by Hamlin. Haflingers are known for their smooth gait and ability to carry large riders easily — two important characteristics — because the herd at MGH works with riders from kindergarten to high school, many of whom are first-time riders and need a smooth, gentle horse. “Foxy is happier at MGH than she has ever been! She has made several friends in the herd,” said Hamlin. “It thrills my heart that the staff at MGH take such great care of her.”

Hamlin gets to see Foxy at work each week when she volunteers. Classes from AIDB’s three K-12 schools come to the arena to participate in equine assisted learning activities and therapy. Volunteers at MGH are able to work in various roles — there is even a place for people with no experience with horses! “Volunteers help groom horses and ready them for students,” said Hamlin. “During classes, we will have a volunteer leading the horse around the arena with sidewalkers on one or both sides of the horse to help the student hold the reins and maintain the correct posture.”

“Volunteering at MGH has been the best volunteer job I have ever had! I have been amazed by the students and what they accomplish; they bring happy tears to my eyes.” — Iris Hamlin

Iris Hamlin with Foxy, who is being ridden by Mason Nickolson, a PreK student in the Listening and Spoken Language Program at Alabama School for the Deaf.

**A HORSE NAMED ROGER**

By Kate Storjohann, Lead Instructor, Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program

Roger at the 2016 Alabama Special Olympics being ridden by a student from Helen Keller School of Alabama.

THE STAFF at Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program (MGH) are always on the lookout for horses with a “therapy heart.” These are horses with the unique spirit needed to be an equine partner at MGH. “We look for calm, quiet, willing horses who will take care of our students during classes,” said Kate Storjohann, Lead Instructor at MGH. “They have to be respectful of their leaders, accepting of unusual toys and activities, and have a demeanor that inspires confidence in the riders.”

One special member of the MGH herd embodies all of the qualities that are necessary for the equine therapy — a 25-year-old Paint named Roger. In November 2015, MGH staff traveled to Art and Lynda Estrada’s farm in South Alabama to meet Roger. Within 10 minutes, it was clear he was destined to become the newest member of the MGH herd.

The year after Roger joined the MGH herd, he and a student from Helen Keller School of Alabama traveled to Troy, Alabama, to compete in the Special Olympics. The Estradas also traveled to Troy to see their former horse compete. “I was thrilled that they were going to be able to see him with our students,” said Storjohann. “The first class had just started when they arrived. Looking up into the stands, I saw Lynda start to cry as she watched her former horse taking baby steps as he took care of the little girl on his back.”

That day, the Estradas gave MGH a donation of $1,500, which was the amount MGH paid for Roger the prior year. That donation allowed MGH to purchase another horse for the equine program: Sven, who is also a Paint and a beloved member of the MGH herd. “We came just to watch our horse compete, but the students captured our hearts,” said Art Estrada. “We didn’t know MGH when they first came to buy Roger, but after seeing what they do, we know he is in the right place.”

LEAF: LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH ACCESSIBILITY FOR FAMILIES

ASK ANYONE about the important things in life and you will find that, more often than not, the answer “family” is among the first things mentioned. That’s why Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) collaborates with the student or consumer along with their entire family to prepare them to reach their limitless potential through superior training and programs. This collaboration led Special Projects at AIDB to create LEAF: Learning Experiences with Accessibility for Families 2022 (LEAF 2022) held in September at Dollywood’s DreamMore Resort in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. The conference was provided free of charge for 20 Tennessee families of children who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or visually impaired.

“This event was a big undertaking, but one that we felt was vital and worthwhile,” said Kimberly K. Baker, M.S.; Assistant Director, Special Projects; Director, Center for Assistive Technology Training; Special Education Coordinator. “We hoped to create an environment where families could connect, find new resources, and enjoy time with their children in a safe space. I saw parents holding and playing with the children of other parents, exchanging phone numbers and social media information, and discussing experiences in advocating for their children. The ability for these families to spend time with others in similar situations is so special and so beneficial. It was an amazing experience!”

American Sign Language Storytime: Parents reading with their child.

While parents received training, the children participated in arts and crafts, and learned how to plant seeds using a magnifier with Jennifer Oldenburg, Deafblind Trainer, Center for Assistive Technology Training and Regional Early Acquisition of Language.

LEAF 2022 featured two tracks: The Center for Assistive Technology Training (CATT) program track, designed specifically for families with children who are blind or visually impaired in K4 through 2nd grade, and the Regional Early Acquisition of Language (REAL) program track, designed specifically for families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing and under the age of 3.

The CATT track focused on parent workshops and presentations such as Visual Impairment 101 and Accessible Games. Families also had the opportunity to participate in product walk-throughs, hands-on explorations, and educational activities for children that provided a family-centered approach to learning and recreation. The REAL track focused on activities that created and improved language acquisition as well as language in the home environment. Families enjoyed presentations on advocating for your child who is deaf or hard of hearing, VL2 storybook apps, and building strong connections through play.

“One of our biggest things, was the realization that, as much as we’ve tried to keep what our daughter is able to do down the road open-ended, and have tried to have as hopeful of a goal as possible, we still had some natural closed-mindedness as well that she would never do ‘this’ or ‘that,’” said conference attendees Joshua and Samantha Bahruth. “The staff were able to take that artificial ceiling we created and tell us to be open to her potentially going further than we thought was possible and to be sure we’re not the ones limiting her.”

While at the resort, trainers encouraged families to explore the resort’s activities, giving families a fun and relaxed chance to continue learning new skills. Trainers also offered arts and crafts and partnered with the resort to make their nightly bedtime story accessible to conference attendees. LEAF 2022 proves once again that no matter what track our family is on, together we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless!

The Bahruth Family smiles to camera while at Dollywood.

**SMARTROOM: THE FUTURE IS CALLING!**

*THE E. H. GENTRY FACILITY RECENTLY RECEIVED AN UPGRADE WITH A NEW, FULLY-ACCESSIBLE VIDEO CONFERENCE SMARTROOM.*

By Donté Little, Assistant Director, E. H. Gentry Facility

THERE IS NO DOUBT we are living in the lifetime of the infamous George Jetson, a fictional character in a 1960s animated sitcom with robot companions, high-speed computers, flying cars, and video calls. Much like The Jetsons, E. H. Gentry Facility (EHG) has incorporated robotics, advanced computer technology, and now, a fully-accessible videoconferencing room dubbed the “SMARTroom.”

Similar to the way individuals interact with voice-activated apps and “smart” devices, the SMARTroom will provide users an enhanced, fully-accessible sensory experience. The SMARTroom is equipped with dual large screens on all walls, surround-sound, high-quality microphones, 360-degree cameras, and touchscreen panels – just like a scene from The Jetsons.

“I have always liked fixing computers and working with technology… I once built my own gaming computer,” said Thomas Kelly, a 2015 graduate of Alabama School for the Deaf and a current EHG student in the RISE Autism program that serves individuals with autism and sensory loss.

EHG Students are joined in class by Grant Patterson, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, RISE Autism at AIDB via SMARTroom technology. Pictured L to R: Sarah Ganus; Derricko Sims; Renee Linn, Adult Education Instructor; Blanca Class; John Mayer.

“Through these types of experiences, our students like Thomas can better understand how technology systems are assembled, composed, and implemented, and how teamwork is needed to turn vision into reality,” explained Abby Jordan, EHG Job Developer. “As a person who is deaf, I believe this SMARTroom makes it easier for us to choose our seats, and not really think too much about seat placement and how to receive information — with multiple screens, we can see the speaker and American Sign Language interpreter from all angles.”

“The additional video displays will allow multiple opportunities for individuals with vision loss to get a front row seat,” stated Doug Nixon, EHG Computer Specialist and Assistive Technology Field Services Manager. “These options allow us to provide people with training who, for countless reasons, may be unable to participate in-person in a residential program or travel to one of Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind’s statewide regional centers.”

Patrick Smith, AIDB Information Systems Manager, noted the SMARTroom will serve all Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind units and programs as a fully-accessible space for distance learning and meetings. The SMARTroom will also support students training in video recording and editing with potential applications in STEM fields. “IT doesn't normally get that first-hand experience assisting our students or consumers, but this has changed that in the best way,” Smith said “We are excited to see the students' further involvement as new projects arise. Who knows? Maybe they will be inspired to be the next Steve Jobs.”

This project was supported with a $20,000 grant from Honda Manufacturing of Alabama, LLC and $58,000 in federal Title II, Part A funding through the Alabama State Department of Education. Title II, Part A funding is intended to support teachers, principals, and other school leaders in their work to improve the overall quality of instruction and ensure equity of educational opportunities for all students. AIDB is honored to be a recipient of both grant awards as it helps our students and consumers jet toward their limitless futures!

Thomas Kelly (foreground) discusses computer networking with Patrick Smith, AIDB Information Systems Manager (middle) and Heather Lease, EHG Assistive Technology/Microcomputer Specialist (on screen). Also pictured: Dee McElroy, American Sign Language Interpreter.

“I have always liked fixing computers and working with technology… I once built my own gaming computer.”

— Thomas Kelly, a 2015 graduate of Alabama School for the Deaf and current EHG student in the RISE Autism program

**LIMITLESS LEGACIES**

*NINETY YEARS AFTER IT WAS FOUNDED, ALABAMA INDUSTRIES FOR THE BLIND CONTINUES TO BE SHAPED BY THE LEGACIES CREATED BY A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHOSE POSSIBILITIES ARE LIMITLESS.*

Shane Jones, AIB Plant Manager, smiles at the camera.

Jaleesia Strayham, 2022 recipient of the Milton J. Samuelson Award, smiles at the camera.

Gary Worrell, 2022 recipient of the Peter J. Salmon Direct Labor Award, smiles at the camera.

MAKING HISTORY

This year Alabama Industries for the Blind (AIB) made history by hiring Shane Jones as the first individual who is visually impaired in the Plant Manager position. “Shane is an exceptional leader, and I am honored to welcome him as AIB’s new Plant Manager,” said Kyle Gregg, Executive Director, AIB. “Shane’s strong background in manufacturing and team building makes him an asset to our team, and I am excited to work with him to grow and strengthen AIB’s commitment to providing employment opportunities for adults who are legally blind or multidisabled.” Jones began his career in Raleigh, North Carolina, as an assistant operations manager at Blind Industries and Services of Maryland. Most recently, Shane served as a project manager for Beyond Vision, a not-for-profit manufacturing company with a mission of enriching the lives of people who are blind through the dignity of work valued by customers and the community.

“I have worked with organizations from around the country, and I strongly feel Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind is a first-class organization,” said Shane. “As we work together, and strive to provide meaningful employment to persons with all types of abilities, there is no limit to our success.”

Shane is a graduate of The Governor Morehead School for the Blind in Raleigh, North Carolina and earned the Certified Associate in Project Management certification from the Project Management Institute as well as the Certificate of Achievement, Effective Supervision: Leading the Way, from the National Industries for the Blind.

“I am pleased to welcome Shane Jones to the AIDB team,” said John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB. “With Shane’s extensive background and leadership experience, he will play a vital role in growing the limitless opportunities, training, and independence created by Alabama Industries for the Blind’s manufacturing facilities and supply stores on military bases across Alabama and Georgia.”

BANKING ON CONSUMERS AT ALABAMA INDUSTRIES FOR THE BLIND

Thanks to the generosity of First Bank of Alabama and the installation of a new ATM at AIB, staff no longer have to leave work to access their banking needs. “By focusing on our customer base, we recognized that many of our AIB customers utilize various forms of transportation to come use the ATM at our main office,” said Chad Jones, President and Chief Executive Officer, First Bank of Alabama. “We are always looking for our customers to have access to their banking needs to do banking when they want, where they want, and how they want. The ATM installed at AIB was a special project for us, and we knew it would make a difference in how our AIB customers would go about their banking lives.”

In addition to braille, the ATM features an audio jack that allows consumers to plug in their headphones for an audio description of what is on the screen. “Usually, people who are blind have to depend on others to withdraw money for them,” said Estefania Colmenero, Production Worker, AIB. “I don’t know if I can express what it’s like to be able to walk to, and access, the ATM on my own. It is very exciting and another step forward for people who are blind or have low vision. It’s another way for people like us to have independence.”

CELEBRATING THE 2022 BLIND WORKERS OF THE YEAR

This fall, Jaleesia Strayham and Gary Worrell were honored by AIB at the annual Blind Worker of the Year Luncheon. Strayham was named the 2022 recipient of the Milton J. Samuelson Award, which is presented annually by AIB to honor a person who is legally blind and employed in an indirect labor position. Worrell is the 2022 recipient of the Peter J. Salmon Direct Labor Award which was created by National Industries for the Blind to recognize outstanding performance and leadership by employees who are legally blind.

Strayham was just 20 years old when she had emergency eye surgery to save a small portion of her sight. From that point forward, she was legally blind but determined not to let any obstacle change her life. In 2016, Strayham began working with AIB’s production team and later began shadowing other positions to gain additional experience before moving to a position in the AIB warehouse in 2021. Strayham also completed the National Industries for the Blind’s Upward Mobility Program. “Most would describe Jaleesia as quiet,” said Strayham’s supervisor, Randy Liner, Store Manager, AIB. “But she is hard-working and motivated to learn and grow. Jaleesia’s ‘can do’ attitude paired with her flexibility and willingness to learn new things has made her an asset to AIB.”

Worrell was born congenitally deaf and began losing his eyesight due to retinitis pigmentosa around the age of 10. After graduating from Kentucky School for the Deaf, he returned home to family. As Worrell’s sight continued to deteriorate, he began planning for what he would need in the future. Worrell visited E. H. Gentry Facility to learn about its customized programs that empower students to explore personal and professional goals. Worrell enrolled at E. H. Gentry Facility in 1985, and in the following year, completed his program and joined the AIB team. “Gary is the type of employee who is going to consistently show up and bring his best,” said Donovan Beitel, AIB Director of Special Operations. “He is dependable and is ready to go above and beyond what is asked of him.”

“With Shane’s extensive background and leadership experience, he will play a vital role in growing the limitless opportunities, training, and independence created by Alabama Industries for the Blind’s manufacturing facilities and supply stores on military bases across Alabama and Georgia.”

— John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB

**VICE PRESIDENT NAMED**

*DENNIS GILLIAM HAS BEEN NAMED VICE PRESIDENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS AT AIDB.*

DR. DENNIS GILLIAM, a veteran educator with more than 30 years of classroom and administrative experience in special education programs and outreach has been named Vice President of Instructional Programs at Alabama institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB). Gilliam has served at AIDB for over 25 years, most recently as Executive Director of Special Projects. Gilliam has also served as the Special Education Coordinator for AIDB, Middle/High School Academic Director at Alabama School for the Deaf and High School Mathematics Teacher at Alabama School for the Blind.

“I am humbled and honored to be chosen as the Vice President of Instructional Programs,” said Gilliam. “The most impressive part of AIDB is the commitment our staff have for the betterment of our students and consumers. My intention is to hold myself, the staff, and the students throughout all of our instructional programs to the standard of excellence AIDB has been known to possess. We have done so many great things at AIDB, and I look forward to the tremendous things to come.”

Gilliam earned a Doctor of Education, Deaf Studies Deaf Education from Lamar University; Educational Administration Certification from the University of Montevallo; Visual Impairment Education Certification from The University of Alabama at Birmingham; and a Bachelor of Science and Master of Arts in Secondary Education, Mathematics from The University of Alabama. Gilliam also completed the STAR/CAEBER/AEBPD Schools on Bi-Lingual/Bi-Cultural (Deaf) Education program. Gilliam published The Relationship Between the Use of the Accelerated Reader Program and Reading Comprehension Scores on the STAR Reading Diagnostic and SAT-10 in 2011.

“Dr. Gilliam shares the vision for our students and staff that is held by the AIDB Board of Trustees and myself: To set high expectations and standards so that limitless outcomes are achieved,” said John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB. “His knowledge, passion, and respect for our mission will serve him well as Vice President of Instructional Programs.”

In this role, Gilliam will be responsible for instructional programs at Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, Helen Keller School of Alabama as well as AIDB’s Child Nutrition Program, Health and Clinical Services, and Special Projects.

Dr. Dennis Gilliam smiles at the camera.

**THE HEART OF HEALTHCARE**

*FROM KISSING “BOO-BOOS” TO COMPLEX MEDICAL CARE, THE NURSING STAFF AT AIDB’S HEALTH AND CLINICAL SERVICES PROVIDES AROUND-THE-CLOCK CARE TO RESIDENTIAL STUDENTS.*

Chrissy Camp, RN, administers medication to a high school student.

Denise Watts, RN, provides medical care to an elementary student.

WHEN A CHILD GETS SICK at school, their first instinct is to want their parents. But what happens when Mom and Dad may be hours away while they’re sick and have to stay at school overnight? Take a look into what 24 hours can look like for the nursing staff of the Health and Clinical Services unit at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB).

As you can see from the schedule, our nursing staff are always on call to care for our students morning, noon, and night; striving to give AIDB’s students the best level of care possible. This is important not only to our students and families we serve; but to our staff as well. “It is so rewarding to make a difference in the lives of the students at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind. We have fourteen full time nurses on staff who bring over 400 collective years of nursing experience to provide around the clock care. We love being able to establish relationships based on trust with our students and their families to help them have a happy and healthy school experience,” Karissa Twymon, Executive Director, Health and Clinical Services.

24 HOURS

4:30 AM Nurses board school buses as they depart Talladega to pick up students throughout central Alabama. Due to medical conditions, some bus riders need one-on-one nursing support while traveling.

6 AM The morning doses of prescription medicines are given to students.

8 AM Daytime tube feedings are set up for students who are unable to receive nutrition via their mouths.

11 AM A nurse writes the care plan for a new student at Alabama School for the Blind. The nurse practitioner holds a bi-weekly sick clinic to care for students with allergies and other minor medical needs.

2 PM Scoliosis screenings and physicals are conducted for students who need them.

4:30 PM Nurses calculate the dinnertime insulin dosages and give them to students as needed.

6:20 PM Accident alert! A student twists their ankle playing basketball, so they receive care at the Alabama Power Foundation Nursing Clinic. The nursing staff monitors the injury to determine if the student needs to be taken to the hospital for x-rays.

8 PM Evening tube feedings are set up to dispense throughout the night.

12:05 AM A student’s continuous glucose monitor has sent an alert that their blood sugar is out of range. The night shift nurses are in contact with the student and residential staff to ensure the student’s blood sugar stabilizes.

2:30 AM Every parent has asked themselves why the stomach virus waits until the middle of the night to strike … A nurse is up caring for a little one whose tummy hurts.

4:30 AM A new day dawns. This morning, nurses not only board the daily school buses — a few travel with the football team as they head to an away game out-of-state

**SUPPORTING THE LIMITLESS POTENTIAL OF STUDENTS & CONSUMERS**

*CHRISTMAS IN JULY RAISES OVER $90,000 FOR AIDB STUDENTS.*

SOLD! Lucky bidder No. 13 is the proud owner of a three-night stay in beautiful Orange Beach!”

The sounds of a festive live auction at Pier 59 in Vincent, Alabama, featuring vacation packages, sports memorabilia and specials from local favorites closed out the 13th annual Christmas in July. This year’s event, held on July 23rd , was the most successful one to date, raising over $90,000 to ensure that the students of Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, and Helen Keller School of Alabama have a magical Christmas full of gifts and fun.

A core group of volunteers led by Tim and Rita Chiasson and Janet Swann, owner of Pier 59, begin preparations in January. By the third Saturday of July, they’re ready to host several hundred people who participate in a variety of events held at Pier 59. The event has raised over $350,000 to date. “There should be no child without Christmas,” said Swann.

“When I think of partnerships, I immediately think of this amazing group of volunteers led by Tim, Rita, and Janet,” said John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB. “They truly believe that the potential for our students knows no bounds. Together we are limitless. When our students wake up on Christmas Day, they will know that they are loved and have hope for the future. That is what this group brings to our children.”

Tim Chiasson; Rebecca Robinson; John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB with Clara Scelsi, a rising 6th grader at ASB who drew the winning name for the $5,000 drawing. Robinson was the lucky winner and donated 50% of the prize back to AIDB. Rita Chiasson celebrates a winning bid. John Mascia, Au.D., President, AIDB (left) with Keith Vernon, owner of Lakeside Grille at Coosa Island, an event sponsor. Vernon also won the 50/50 drawing and donated his winnings back to AIDB. Thank you for supporting Christmas in July!

**STUDENTS IN ACTION**

The Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) recently held its 14th annual AHSAA Sportsmanship Luncheon. It recognized 131 AHSAA high schools as sportsmanship schools for being ejection and fine free during the 2020-2021 school year. Among the schools recognized were Alabama School for the Blind and Alabama School for the Deaf. We are proud of the hard work and sportsmanship shown by our coaches and student athletes!

In addition to being recognized as a sportsmanship school by the AHSAA, Alabama School for the Blind was one of eight schools to receive the Andrews Sports Medicine Sportsmanship $1,000 grant from AHSAA! Back Row (L to R): Students Noah Price and Tey Jones; Coaches Troy Haynes, Josh Haynes, Jennifer Hammock; students Rin Pollard and Cassidie Gorig-Worrell. Front Row (L to R): Students Belle Williams, Zania Abdullah, Narissa Swaim, and Moises Francisco.

TRACK & FIELD NATIONAL CHAMPS

Alabama School for the Deaf Boys and Girls Varsity Track and Field Teams raced across the finish line and were named the United States of America Deaf Track and Field/National Deaf Interscholastic Athletic Association Track and Field Division 2 National Champions! ASD Boy Track Team Front Row (L to R): Joshua Kelley, Brayden Flenory, Edson Rojas, Semaj Wright, Dominick Jefferson, and Lemarcus Jordan. Back Row (L to R): Addison Taylor, Lakendrick Agee, Triallen Washington, Peter-Joseph Brownlee, Andarius Fitten, Austin Hayes, Bogdan Dailey, Joshua Kirk, Austin Brown, Noah Merritt. ASD Girls Track Team Front Row (L to R): Sasha Dailey, Ka'Mora McCurdy, and Debbie Wilkinson. Back Row (L to R): Dejia Ware, Melika Washington, Tusi Silas, and Peja Brownlee.

For nine of the past 10 years, Alabama School for the Deaf has gone fine and ejection free! Congratulations to the ASD coaching staff and student athletes! Pictured (L to R): Students Stacey Phillips, Austin Brown, Joshua Kelley; Paul Kulick, Coach; Cedric Tyson, Athletic Director; Marvice Robinson, Coach; students Carly Ortega, DeShauna Wallace, Lily Tucker. Front: Haylie Rizor, student.

AIDB Logo  
P.O. Box 698  
Talladega, AL 35161

**Providing services ın YOUR community!**

Last year, over 36,000 lives were transformed through AIDB services provided at Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, Helen Keller School of Alabama, E. H. Gentry Facility, Alabama Industries for the Blind, and the network of 10 regional centers strategically located throughout the state. Whether through educational development for young children, training for families, or adjustment and support for adults, AIDB’s students and consumers prove that together we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless!

A map of Alabama with each of the 10 regional centers outlined in a different color. The following cities are noted: Shoals, Decatur, Huntsville, Tuscaloosa, Birmingham, Talladega, Opelika, Montgomery, Dothan, and Mobile.