Sights & Sounds

The Magazine of Alabama Institute for Deaf & Blind

Summer 2024

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Nyzier Posey hard at work at Dollar General as a part of AIDB's JumpStart Program.

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**A Letter from the President**

Dr. Gilliam smiles to camera.

AS WE EMBARK on a new school year at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), it fills me with joy to witness the bright faces of our returning students. From the eager kindergarteners, brimming with excitement for new friendships and discoveries, to our middle school students on the threshold of adolescence, and our high school and adult students focused on their next steps toward independence, I am continually inspired by their potential. Their energy and enthusiasm reaffirm the vital role AIDB plays in the educational landscape of Alabama.

During our recent Convocation ceremony, which officially kicked off the school year, I challenged the AIDB staff to strive for excellence: to transform potential into achievement, to turn “no” into “yes,” and to elevate our efforts from good to great. Our students and clients are the heart of AIDB, and they deserve our unwavering commitment to their success every single day.

I think of our dedicated teachers, who welcome their students with warm smiles and infectious enthusiasm. These classrooms, filled with positivity and encouragement, become places where students not only learn but thrive. This year, we are collectively embracing a mindset of relentless optimism and a steadfast belief in AIDB’s mission. Our focus remains on creating pathways for upward mobility for our students and clients, encouraging them to reach new heights. We are committed to providing them with role models, trailblazers who have navigated similar journeys and can inspire others to follow. AIDB staff will stand by them every step of the way, offering support and guidance as they strive toward their goals.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Governor Kay Ivey, our Alabama State Legislators, the AIDB Board of Trustees, as well as our donors and the entire AIDB staff. Your unwavering belief in our mission and in the potential of our students and clients is what empowers us to aim for greatness.

**Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D.**

President

**The New Face of Summer Break**

How Students at E. H. Gentry Facility are Turning Work Experience into Career Gold

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind

AS SUMMER APPROACHES FOR STUDENTS, the prospect of a productive break looms large. For many, it’s a time to catch up on sleep, binge-watch favorite shows, or hit the beach. But for an increasing number of high school students, and recent graduates served by E. H. Gentry Facility’s (EHG) JumpStart Program, summer is not just a vacation; it’s an opportunity to dive into an enriching three-week journey designed to ignite their interest in the world of work. This dynamic program blends practical experience with educational and fun activities to provide a comprehensive introduction to employment.

*Internships: The Gateway to the Professional World*

Internships have become the gold-standard for summer work. For JumpStart students, they’re the ticket to exploring career paths and gaining industry-specific experience - and a paycheck! At the heart of this trend is Austin Hayes, a 2024 graduate of Alabama School for the Deaf who thrived in the JumpStart program, and especially enjoyed his experience at Majestic Caverns.

“When Isis Mann, the Director of Employment Services at E. H. Gentry, called me to ask if Majestic Caverns would participate in JumpStart, it was an automatic yes,” said Crystal Story, General Manager of Majestic Caverns. “I know how important this program and these future business leaders are to our community. The best part is that Austin has already applied for a job at Majestic Caverns! Building this pipeline of strong employees is so important to our economy!”

Order Up! Teralyn Burford is brewing up experience at The Daily Grind in Talladega

Left to Right: Robert Smith, Devin Hale, Isaiah Casey, Donte Little, Isis Mann and Lisa Bonner

According to Hayes, this has been one of his best summer experiences. “I have enjoyed everything about JumpStart. Not only did I get hands-on experience in different jobs, I learned how to write my resume, interview for jobs and other skills that will make me a successful employee.”

Hayes' experience reflects a broader shift. Internships today offer more than just a foot in the door; through the JumpStart program, internships provide a chance to work on meaningful projects, make professional connections and sometimes even land a full-time job offer.

*Part-Time Jobs: Skills Beyond the Classroom*

Partnerships with local businesses, whose management and employees support the goal of JumpStart, provides students with a safe place to learn and practice customer service, teamwork and problem-solving skills.

Robert Smith, Operations Manager at Coosa Valley Electric Cooperative, agrees. “These students have done a tremendous job this summer. They arrived on their first day very motivated and ready to work, from there it was easy to help them learn how to work together as members of a larger team in a professional environment.”

Part-time jobs provide a wealth of experience that’s transferable across various fields. They offer a chance to develop soft skills and work ethic that are essential in any professional setting. Thelonius Sylvester, a rising Junior at Alabama School for the Blind, found the various jobs to be the most rewarding part of JumpStart. “I got to work at a local coffee shop, Daily Grind, in the morning then go work at Majestic Caverns or at AIDB’s Joe Tom Armbrester Agriscience Center in the afternoon. Only through JumpStart would I have been able to go from making and serving food in the morning to customer service or working on the farm in the afternoon. I got so much experience, and even got paid!”

Nyzier Posey found the experience helped him grow outside of just the professional experience.

"JumpStart is a great program where you learn a lot and experience new jobs, but it has also helped build up my communication skills. I used to be very quiet but this taught me how to talk to people who I didn’t know before. It teaches you how to always be flexible because sometimes it doesn’t go exactly as you thought it would. It teaches you how to adapt."

*Volunteering: Making an Impact While Gaining Experience*

Each JumpStart session includes a volunteer component to empower students to embracetheir own potential to be agents of positivechange in their own communities aroundAlabama. This year, students volunteered withUnited Way of North Talladega County andhelped conduct a food drive for citizens of thelocal community.

“I’ve always thought that work wasn’t supposed to be fun,” said JumpStart student Celindia Martin. “I got to help people and learn to be flexible and plan ahead.”

*The Power of Reflection and Planning*

Each day at JumpStart kicks off with Job Readiness Class, which gives students an opportunity to share their personal experiences and reflections, offering valuable insights into their journey and growth. This peer-to-peer approach to learning provides an opportunity for students to share and discuss diverse perspectives, leading to a more well-rounded understanding. It also brings a sense of the boardroom into the classroom, offering students the opportunity to collaborate through discussion.

“All of us at E. H. Gentry are proud to support and inspire the next generation of professionals through this engaging and impactful summer experience,” said Isis Mann, main organizer of the JumpStart program. “JumpStart has changed summer from a mere break from school to a critical component of career development. Students are seizing this time to gain real-world experience, develop valuable skills, and explore career paths.

Jalen-Ochoa-Vallejo enjoyed his work experience at Dollar General

Noah Merritt learning to prepare meals at Majestic Caverns

Tierece Wilson learns work can be fun as he "kids" around with the goats

**AIDB LEGISLATIVE DAY**

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

IT WAS A SUNNY spring morning when students, faculty, staff and administrators from the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) boarded a bus in Talladega, Alabama, and headed toward Alabama’s State Legislature in Montgomery. The excitement was palpable as representatives from AIDB’s 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 AIDB Regional Centers prepared to bring the limitless spirit of AIDB’s students and consumers to Alabama’s lawmakers.

While at the capitol, students experienced sessions with both the Alabama House of Representatives and the Alabama Senate. Alabama School for the Blind student Zachary Glasgow of Albertville; Alabama School for the Deaf student Ashley Wentworth of Helena; and Helen Keller School of Alabama student George Meyer of Eastaboga also had the opportunity to lead the Pledge of Allegiance to open the Senate session, by reciting and signing the Pledge using American Sign Language (ASL). Adult consumers and families who receive services through the Early Intervention program at AIDB Regional Centers also enjoyed visiting with the elected officials who represent their home communities.

“It was an honor to be chosen as one of the students from AIDB to lead the pledge today.”

— Zachary Glasgow, ASB Student

President Dennis Gilliam with students and consumers from across AIDB at the Alabama State House.

Alabama State Representative Danny Garrett and AIDB President Dennis Gilliam meet with students and consumers from across AIDB.

Alabama State Senator Arthur Orr and AIDB President Dennis Gilliam meet with students and consumers from across AIDB.

**STUDENT LIFE AT ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND**

By Alan Nunn, Principal, Alabama School for the Blind

THE STUDENT LIFE PROGRAM at the Alabama School for the Blind (ASB) is an integral part of what we do. It allows us to work closely with our students on all aspects of the Expanded Core Curriculum. While the key element of the program is based around independent living skills, it also allows us to work with the students in the areas of recreation and leisure, social interaction skills and self-determination skills. We practice these skills at all times, but the Student Life Program allows students to put these skills into practice in real-world settings.

In the dormitory setting, students begin to learn in elementary school how to take care of their rooms and their personal items. With assistance, they learn the steps of washing their own clothes and as they get older they also learn to iron. As they grow through the program, they complete these tasks independently. Additionally, they learn to make their beds and take care of their personal space. They eventually learn to create shopping lists and actually go to the store to buy what they need. They also learn to prepare not only their own meals, but also meals for others who are in the dorm.

They learn other skills less directly. The Student Life Program keeps the students active and involved. It might be a trip to eat in a restaurant and go to a movie. They learn how to behave appropriately in these setting as well have the opportunity to interact with others who are not ASB students. So much of what is typically learned is through observation, so some guidance and instruction has to be a little more direct. Like anyone else, it is easier to learn when they enjoy doing something than just sitting in a room and being told how to act or use proper table manners.

Recreation for our students might involve spending time in the student center playing ball, swimming or participating in a scavenger hunt. They also have many opportunities to travel and do things they might not be able to otherwise. They might spend a Saturday at Six Flags or a weekend white water rafting. Not only do they learn essential skills while they are participating, but they make memories and form friendships that will last a lifetime.

2024 4-H Regional Congress Participants

3rd and 4th Grade Zoo Trip

**SERVICE THROUGH ACTION**

Maroon Crew Promotes Student Development through Community Service

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

WHEN THE ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF (ASD) first assembled the Maroon Crew, they had one simple challenge for their students: to give back to the community they call home during the school year.

Cliff Geffen, Adjustment Specialist at ASD, created Maroon Crew as a service organization where students could volunteer at on-campus athletic and residential events. From the concession stand at home football and basketball games to a Halloween party and an international dinner, students could give back to their school community in various ways.

“Community service is an invaluable experience for our students. It provides an opportunity for them to develop the skills needed to be successful in their future academics and careers,” said Jason Cox, Principal, ASD. “Whether they volunteer off-campus with our community partners or on-campus with our athletic and residential programs, these volunteer experiences provide students with the opportunity to learn the importance of time management, empathy and teamwork.”

Over the years, Maroon Crew added opportunities both on and off-campus for students to increase their involvement. Most recently, students had the opportunity to collaborate with the Talladega City School District to distribute food to families within the Talladega community.

“On behalf of the Parent Involvement Committee, we appreciate Mr. Cliff Geffen and the ASD students for volunteering at the Talladega City School Family Market,” said Diann Whitson, Ed.S., Parent Involvement Specialist, Talladega City Schools. “We are grateful for their willingness to give their time, energy and talents. These students worked tirelessly for the entire day. The support of the ASD organization allows us to continue fulfilling our mission and serve the students and families in our community every year.”

They also volunteered at Diaper Row, a community partnership between St. Peter’s Episcopal Church and Bundles of Hope Diaper Bank that distributes diapers and wipes to families in Talladega. “It takes a community of volunteers to make Diaper Row a reality,” said Lynn Sims, a member of St. Peter’s Episcopal Church. “And ASD’s Maroon Crew is an amazing group of young people who worked hard to make this ministry successful. I was thrilled to work with each of them and look forward to working with them again in the future.”

During the 2023-2024 school year, Maroon Crew consisted of 44 students who worked together to give back to their community with over 250 hours of service.

L to R Ashley Wentworth, Triallen Washington, Austin Hayes, Derek Irizzary-Ruiz, Dominic Jefferson, Clifford Geffen

**HKS STUDENT LIFE PROVIDES WORK EXPERIENCE**

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, their first part-time job is a rite of passage. But more importantly, it is an opportunity that builds character and allows for the development of skills essential to future employment; not to mention the extra spending money that is earned along the way!

Students at the Helen Keller School of Alabama (HKS) have recently begun serving their school community as Student Life Work Experience Aides, an exciting job opportunity designed to develop the workforce skills needed as they begin their transition toward adulthood.

“The 2023-2024 school year was our first year having the Student Life Work Experience Program in the dorms,” said Chris Tomlin, Student Life Manager, HKS. “The students who participated enjoyed having the opportunity to earn money while working on campus and contributing to their school community through our program. But more importantly, they learned job skills that will help them successfully find employment after graduation.”

One HKS student, George Meyer, worked with the dorm staff to count and deliver the supplies requested throughout the Student Life Program.

“I like assisting with the dorm supplies and being able to earn money,” said George. “It also allowed me to help other students while getting some exercise.”

In addition to organizing and delivering supplies, Student Life Work Experience Aides were also tasked with helping in the HKS cafeteria, known as The Eagle's Nest, by cleaning the tables after dinner.

“Our plan for next school year is to have more individualized jobs that will help students learn employment skills in an area they are interested in,” added Chris. “More individualized jobs will build on each student’s strengths and help them to further develop their job skills.”

With these job skills, these students will be prepared to soar from The Eagles Nest to employment after graduation!

Left: Isabella Windsor works at The Eagle's Nest after dinner

**DONORS SUPPORT "ACTS OF KINDNESS"**

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

THIS SPRING, the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation hosted “Acts of Kindness” at Red Mountain Theatre in Birmingham. Thanks to generous donors, the event raised over $150,000 to support AIDB’s programs throughout Alabama!

“AIDB is an amazing organization, serving wonderful students and consumers across the state,” said Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “I am very proud of what our staff, students, partners and donors accomplish every day and truly appreciate our donors’ investment in what we do.”

The event included a performance by optimist, actor, arts educator and disability inclusion consultant, Alie B. Gorrie joined by students from Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf, and Helen Keller School of Alabama.

“I have been part of the AIDB Foundation Board of Directors for quite some time and it has been incredibly rewarding to witness the amazing impact that is made when our philanthropic partners come together,” said Mike Royer, Retired/Consultant at The University of Alabama WVUA and President of the AIDB Foundation. “Since 1980, the AIDB Foundation has raised private funds to supplement an appropriation from the Alabama Legislature for educational services. Through Foundation funds we are able to build new facilities, provide our students with the most innovative technology and deliver on our promise of limitless opportunities.”

The event also featured a live auction of artwork painted during the event by AIDB students and renowned artists Laurel Browning of Trussville, Eli Cobb of Decatur, Madison Faile of Birmingham, David Garrett of Birmingham and Rhonda Sims of Wetumpka. After the auction, guests attended a special screening of the play “Sister Act” performed by Red Mountain Theatre in collaboration with The University of Alabama at Birmingham Department of Theatre.

Above: Alie B. Gorrie, Lead Vocalist, with Clara Scelsi (Keyboard), Davis Brakefield, Aumari Jordan, and Madison Faulk (Vocals), Alabama School for the Blind along with Ashley Wentworth (ASL Interpretation), Alabama School for the Deaf.

“We sincerely appreciate the sponsors and donors who made 'Acts of Kindness' a success! It was a wonderful night for the Birmingham community to learn more about the AIDB story and for our students to showcase their limitless talent,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the AIDB Office of Institutional Advancement and the AIDB Foundation. “The funds raised from this event will be used to support the AIDB mission as we work, every day, to prepare individuals to reach their limitless potential by providing superior staff, facilities, training and programs. We are better together and together we are limitless!”

This event was made possible through the support of these generous sponsors:

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Top Left: Mike and Amy Royer Top Center: Laura and Allen Cope. Top Right: Cecelia Miller, Dr. Mike Kulovitz, and Susan Morrow. Center: Alan and Melanie Kirk, Jeff Gaskin, Kent and Marianne McGriffin. Bottom Left: Madison Faile, Artist, with Asher Cobb, Student, Alabama School for the Blind. Bottom Right: Eli Cobb, Olivia Cobb, Debbie Gilliam, and Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President of AIDB.

**SUMMER SPEECH PROGRAM**

By Kristen DeLauney, Au.D., CCC-A, Director of Audiology

FOR MANY CHILDREN, the summer months can signify a decline in academic and developmental progress. However, for children aged 3-18 in Talladega County, a beacon of opportunity emerges each summer through the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind's (AIDB) Summer Speech Program. Featuring specialized speech therapy sessions and tailored activities, this program not only helps children maintain their speech and language skills but also empowers them to make significant strides in overall communication abilities.

This has been the case for AIDB student Landry Kate Wood. Landry Kate was born with profound hearing loss and has used cochlear implants since she was 12 months old. In 2019, she started attending preschool in the Listening and Spoken Language Program at the Alabama School for the Deaf. Last month, Landry Kate graduated from kindergarten and will be moving to mainstream school for first grade. Landry Kate has been part of the Summer Speech Program for four years. Her mother, Lindsey Wood, shared her thoughts on the program, stating, “Summer Speech helps our family bridge the gap between school years to prevent summer regression. For Landry Kate, it provides extra time during the summer to maintain skills developed during the school year. It also gives her the opportunity to work with someone unfamiliar, helping her to use her skills in new situations. The speech therapists have been wonderful and truly invest in their students during their time together.”

The Summer Speech Program thrives on robust community support from organizations such as Easter Seals of Alabama, United Way of North Talladega County, Talladega County Schools Education Foundation, First Bank of Alabama and the AIDB Foundation, which provide essential financial resources. This commitment guarantees that every child in Talladega County requiring additional support can access these crucial services without financial constraints. Each participant benefits from eight 30-minute speech therapy sessions throughout the month of June.

The Summer Speech Program is vital for children overcoming challenges. Supported by community partners, it provides a nurturing environment for confident communicators to thrive. Stories like Landry Kate Wood's highlight its transformative impact. Let's empower young voices in Talladega County, ensuring every child reaches their full potential.

Landry Kate Wood smiles to camera while wearing a kindergarten cap and gown.

**EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS EVERY DAY**

PowerSouth Energy Cooperative Powers the Way to Limitless Futures

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind

IN THE HEART of rural Alabama, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative has long been a pillar of community support. For over 80 years, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative has lived their vision to exceed expectations every day, delivering reliable, affordable power to promote the development of the communities that their 20 distribution members serve throughout Alabama and Florida. PowerSouth Energy Cooperative considers fulfilling their vision as more than a responsibility, it is a privilege.

The commitment of PowerSouth Energy Cooperative to power the development of communities has led to a new partnership with the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Foundation. Recently, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative gave a very generous donation to the AIDB Foundation to support the construction of AIDB’s new Student Life and Conference Center, a space designed to bring students from all campuses together to collaborate on projects, host events and engage in creative endeavors.

“PowerSouth Energy Cooperative has always been a pillar of innovation within the energy industry and we see that same commitment to innovation and positive change at AIDB,” said Gary Smith, PowerSouth Energy Cooperative CEO. “We are honored to partner with the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind and help ensure the students have a bright and limitless future ahead of them.”

“AIDB is honored that PowerSouth has chosen to support the AIDB Student Life and Conference Center that will make a difference in the lives of our students, staff and faculty as well as in the lives of those living in the community of Talladega,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the AIDB Foundation. “I have always found PowerSouth to be genuine in their concern for those they serve and this is just another testament to their ideology of giving back to support AIDB and the Talladega community in a generous way.”

Gary Smith, CEO, PowerSouth Energy, Cooperative looks to camera.

The PowerSouth logo.

**BEYOND FOOTBALL**

Monday Morning Quarterback Club Supports AIDB’s Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

IN OVER 80 SEASONS, the Monday Morning Quarterback Club of Birmingham, Alabama, has never lost a game. What began as a club for the expressed purpose of fellowship among football lovers quickly grew to look beyond football. They looked to fundraise to address the humanitarian needs of their community which led to the development of the Quarterbacking Children’s Health Foundation.

"We at the Quarterbacking Children's Health Foundation see the wonderful things happening through the work at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind,” said Marc Bryant Tyson, President, Quarterbacking Children’s Health Foundation. “It is our pleasure to be able to give to an entity empowering children and adults who are Deaf, Blind, or DeafBlind on their campus in Talladega, as well as those being helped through the regional centers throughout our state. We hope this donation helps in the impactful mission they have set out to do.”

The Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program (MGH) at the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) has seen a similar transformation and growth. What began as a pilot program serving eight students from the Helen Keller School of Alabama has grown to serve over 330 students who are Deaf, Blind, DeafBlind or multidisabled.

With a shared growth and humanitarian spirit, the two organizations banded together for a common good; to provide various equine therapy programs to AIDB’s students.

“The Quarterbacking Children's Health Foundation has been a long-time supporter of the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program,” said Tim Greene, Arena Coordinator, MGH. “They have contributed to making our program successful as we have been fortunate enough to purchase equipment and update our facilities.”

As equipment and facilities have been updated, the longevity of the program has also increased. This, in turn, allows MGH to continue providing equine therapy, sport, and recreation that enhance physical and mental skills, aid in mobilization and promote socialization and communication for AIDB’s students.

“We are extremely thankful for the support of the Quarterbacking Children’s Health Foundation,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of AIDB’s Office of Institutional Advancement and the AIDB Foundation. “Their continuous support is invaluable in ensuring our students are prepared to reach their limitless potential.”

Clara Scelsi, Alabama School for the Blind Student, with MGH Horse Foxy

**"OH HAPPY DAY"**

A GRANT FROM THE HILL CREST FOUNDATION SUPPORTS HAWKINS CHAPEL.

By Jessica Atkinson, Coordinator, AIDB Marketing and Community Relations, Office of Institutional Advancement

Hawkins Chapel sits in the sunlight.

Students take a break from their spiritual journey for a group photo.

EACH DAY AT THE Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), our students have the opportunity to grow physically, academically and emotionally. But thanks to a grant from the Hill Crest Foundation, AIDB's students, who choose to attend AIDB's Hawkins Chapel, also have the chance to grow spiritually.

The Hill Crest Foundation awarded a $25,000 grant to the AIDB Foundation in support of Hawkins Chapel which will allow the AIDB Foundation to continue to conduct chapel activities for students from the Alabama School for the Blind, the Alabama School for the Deaf, E. H. Gentry Facility and the Helen Keller School of Alabama.

Hawkins Chapel provides an open environment for students to ask questions in their own language. That availability makes the environment special for students who are Deaf. For students who are Blind, it is the significant interaction with their peers. For all, including students who are multidisabled, what makes the environment so special is the opportunity to actively participate in the programs offered. Most of AIDB’s students would not have these same opportunities in their hometown church.

“On behalf of the Hill Crest Foundation, we are honored to award AIDB with a $25,000 grant to support the programs held at Hawkins Chapel,” Charles Terry, Jr., Chairman, Hill Crest Foundation. “We are proud to partner with AIDB to prepare students in reaching their limitless potential in all facets of their life.”

Since 1989, the Hill Crest Foundation has been a generous supporter of AIDB programs and has generated resources for the development of the nursing clinic, Hawkins Chapel, the Marianna Greene Henry Special Equestrian Program, a fully-accessible playground at the Helen Keller School of Alabama, the Helen Keller School of Alabama Art Project and assistive technology at Alabama School for the Blind.

“We are very grateful for our partnership with the Hill Crest Foundation,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director, AIDB Foundation. “As long-time supporters of AIDB, they have played an integral role as we continue to transform the lives of our students and consumers beyond all expectations.”

**MERRY CHRISTMAS... IN JULY!**

Christmas in July raises over $145,000 for students at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind

THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT was alive and well this July at the 15th annual Christmas in July on July 20, 2024, at Pier 59 in Vincent, Alabama. The day-long event concluded with a live auction featuring vacation packages, sports memorabilia and beautiful hand-crafted furniture designed to make lake life more comfortable!

Funds raised by Christmas in July will ensure that students at Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf and Helen Keller School of Alabama have a wonderful Christmas, full of gifts and holiday cheer.

A core group of volunteers led by Tim and Rita Chiasson and Janet Swann, owner of Pier 59, begin preparations in January each year for the summertime event. By July, they are ready to host several hundred people who participate in a variety of events held at Pier 59. The event has grown each year, expanding its impact to help more and more AIDB students.

“We're so proud to partner with the Christmas in July Volunteer Committee and this growth shows such a commitment to our students at AIDB,” said Becky Watson, Executive Director of the AIDB Office of Institutional Advancement and the AIDB Foundation.

Dr. Dennis and Debbie Gilliam smile to camera.

Janet Swann and Rita Chiasson smile to camera.

Howard O'Neil holds up a bid number while smiling to the camera.

Jacob Harper, Darrell Harper and Ricky Harper stand together and smile to camera.

Tim Chiasson speaks into a microphone.

April Womack and Jennifer Dowdy smile at the camera.

James Brasher holds up a bid number to make a bid on an auction item.

**THE MGH FAMILY**

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

Left to Right: Noah Moreland, Volunteer, MGH; Analeigh Albright, 5th Grade Student at Alabama School for the Blind; Kyleigh Moreland, Volunteer, MGH; and Stacy Tidwell, Volunteer, MGH

AT THE MARIANNA GREENE HENRY SPECIAL EQUESTRIAN PROGRAM (MGH) we call ourselves the “MGH Family,” and AIDB’s summer camp is one of the times of the year that we feel it the most. Volunteers who live too far away to come on a weekly basis, plan their summer around coming to help with camp. It doesn’t matter where life may take you… once you become part of the family, MGH is always home.

We asked two of our volunteers who come spend the week with us, what summer camp means to them.

“Volunteering at MGH Arena Camp is the highlight of my summer. I think the volunteers are truly just as blessed as the children who attend. There’s just nothing like seeing a child light up when introduced to horses. And while some of them are a bit nervous at first, seeing them overcome their fear and grinning from ear-to-ear while riding or grooming a horse is so beautiful. It truly is a magical place! And helping these children experience it all fills your heart with joy. I’ve made some incredible friends during the past 10 years volunteering at camp. MGH is like a second family and I hope to keep coming for at least another 10 years, if not longer.” – Stacy Tidwell

“I began volunteering at MGH for summer camp when I was 12 years old. This opportunity literally changed my life. When I began volunteering, I had never considered what I 'wanted to be when I grew up.' I began volunteering because I loved horses and wanted to be around them more. I quickly became in love with the kids more and found my calling in life. Through volunteering, I fell in love with special education and now, 16 years later, I am a special education teacher. I have volunteered almost every summer, during the school year some, and with a few special events all because of the relationships with the staff, volunteers and students that I have built. MGH is such a wonderful place and I look forward to being able to bring my own children to volunteer as they get older.” – Becca Gaffin

Aubree Pitts, Student, Listening and Spoken Language Program, grooms the stomach of a horse.

**UPWARD AND OUTWARD MOBILITY: A COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT MODEL**

By Traci Martin, Human Resources Business Partner, Alabama Industries for the Blind

Jaleesia Strayham smiles to the camera while seated at her desk.

JALEESIA STRAYHAM learned her eyesight was significantly impacted by retinal detachment when she was told that she was legally Blind. She turned to Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) Tuscaloosa Regional Center to receive activities of daily living training. In 2016, she joined the Alabama Industries for the Blind (AIB) production team, sewing pillowcases, military neckties and helmet covers. In 2020, she began her participation in the AIB Upward/Outward Mobility Program – a competitive integrated employment initiative providing leadership, assistive technology, educational and job skills training for individuals driven by an individual’s strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities and interests.

Since early 2022, more than 170 AIB employees have opted to participate in the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) NSITE or Alabama Industrial Development Training (AIDT) leadership training programs to receive additional education and rehabilitation training through AIDB’s E. H. Gentry Facility or Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind or to obtain job development services through AIDB’s network of 10 statewide Regional Centers.

With training, each have opportunities to advance from a production worker to a member of AIB leadership or to various other leadership roles within AIDB. In addition to upward mobility, AIB has implemented an outward mobility pathway for employees who aspire to find employment in the community in a production or leadership role outside of AIDB.

“The Upward/Outward Mobility Program is something we are very proud of at AIB,” states AIB Executive Director Jeff Papalia. “At AIB, we give our employees the chance to grow, develop, learn and progress to reach new levels as supervisor, manager and executive positions. AIB provides the tools and training to reach these positions.”

In 2021, Jaleesia accepted a job offer as a Warehouse Clerk in AIB’s retail store. She continued to develop her computer skills, understanding the workflow of the operations within the warehouse and working with the team to increase her knowledge of customer service. In 2022, she was promoted to Purchasing Technician within the AIB Sales and Marketing Department. She has continued to participate in training opportunities through NSITE training of Business Essentials and Effective Supervision and was nominated as the NIB Employee of the Year in 2022.

“I wasn’t always certain of my career path. However, as I progressed from production to becoming a purchasing technician, I gained invaluable knowledge,” notes Jaleesia. “Each challenge underscored the importance of perseverance and adaptability, enabling me to achieve upward mobility in my career.”

**SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS IGNITE CREATIVITY AT WRITER'S WORKSHOP COURSE**

Jessica Chapa, Director, Short-Term Programs

Short-Term Programs recently held a Writer's Workshop course specifically designed for 6th-12th grade students who are Blind or Visually Impaired from across Alabama. This program brought together 11 enthusiastic young writers, providing them with an opportunity to explore their creative potential and enhance their literary skills.

The course featured a series of presentations by a diverse group of local authors and storytellers. Writers such as Kelly Kazek, Carol Cain, Leah Oakley, Tom Brandon, and sisters Ashley and Monique Jones shared their expertise of writing and storytelling. Each presenter brought a unique perspective, inspiring the students with their varied backgrounds and approaches to writing.

The course was not just about listening to presentations; it was a hands-on experience where students engaged in writing exercises. The participants were given prompts by teachers and local authors and storytellers who presented at the course. This collaborative effort provided students with a diverse range of ideas and themes to explore, allowing them to craft their own stories and poems.

Several categories of the Expanded Core Curriculum were incorporated into the course. These included compensatory skills, such as creative writing and literacy; assistive technology, through the use of specialized writing tools; and independent living skills, demonstrated by the kitchen skills training – emphasizing the importance of students’ independence and limitless potential.

Reflecting on the experience, Carol Cain stated, “I hoped that as a storyteller I could inspire students to find and then craft their own stories. What I did not expect was how much these students would impact my own work." Leah Oakley added, "Being with these students was one of the richest blessings of the year."

Short-Term Programs student Maggie from Pike Road, Alabama, shared her thoughts, saying, "It is a great environment for learning writing techniques while talking to first-hand professionals and simply spending time with your friends simultaneously."

The Writer's Workshop course was a resounding success. The students left the program not only with improved writing abilities but also with a sense of accomplishment and empowerment. Short-Term Programs continues to make a significant impact on the lives of students across Alabama who are Blind or Visually Impaired.

Below: Maggie Watts smiles up to the camera while typing.

**ELEVATING ACCESS TO ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY**

By Stephanie Pizza, Director, Center for Assistive Technology Training

ESTABLISHED IN 2019, the Center for Assistive Technology Training (CATT) program began providing services and supports to Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments, educational professionals, students, and families across the Southeastern United States. Over the last five years, the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB) has continued to impart leadership through fulfilling the mission of the program, and directly assisting with and providing oversight for national expansion.

Two additional programs have been created: CATT Southwest based in Phoenix, Arizona, at Foundation for Blind Children and CATT Pacific Northwest in Vancouver, Washington, at Washington State School for the Blind. In collaboration with the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), CATT’s federally funded partner, the capacity to elevate access to assistive technology training and devices now spans 22 states (Florida, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Louisiana, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Alaska, Hawaii) and five U.S. territories (Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa).

As of March 2024, CATT has collectively served over 2,500 individuals across the nation and provided access to more than 1,000 assistive technology devices to Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments and educational professionals. Access to this specialized equipment increases awareness and knowledge, skill set, and the capacity for teachers and staff to better support students with vision differences comprehensively. In turn, student outcomes in the educational setting are positively impacted and acquired skills can be generalized into the home and community settings.

“Assistive technology is an essential component to the education of children and students. Whether low tech or high tech, the implementation and successful utilization of assistive technology establishes a means of access; access to math, science, literacy, interaction with peers and adults, gainful employment, and most importantly, independence," said Stephanie Pizza, Director, CATT.

CATT provides training on and supports a variety of Braille notetakers, embossers, Braille teaching tools, coding/STEM products, electronic magnifiers, screen readers, and other equipment to support visual skills and access. For more information, visit www.aidb.org/catt or email catt@aidb.org.

Marquitta Riggins explores Assistive Technology options with CATT Trainer Susie Thomas

**EDMISTON NAMED CHIEF ADULT PROGRAMS OFFICER AT AIDB**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind

Jessica Edmiston smiles at the camera from behind her desk.

JESSICA EDMISTON has been named the Chief Adult Programs Officer at Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB). Edmiston will provide leadership to Alabama Industries for the Blind, E. H. Gentry Facility and the Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind.

“To be named Chief Adult Programs Officer is a tremendous honor and a position I take on with great excitement and passion,” said Edmiston. “Dedicating 27 years of service to AIDB has been underscored by the support of my immediate and AIDB families along with guidance and encouragement from the Deaf, Blind and DeafBlind communities. I am truly grateful and humbled while remaining unwaveringly and unequivocally committed to AIDB, our team members, our partners and our communities while continually striving towards and exceeding the standard of excellence in innovation, education and rehabilitation that AIDB embodies nationally.”

Edmiston’s career spans over 27 years; including 6 years as owner of Kaizen Consulting, LLC and 21 years at AIDB. Most recently Edmiston served as the Executive Director of E. H. Gentry Facility and the Director of Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind. Edmiston’s executive leadership at AIDB has resulted in awards in excess of $25 million, developing some of AIDB's most significant programs related to structured discovery, Autism, transportation, mentoring, manufacturing, job development, American Sign Language interpreter training, energy retrofits, and technology. Prior to her service at E. H. Gentry Facility, Edmiston was the Director of the AIDB Birmingham Regional Center. Under her leadership, the regional center experienced significant growth in its programs and services for people from birth to aging who are Deaf, Blind and DeafBlind. While at the regional center, Edmiston also created and implemented the Alabama Freedom Center for the Blind, one of only eight programs of its type nationwide. Edmiston began her career at AIDB in the Office of Institutional Advancement where she had a strong impact on the organization’s philanthropic efforts.

“I am immensely pleased to support our search committee's unanimous recommendation of Ms. Edmiston for Chief Adult Programs Officer,” said Dennis Gillam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “Jessica has proven herself as a dedicated AIDB employee for 21 years and a valuable asset to the AIDB team. Ms. Edmiston's attention to detail is outshined only by her level of creativity in ways to serve our students and consumers who are Deaf, Blind or DeafBlind. She keeps the student or consumer first, which exemplifies our mission at AIDB.”

**AIDB NAMES ANDY KEITH CHIEF EDUCATION PROGRAMS OFFICER**

By Jacque Cordle, Director, Marketing and Community Relations, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind

Andy Keith smiles at the camera.

ALABAMA INSTITUTE FOR DEAF AND BLIND (AIDB) has named Andy Keith as its new Chief Education Programs Officer, a position that will provide leadership and direction to AIDB’s three K-12 schools, Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf and Helen Keller School of Alabama; as well as Heath and Clinical Services and the Child Nutrition Program.

“Mr. Keith has brought a great deal of administrative expertise to the AIDB family,” said Dennis Gilliam, Ed.D., President, AIDB. “His ‘can-do’ attitude and dedication to the education of the students and clients of AIDB have only increased during his tenure as an employee. We look forward to all the great things he will do within our educational programs.”

Before being named the Chief Education Programs Officer, Keith served as Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Accreditation at AIDB. Keith has also served as Assistant Principal for Administrative Development and Continuous Improvement at Alabama School for the Deaf, a position he held prior to his promotion to Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Accreditation. Keith has also served as the Principal of Alabama School for the Blind.

Keith is a graduate of Jacksonville State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Health and Physical Education and a Master of Science in Educational Administration. Keith has also earned an Educational Specialist Degree in Instructional Leadership from the University of West Alabama.

“Growing up in Talladega and having my grandfather work at Alabama Industries for the Blind, I consider AIDB home. I remember visiting my grandfather at work, and he walked me through the plant, introducing me to all the workers. That is truly one of my fondest memories as a young child,” said Keith, Chief Education Programs Officer. “The mission that AIDB stands for is powerful: serving others. I am thankful that I get to be a small part of that mission. Our students and staff go above and beyond every day, overcoming obstacles and barriers and exhibiting their limitless potential. I am truly humbled that I have been selected to serve in this role. This is a dream opportunity. I will not let AIDB down!"

**CONGRATULATIONS 2024 Graduates**

On May 24, Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind celebrated the graduates from Alabama School for the Blind, Alabama School for the Deaf and Helen Keller School of Alabama.

Congratulations to all graduates!

Thank you for reminding us that together, we are Deaf. Blind. Limitless!

ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

Alabama School for the Blind graduates stand on steps in their caps and gowns and look at the camera.

Front Row (L to R): Chrislynn Oliver, Braxton Gardner, Samantha Taylor, Mariel Woodall, Shardae Gray and Tamya DeWitt

Middle Row (L to R): Angel Meyer, Moises Fransisco, Bobby Joe Hayes, Daymion Winfrey and Miguel Andres

Back Row (L to R): Jaden Ochoa-Vallejo, Zachary Glasgow, Nyzier Posey, Noah Price, Keith Meadows and Cole Young

ALABAMA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF

Alabama School for the Deaf graduates stand on steps in their caps and gowns and look at the camera.

Front Row (L to R): Taqunia Dandridge, Derek Irizarry-Ruiz, Ashley Wentworth, Lily Tucker and Antonia Ruiz

Back Row (L to R): Jaycee Tucker, Kristopher Williams, Austin Hayes, Triallen Washington and Brianna Pettway

HELEN KELLER SCHOOL OF ALABAMA

Helen Keller School of Alabama graduates stand in their caps and gowns and look at the camera.

L to R: Ethan Jordan, Christian Santiago, Tyler Beard, Thomas "Carson" Meadows and Timirra Spencer

The AIDB Logo with the Deaf. Blind. Limitless tagline.

P.O. Box 698

Talladega, AL 35161

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

**Ways YOU Can Make a Difference**

DONATE TO AIDB’S ANNUAL FUND CAMPAIGN.

SUPPORT ACADEMIC OR EXTRA-CURRICULAR PROGRAMS.

ESTABLISH A PLANNED OR LEGACY GIFT.

MAKE A GIFT OF APPROPRIATE SECURITIES.

CREATE AN ENDOWMENT FUND.

A student smiles at the camera on the first day of school and signs “I love you” in American Sign Language to the camera.

The AIDB Logo.