

ABC of NC | **20 YEARS!** | 2002 – 22

abc

It started in 2002 with a few optimistic autism treatment pioneers and six young behaviorists working out of the trunks of their cars.



Selene Johnson,  
ABC of NC executive  
director, in her first  
office—the trunk  
of her Subaru

ABC of NC no longer uses the puzzle piece to represent autism, as we understand many in the autism community reject this symbol for its potential ableist implications. Some photos in this publication may contain images of a puzzle piece due to their historical nature, but they do not imply that ABC of NC supports its use currently.

#### Dear ABC of NC Community:

As we celebrate our double-decade anniversary, it's fitting to reveal ABC of NC's astonishing transformation through this diverse collection of shared experiences from our clients, our employees, and the greatest, most generous community we could ever imagine.

This is our journey over the last 20 years. The heroes of our story: the ABC of NC staff, clients, families, and our ever-faithful donors. There were obstacles aplenty—securing funding, finding facilities, legislative barriers, and skepticism of science. But we prevailed. And now, with this publication, we celebrate the incredible accomplishments we witnessed since the adventure began.

It started in 2002 with a few optimistic autism treatment pioneers and six young behaviorists working out of the trunks of their cars. Today, we continue to be amazed by our staff of nearly 100 professionals who provide the highest level of therapies and educational services to over 400 unique, delightful, and captivating children and families each year. Our staff worked tirelessly, trained, innovated, and loved our kids while teaching them to say their first words, form friendships, and live as independently as possible.

## Happy 20th Anniversary to **ABC of NC!**



We marveled as our organization transformed Winston-Salem from a community with few autism resources to a nationally known center of comprehensive services. Along the way, our donor community gave from their hearts and we, along with so many other families with a loved one on the spectrum, became the beneficiaries—finding silver linings in the smallest accomplishments and celebrating the bigger ones like nobody's business.

Yes, this journey is personal for us—our son, Hayes, tells his own story (honestly and brilliantly, in our opinion) within this magazine. But all of us—clients, staff, and community—travel these roads together, forever changed, as we continue our mission. Our shared destination is the vision where all people with autism spectrum disorder reach their full potential in a world where they are valued, accepted, and included. Hayes reflected on this beautifully in his article.

“... We on the spectrum must no longer feel ashamed of feeling like we don't belong in mainstream society, that we are somehow 'inferior' and 'broken.' ... This is why it is so important that we neither deny the resources nor the dignity that can make all the difference in the lives of thousands of individuals. ... To actualize our potential is not an easy task. ... But it is possible and very much worth fighting for.”

We are forever grateful and changed by your support, compassion, and generosity. Thank you for 20 years of listening to our story, standing behind us, and marking this milestone.

**Felice Brenner**  
Board Chair, ABC of NC

**Richard Brenner**  
Board Chair, ABC of NC Foundation

# history

Since the 1980s, a growing number of North Carolina and South Carolina parents have pursued services for their children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In 1992, a parent group, Autism Treatment Options (ATO), held a conference featuring researchers presenting new educational and therapeutic methods for ASD. Proceeds from the event allowed the organization to help set up an autism research replication site to serve families in North Carolina and South Carolina. The replication site, Autism Research Center (ARC), served children with ASD throughout the Southeast with consultative-model, home-based programs.

Families for Early Autism Treatment (FEAT) of North Carolina, a nonprofit organization of parents and professionals, was founded in 2000 with the mission to help families of children with ASD. Their objectives were to promote applied behavior analysis (ABA) as a proven, effective therapy for autism; increase the number of children using ABA; and educate medical, educational, political, and lay communities about autism and ABA. ABA is the application of behavioral principles, such as prompting and reinforcement, to produce socially significant improvement in human behavior. In addition, a group of individuals in Winston-Salem, NC, started a fund to establish an organization that would provide ABA services to families who could not otherwise access them.

In 2002, the ARC and FEAT of NC combined efforts to create ABC of NC, a nonprofit organization offering center-based, one-on-one instruction, small group instruction, parent/caregiver classes, and ASD community education and support. ABC of NC was the first in our community to offer these services and remains the only comprehensive nonprofit autism services provider in North Carolina even 20 years later.

The ABC of NC Education Center earned accreditation from AdvancED (now

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Cognia) in 2011. Cognia accreditation assures parents/caregivers that ABC of NC meets nationally accepted quality and professional practice standards. Cognia is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts rigorous, on-site external reviews of PreK-12 schools and school systems to ensure that all learners realize their full potential.

In 2013, ABC of NC further expanded its mission and services to add a diagnostic and therapeutic clinic to its educational facility. The clinic was established primarily to address an “access to services” issue that was growing in our community. The clinic provides therapeutic services to individuals diagnosed with autism and their families, including parents and siblings. In addition to therapeutic services, the clinic offers complete diagnostic autism evaluations, resulting in more expedited referrals for intervention services when appropriate. (Due to COVID-19, diagnostic services have been on hold since 2020.)

May 2015 ushered in a new phase of growth and expansion for ABC of NC. Following more than eight years of

leasing facilities on Old Vineyard Road, ABC of NC purchased property at 905 Friedberg Church Road in Winston-Salem. After completing renovations to the existing building and making necessary grounds improvements at the new location, ABC of NC opened the doors to its new facility in December 2015.

After a long period of advocacy and the passing of Christopher’s Law, many private health insurance plans and NC Medicaid began covering autism support services in 2017. (Read more about this journey in the article “Autism Insurance Reform in North Carolina.”) With more families now having coverage for autism therapies, it was clear that the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina needed a comprehensive, cutting-edge autism services campus for the growing population of autistic children, adolescents, and young adults. To meet this need, ABC of NC initiated its \$7M Hello World capital campaign, which funded the construction of the 26,000-square-foot SECU Autism Clinic and the Burress Activity Center. The new campus buildings opened in July 2018, allowing ABC of NC to broaden services to better serve our community.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused nationwide shutdowns in early 2020. ABC of NC quickly pivoted and began offering temporary in-home services to families to prevent prolonged disruptions in therapy. After the stay-at-home order was lifted, ABC of NC reopened the campus with stringent COVID-19 prevention protocols in place. Throughout the pandemic, ABC of NC has continued to offer services to families while following CDC guidelines and practicing heightened protocols designed to prevent transmission of the virus to our clients and staff.

Today ABC of NC continues to provide hope for bright futures for more than 400 autistic people and their families while advocating for a world in which all people with autism feel valued, accepted, and included.



- 1992 FOUNDING OF FAMILIES FOR EARLY AUTISM TREATMENT (FEAT)
- 1992 FOUNDING OF AUTISM RESEARCH CENTER (ARC)
- 2000 CENTER-BASED SERVICES AT HIGHLAND PRESBYTERIAN
- 2000 COMBINED ARC & FEAT TO FORM ABC
- 2004 MOVED TO OLD VINEYARD ROAD
- 2007 ACCREDITATION FROM ADVANCED
- 2011 PURCHASED FRIEDBERG CHURCH ROAD PROPERTY
- 2013 OPENED DIAGNOSTIC & THERAPEUTIC CLINIC
- 2015 OPENED SECU AUTISM CLINIC & BURRESS ACTIVITY CENTER
- 2018





# three buildings, two degrees, and a wedding an employee reflection



Top:  
Highland  
Presbyterian  
Church

Center:  
Employees in  
front of Old Vineyard  
Road location

Bottom:  
The entrance to the  
SECU Autism Clinic at  
ABC of NC on Friedberg  
Church Road

**By Cindy Andree Bowen MA, BCBA,**  
Program Supervisor  
Adaptive Martial Arts Instructor

I first learned about ABC of NC while working as an in-home therapist for a young autistic child in the early 2000s while finishing my undergraduate degree in Elementary Education. My supervisor, providing direction over the home program, was also a program supervisor at ABC of NC. The summer I graduated with my degree coincided with the opening of ABC of NC's center-based autism clinic. Even though I had a freshly minted NC teaching license in hand, my heart was tugging at me to keep working with autistic children with this fledgling nonprofit organization.

Continuing to work with my current client in the mornings, I began working as a 1:1 behavior tech for ABC of NC in the afternoons. Nestled into the Ardmore neighborhood, with a core staff of less than 10, ABC of NC was then working out of Highland Presbyterian Church and neighboring activity building. These were definitely exciting times. Monday mornings involved hauling our teaching supplies and furniture from the outdoor storage unit into the church (and rearranging church furniture to protect their property), and Friday afternoons required the reverse. We worked really hard to prevent disruptions to midweek funeral services in the chapel and had to deep clean pretty often (the origin of "code orange" was Cheetos flung far and wide). Giving our clients ready access to a center with mission-oriented colleagues was worth all of the physical effort of sharing a space with our generous hosts.

As ABC of NC grew and continued to expand, we moved to a former Montessori school building on Old Vineyard Road. Our relatively small organization was over the moon to have a place that felt like our own. The Old Vineyard Road building was a dream in many ways. The gross motor room was spacious, and the classrooms were extra-large. (The gross motor room was so expansive I was able to host my wedding reception there at ABC of NC!) The building was also able to support



**"My heart was tugging  
at me to keep working  
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our summer educational program with significant influxes in students. We had classrooms that would hold multiple groups of students at one time when the need arose. After a while, to accommodate our ever-expanding number of students, we added a double-wide modular office space on the hill, next to our beautiful building, to fit our very own psychology suite for diagnostic services! Our vision was coming to fruition.

At this point in my career, I was invested and committed to becoming a behavior analyst so that I could continue doing what I loved: working with my favorite neurotype of human. I completed my master's degree and became a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). ABC of NC's tireless efforts towards an equitable and sustainable service delivery model then led me into the world of insurance and medically necessary therapy, a not-fun but crucial understanding for me. With the support of ABC of NC and Champions in Motion, I also started a passion project to bring weekly, free adaptive martial arts classes to neurodivergent members of the community and their siblings.

ABC of NC's most recent move to the Friedberg Church Road campus has been almost beyond the wildest dreams of my 22-year-old self, working out of a church with a storage unit. First, moving into what is now the school building and then constructing the clinic and activities building to create the first comprehensive campus for autism services in the state of North Carolina was an inspirational experience. This campus was designed with our clinical team's insights into what we felt would provide our clients with the most valuable learning setting. The community labs are genuinely cutting edge and so much more convenient and efficient than the field trips I had previously been taking with clients to work on these goals. Our new campus also provided the space to expand service opportunities for our clients to include counseling, academic tutoring, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. These options have been such a beneficial addition to our programming and a welcomed expansion of my professional and personal growth.

Today, I have a front corner office in the school with big windows and a welcoming space to host students who want to collaboratively problem-solve a situation or just enjoy each other's company. I have a team of dedicated professionals who continuously impress me and whom I enjoy mentoring. ABC of NC has been a part of my journey professionally and through the milestones of my life, including completing degrees, marriage, and having both of my children spend their preschool years here and growing into ABC of NC's biggest cheerleaders right alongside me.

**Here's to the next 20 years!**



# beyond our campus

abc of nc's  
community impact

By **Selene Johnson** M.Ed., BCBA  
Executive Director

Since ABC of NC was founded, we have been committed to advocating for inclusion and acceptance by engaging the broader community in the places where autistic people live, learn, work, and play. The vision of ABC of NC is that all people with autism spectrum disorder reach their full potential in a world where they are valued, accepted, and included. We recognize that our work must extend beyond our campus to realize this vision.

Notably, one of the places we have had significant community impact has been in our work with public, private, and charter schools. Over the years, we have provided support to more than 15 public school districts and many private schools and preschools, including large-scale district-wide training, targeted workshops, individual classroom consultation, and direct student services. Our work has reached hundreds of school personnel across many positions—administrators/principals, teachers, teacher assistants, speech/language pathologists, school psychologists, guidance counselors, and others.

Most of this work has been funded through generous community grants, including Wells Fargo, Reynolds American Foundation, and The Pratt Family Foundation. When we foster school district partnerships, not only do we connect with school personnel, we also impact all the children they serve.

In the broader community, we work with organizations to help them become more inclusive for people on the autism spectrum. Instead of having a “special needs day” or a “sensory-friendly day,” we hope

**“I wish your trainer could come to my school!!!** So many good tips and examples. I can’t wait to share what I learned. We are a public school of 750 students, and we have a very large amount of students with autism. ... Your tips will be so helpful for the students and teacher communication.”

**Public School Administrator**

that our community will embrace and include autistic people every day. We have provided training and support materials to various community organizations and businesses, including Kaleideum Children’s Museum, Lowe’s Foods, Riverwood Therapeutic Riding Center, the YMCA, Peppercorn Children’s Theatre, Forsyth County Public Library, and more. In 2018, we provided training for more than 90 Great Clips hairstylists so they could learn how to be sensitive and inclusive to folks on the spectrum, many of whom find getting a haircut to be a stressful or traumatic experience.

ABCares is a program designed to reduce health disparities in autism by building an inclusive and equitable network of care through culturally responsive autism practices and concentrating on

families with additional unmet social needs. A key element of this program involves training community gatekeepers and their staff to recognize signs of autism and encourages them to provide referrals to families for autism support services in addition to the resources they are already providing. By increasing gatekeepers’ knowledge of autism and reinforcing the importance of early diagnosis and early intervention through referrals, ABC of NC aims to provide accessible, evidence-based programs for more children with autism and their caregivers in our community.

Our initial community partners for this program include Atrium Health (The Downtown Health Plaza), Imprints Cares, Parenting Path, The Children’s Home Society, and the Forsyth County Department of Social Services. We are grateful to our ABCares funding partners, The James G. Hanes Memorial Fund, the Richard J. Reynolds, III and Marie M. Reynolds Foundation, and Novant Health, for supporting this exceptional initiative.

ABC of NC also partners with local colleges and universities to help prepare the next generation of autism service providers. We host interns and practicum students from Winston Salem State University, Wake Forest University, High Point University, Forsyth Technical Community College, Appalachian State University, and many more. These students come from a variety of educational programs, including speech/language pathology, education, psychology, nursing, occupational therapy, and other human services professions.



**“I wish everyone knew how ABC of NC has changed the lives of so many families in a meaningful and positive way.** Their impact goes beyond the kids they’re helping directly. They help that child’s immediate and extended family, their communities, the employers of their family members and caregivers—and so many more.”

**Gabriel Bottazzi**, ABC of NC Board of Directors  
CEO, LBCM Todos Health Management, LLC





# "abc of nc was the best!"

## an abc of nc parent-child experience

By Paul Tutherow (parent) with a reflection by Lisa Tutherow (former client)

In Paul's words:

I first heard about ABC of NC from another autism parent at a community support group for parents with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. My daughter, Lisa, and I had recently returned to the States after living in Korea for six years. I struggled to understand why autism was a concern since most of what I was reading sounded like it described what I had always accepted as "normal." When I arrived for a tour of the ABC of NC campus and enrolled my daughter in the Summer Education Program (SEP), I had not yet been diagnosed with autism.

The SEP changed my daughter's life. Lisa had just finished kindergarten, and her experience had been so poor that she did not want to go back to school. The SEP reminded her of the love and care she received from her daycare and nursery in Korea. There were many different activities such as outdoor games and swimming. She left kindergarten ready to give up on school, but ABC of NC taught her a love for reading and education over the next several years.

Meanwhile, I was able to serve as a parent volunteer for ABC of NC, which meant that day to day, I was interacting with the program directors and other staff at ABC of NC. While I was learning about how autism impacted my daughter, I was also learning about myself and how the way I related to the world was not the same as everyone around me. With ABC of NC's moral support, I began pursuing a diagnosis for myself. My daughter continued in the ABC of NC Junior Readiness

In Lisa's words:

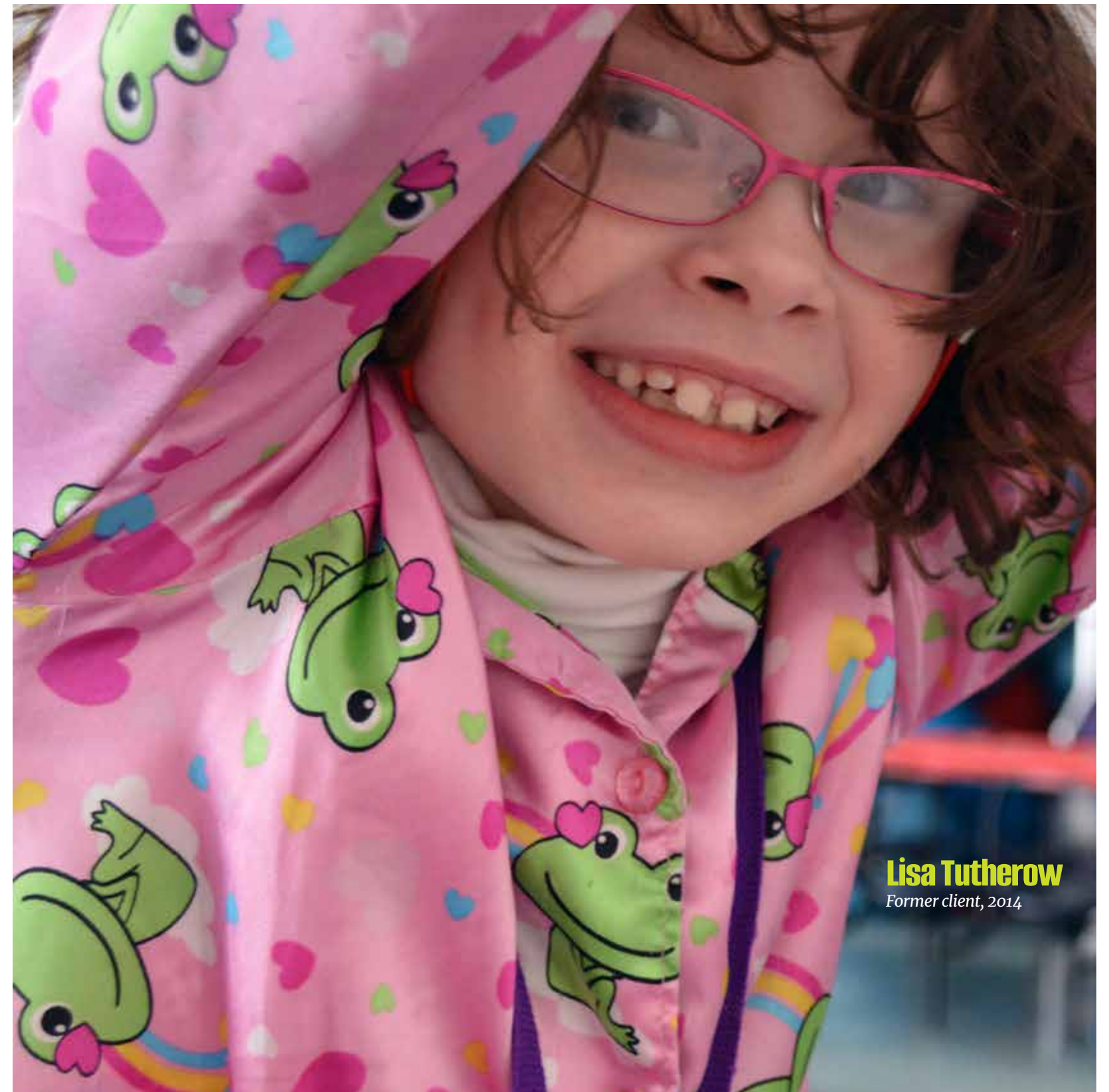
ABC of NC was the best! I looked forward to seeing my friends every day because we had so much fun together. My teachers were nice, too. I specifically remember losing a lens from my glasses in the ball pit. Instead of telling my parents about it for me, they helped me tell them myself.

My father told me that I went to ABC of NC for therapy. I don't remember all of that; I just remember how much fun it was!

What I wish everyone knew about ABC of NC is how much they meant to me because looking back—I don't know if I would be doing so well in school now without the help and care they offered me then.

Today, as the school year 2022 wraps up, Lisa Tutherow is 15 years old. She is finishing her ninth-grade academic year. Lisa completed 30 hours of driver's education without any accommodations and will take in-car training soon. Planning to pursue science in college, she continues to be excited about her education and is on a path to success.

Class for her first- and second-grade years. During this time, the program director and teachers helped recognize and target her struggles with goals that helped her overcome her challenges in a safe and caring environment. While I was reluctant about her transition back to public school, she sailed like a rock star. Even after the transition, Stephanie Holladay, Lisa's program supervisor, continued to offer support with IEP meetings, continuing goals, and providing resources for Lisa directly, as well as for her mother and me, as parents. Lisa was one of the original members of the Adaptive Martial Arts class at ABC of NC. Eventually, she transitioned from the adaptive program to Tiger Kim's, where she earned her black belt in Taekwondo. She returned to the adaptive martial arts at ABC of NC as a student assistant, allowing her to give back to the community that had embraced her. As a student assistant, Cindy Andree Bowen, the Adaptive Martial Arts instructor, provided guidance that helped Lisa be successful in this role while growing her social skills.



**Lisa Tutherow**  
Former client, 2014



**"In 2014, I was finally clinically diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.** This diagnosis gave me new insight into my differences. I am now an advocate for early intervention, parent education, and community representation so that today's generation of autistic individuals can look forward to better outcomes. I recently joined ABC of NC's Board of Directors and am excited to help guide the organization into the future."

Paul Tutherow





# Our ABCs of **d e i + b**

## diversity, equity, inclusion + belonging

**By Darlene Steele MSOL**  
*Clinical Practice Manager*

Change is happening in our small corner of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The ABC of NC motto, “You Belong Here,” is reflected on signs throughout campus, the LGBTQIA+ Safe Zone email signature is seen among many, and our Black Lives Matter sign greets all who enter the clinic. These are impactful reminders of ABC of NC’s commitment to DEI+B practices being put into action.

ABC of NC knows that DEI+B initiatives are important to our clients, staff, board members, parents/caregivers, partners, and the broader community. We recognize the importance of developing cultural competence and cultural humility in our team to ensure we most effectively serve our clients, who come from a variety of different backgrounds, cultures, and family structures.

Belonging to an inclusive organization focused on equity across diverse individuals can seem far-fetched, especially for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). Not at ABC of NC. Selene Johnson, the executive director, has been proactive in her vision for leading the organization in its DEI+B journey. We are effectively building a solid foundation of equity, acceptance, respect, and inclusion. Transparency has been the main objective to promote buy-in and understanding while inspiring passion, drive, and commitment from all.

The commitment to our DEI+B initiatives is also evident in our actions. We have updated our recruitment practices, reviewed all policies and procedures through a DEI+B lens, and have embedded DEI+B trainings throughout our professional development opportunities. All of our staff participate in ongoing cultural competence training each year, and we offer an optional anti-racist growth group for those who want to do more. The Champions, a focus group of diverse staff from across our organization, provide support for staff and guidance to address difficult conversations relating to DEI+B. They also lead cultural-related activities across our campus that promote inclusivity.

ABC of NC is a place where all belong! Our DEI+B vision for the organization is to carry out our cultural competency plan, ensure that we provide culturally sensitive and relevant treatment for clients, recruit a diverse workforce, eliminate barriers, and provide an environment where all feel safe, accepted, and included. We are proud to say, **“YOU BELONG HERE, too!”**







# a heritage of **community** **support** building an autism service legacy

**By Angie Wilson**  
Director of Development

Approximately 20 years ago, a couple of concerned parents, a few dedicated autism professionals, and a generous community changed the lives of thousands of children in North Carolina. ABC of NC was founded by the family of a child with autism who experienced successful gains with early, intensive behavior therapy. They felt that every child should have access to quality services and opportunities. Their heartfelt mission included access to quality autism services regardless of a family's financial status.

"When our two-year-old son was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in 1997, we were lost as to where to turn, what to do. There were few resources in Winston-Salem, but we were the lucky ones. We could afford the thousands of dollars that it cost to bring professionals in from out of state to help us run intensive in-home programs for our son," said Richard Brenner, one of the founders of ABC of NC and chair of the ABC of NC Foundation. "But there were hundreds of children in our area who could not afford or access this effective therapy. We were struck by the tragedy of this inequity and decided to do something about it."

Richard and his wife, Felice, gathered family members, most notably Richard's mother, Ann, for seed money. They hired an autism professional from California

**"As a donor, I can say that financially, it's the best return on investment I've ever seen. To see the progress these kids make while in the warm embrace of the dynamic, well-trained, dedicated staff is absolutely amazing to watch."**

*Board member, long-time supporter, and community advocate* **John Burress**

to start working with families in their homes across the Piedmont Triad. Shortly afterward, the Brennens met Mary Louise and John Burress who also became passionate supporters of the vision. In 2002, ABC of NC was officially founded, and an autism services leader was born.

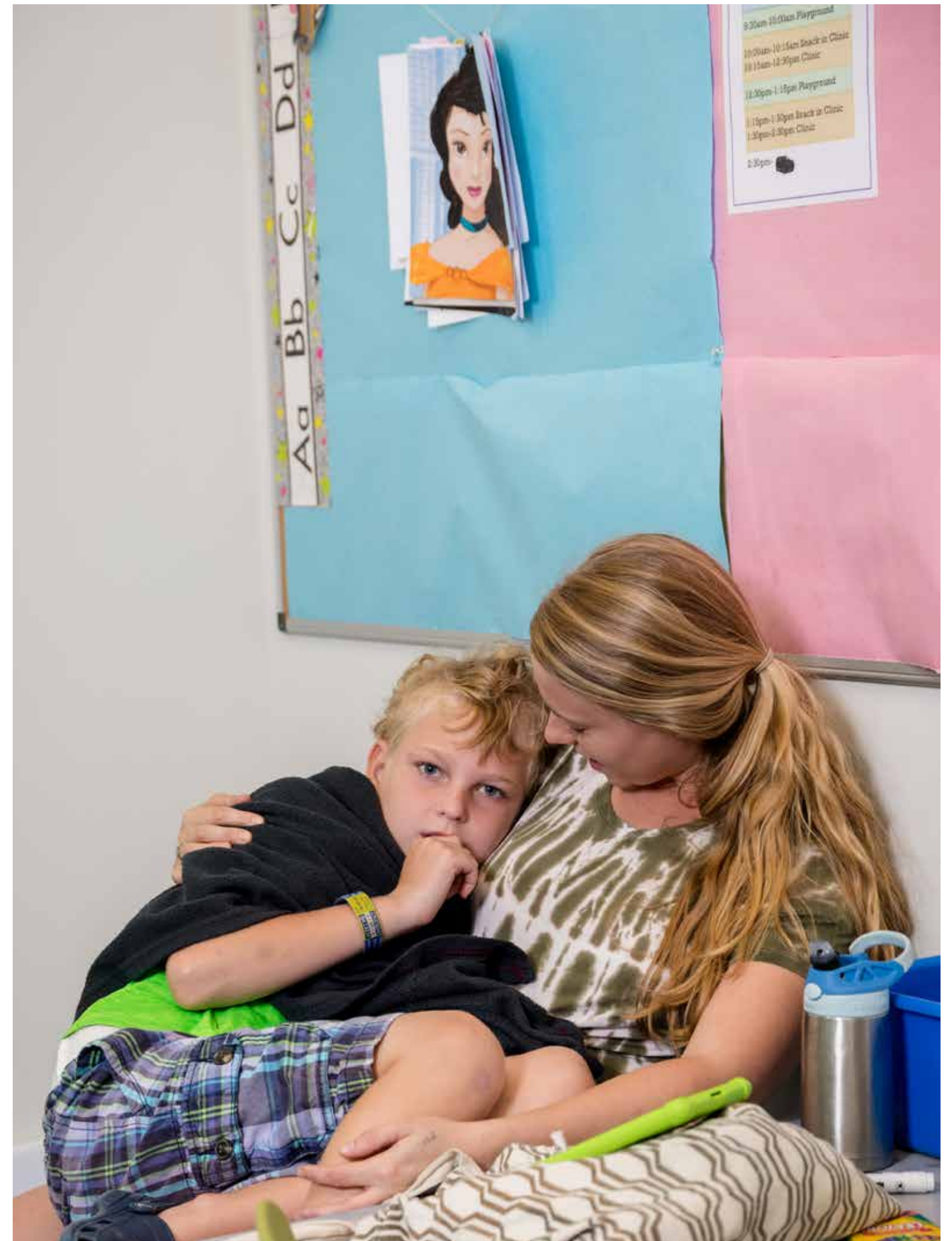
After securing a complex system of funding for in-home autism services, ABC of NC leaders knew they needed to establish a center-based program so that parents could access quality therapies and still work outside the home. In August 2004, community leaders Nancy and Gilmour

Lake and Claire and Randall Tuttle helped the organization secure donated space from their church, Highland Presbyterian, to create ABC of NC's first centralized service location.

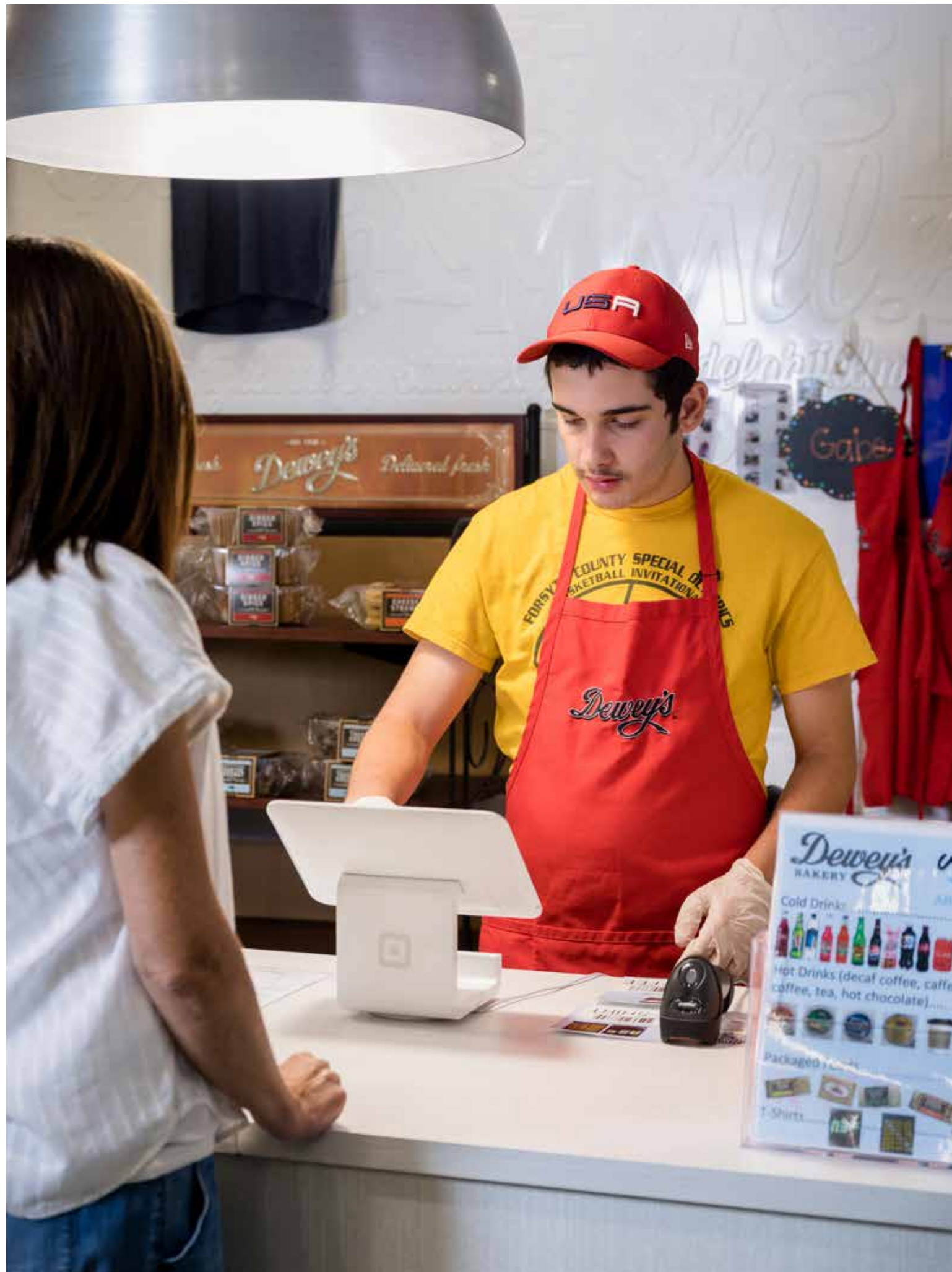
Many families paid out-of-pocket therapy costs, so ABC of NC created the Gourmet Lunchbox Lunch fundraiser in 2007 to raise funds to help with these costs. Since its inception, ABC of NC's financial aid program has awarded more than \$2.5 million to families who would not otherwise have been able to access critical autism services. Generous donors over the years include Brenner siblings Sally and Larry Wolfish and Van Brenner.

Meanwhile, ABC of NC and its fundraising needs continued to grow. After another move, it became clear that ABC of NC needed a home of its own with additional space. ABC of NC embarked on its most ambitious fundraising campaign yet.

With careful research that looked at the needs of children with autism, their family members, and the broader community, ABC of NC planned to build a 26,000-square-foot clinical building and a 4,000-square-foot gymnasium. ABC of NC initiated its Hello World Capital Campaign in 2015 and raised nearly \$7 million to build the first comprehensive campus for autism services in the state.







Community funds, businesses, and individuals contributed generously to the capital campaign. These included Reynolds American Foundation, Wake Forest Baptist Health, Thomas R. Adams, Cynthia Anderson, BB&T, The Cannon Foundation, Golden LEAF Foundation, James G. Hanes Memorial Fund, Melanie and Robert Niblock, Kenneth A. Steele, Ellen and Andy Schindler, Paul Fulton, The Winston-Salem Foundation, Marilyn and Bob Beach, the Pope Foundation, and many others. The extended Brenner, Kurtz, Eisenberg, Grosswald, Kaplan, and Rosenberg families continued their generous support.

At \$1.5 million, the largest donation came from the member-funded SECU Foundation, and our clinical building was named the SECU Autism Clinic. The gymnasium was named "The Burress Activity Center" to honor the contributions of Mary Louise and John Burress.

"I have been involved with ABC of NC since the very beginning of the organization. I have watched as it has grown from a couple of concerned parents to a

thriving nonprofit organization providing diverse services to children with autism and their families," said board member, long-time supporter, and community advocate John Burress. "As a donor to the organization, I can say that financially, it is the best return on investment that I have ever seen. To see the progress that these kids make while in the warm embrace of the dynamic, well-trained, dedicated staff is absolutely amazing to watch. An investment in these kids and in ABC of NC is an investment in our community—an investment that pays incredible dividends."

To commemorate the organization's 20th anniversary, ABC of NC is establishing the Burress-Brenner Employee Scholarship Fund. This new program allows eligible ABC of NC employees to pursue advanced degrees that further the treatment and education of children with autism. The organization believes that by investing in the staff who work with children on the spectrum, they ensure the highest quality therapy and support services for their families.

**"ABC of NC started as an idea, grew because of our generous community, and exists today at the forefront of autism service delivery."**

"This new scholarship fund is a fitting tribute to our most generous supporters," said Richard Brenner. "We can't begin to thank every single contributor for joining us on this exciting adventure and opening a world of possibilities for individuals with autism."



# making autism support **accessible to all**

## autism insurance reform in nc

By Leigh Ellen Spencer  
Client Relations/Compliance Coordinator

Believe it or not, for many years, autism was an excluded condition on many, if not most, health insurance plans. One family told ABC of NC about their shocking situation: their insurance company covered speech therapy for their neurotypical child who couldn't pronounce her Rs, but the same insurance company would not cover speech or any other therapies for their nonverbal child who was diagnosed with autism. In 2002, the year ABC of NC was founded, only one state, Indiana, had passed autism insurance reform, presumably because a legislator there was the grandfather of an autistic child.

Finding the lack of insurance coverage for autism treatment to be a complete travesty, our ABC of NC founders, Felice and Richard Brenner; our executive director, Selene Johnson; and board member and autism advocate extraordinaire, John Burrell, sought to change things. In 2007, only three states had passed legislation, but we were determined to change that! Our team of dedicated advocates began working alongside many other autism advocacy organizations to pass autism insurance reform in North Carolina. Our work included endless strategy meetings, grassroots organizing, and countless trips to Raleigh to talk with legislators. We even chartered a bus to take our clients to Raleigh so they could engage in self-advocacy.

**One family told us their insurance covered speech therapy for their neurotypical child but no therapies for their nonverbal child with autism**

After years of hard work, multiple bills that died in committee, and more ups and downs than a roller coaster, the North Carolina legislature finally passed the autism insurance bill in 2015, becoming the 43rd state to require certain health plans to cover Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy. In 2016, the law went into effect, and in 2017, NC Medicaid also began coverage. This was a significant turning point for NC families who can now access critical therapies for their child(ren) on the spectrum.

While the passage of autism insurance reform was a huge victory, there was another hurdle to cross for the legislation to be truly meaningful. North Carolina

was the only state in the United States in which Board Certified Behavior Analysts were not allowed to practice except under the supervision of a licensed psychologist. This created barriers to treatment accessibility and left families across the state of NC on long waiting lists for services. ABC of NC Executive Director Selene Johnson led a decade-long, statewide effort to pass a Behavior Analyst Licensure Bill to remove the cumbersome limitation of psychologist oversight, allowing BCBA's to practice more efficiently. The Behavior Analyst Licensure Bill was signed into law in May 2021. In September 2021, Selene was appointed to the first NC Behavior Analyst Licensure Board, where she now serves as chair. We expect this legislation to open the doors to treatment options for people across North Carolina.

In October 2021, ABC of NC staff joined autism advocates from across the United States at the Green State Gala to celebrate the passage of autism insurance legislation in all 50 states.

ABC of NC continues to advocate to ensure that families have access to educational and therapeutic services. One of our current endeavors involves working with the public schools, fellow advocates, and families to ensure that students with significant needs are receiving a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

**Our work continues ...**



Signing of North Carolina Autism Insurance Bill, also known as Christopher's Law



The Green State Gala



Signing the Behavior Analyst Licensure Bill into law





**“everyone**  
is just like  
they’re  
supposed  
to be.”



**By Angela Pesenti**  
*ABC of NC Financial Counselor  
and Accountant*

My kids don't have autism, but ABC of NC made a huge impact in their lives. My son and daughter both participated in ABC of NC programs as they grew up. My son was a junior camp counselor at ABC of NC's summer camp over the years. My daughter, Mya, attended ABC of NC through a state-funded early intervention preschool program where neurotypical and neurodivergent students (specifically those with autism or characteristics of autism) received early education together to promote learning, inclusion, and acceptance. Mya also attended ABC of NC's summer camp program and went on to become a junior camp counselor as she got older.

My children were just two of many neurotypical students who have participated in ABC of NC programs over the last 20 years. Another parent said her daughter "liked the teaching methods used at ABC of NC. The program promoted compassion and encouraged tolerance for all different kinds of human beings." One of the first six employees of ABC of NC, Becky Payton, is now an ABC of NC program supervisor, and her children also attended ABC of NC as neurotypical students. She says, "Their experience at ABC of NC made them both more accepting and helped them to become well-rounded humans. This program fostered great empathy for kids who are different, especially those on the autism spectrum. It created a sense of understanding, belonging, and responsibility to the autism community."

I feel like being a part of ABC of NC had such an impact on Mya's life. Mya doesn't view people who are neurodivergent as 'less than.' Everyone, to her, is just like they are supposed to be. Her ability to get along with people is incredible; she accepts people for exactly who they are.

Mya is now 17 years old and she agrees that ABC of NC made a big impression on her. She explains her experience in her own words:

"As a little girl, I always dreamed of working with children. I realized that helping others gives me fulfillment. Growing up, I always pictured myself working as a therapist, diligently helping people arrange their family life and helping adolescents work through personal struggles. In middle school, I signed up to be a Junior Camp Counselor with ABC of NC for their Summer Camp Program. I was so excited to be able to help students and interact with so many awesome people.

"As a camp counselor, I was there to help adolescents interact with kids their own age in the class. I helped kids individually with struggles such as reading and social interactions. I was even able to use American Sign Language to interact with students who were nonverbal. I spent the entire summer interacting with these kids and their families. I saw so much progress in many of the new friends I made. I loved being part of something I knew was helping people.

"I continued this journey for many summers. I really enjoyed what I was doing and all that I was learning. I learned it takes lots of time and patience to care for any individual, and as imperfect humans trying to help and care for children on the spectrum, sometimes it's a challenge. This program even taught me things about myself. It taught me that even with myself, I have to be patient and give myself time to grow. I figured out that I was really good with kids, and I had a passion for helping people. Now I am a senior in high school, and I can't wait to further my education in child care after graduation."

Watching her—it was like she was born to do it. She just naturally knew what to do and how to interact with autistic children. It was amazing. All of that was because of being at ABC of NC, and that has carried over into her goals now in life; she knows she wants to do something to help people.

I'm proud that both my kids were a part of ABC of NC. They both accept everyone and don't have any qualms about talking to and befriending a person with disabilities of any kind. I would have tried to teach that lesson – but it wouldn't have been the same if ABC of NC hadn't helped me. It was my goal to teach it, but would they have really learned it, loved it, and lived it, had it not been for ABC of NC?





# the seed of an individual and the soil in which they grow

By Hayes Brenner

The Jewish philosopher Maimonides once declared that the greatest act of charity one can do is to strengthen someone to the point that he/she/they will no longer need any further assistance. It's an idea that has resonated with me ever since I encountered it: In theory, the idea is practical, efficient, kind, and wise. It implies that self-sufficiency and self-actualization are the true hallmarks of a life well-lived. But of course, being aware of the idea is the easy part; actually implementing it is a much, much harder task: How does one provide to the point where assistance is no longer needed? Does it involve money, or physical effort, or emotional support? Is it a collaboration or a one-way street of giving? How much time and labor are required? How do you even define what it means to be self-sufficient? There are no simple, easy answers to these questions, and within the world of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), these questions become even more complicated.

The perception of what it means to have ASD is very much in flux. While it previously was seen as a curse, now people will say it is a gift. As is often the case, I think

the truth is somewhere in the middle and very much context-dependent. Every individual with ASD is singularly different and, as such, will require different levels of support; some will need a lot, others not as much. I can only say for myself that this condition has certainly been a double-edged sword: I have struggled with social interactions for most of my life, which has caused a tremendous amount of anguish and loneliness. But simultaneously, I have been granted an analytical mind that I used to better my own position. It has given me a deep curiosity and passion for music, math, cinema, science, video games, and books, all of which have made my life more vibrant and rewarding (you only need to talk to me about any one of those subjects to see how much joy each brings).

But when I think about how and why I have been able to realize this positive benefit, I understand that, in a different setting, I may not have been able to actualize these passions. It's an idea that has disturbed me, and in all likelihood, it will always haunt me.

As I have developed my career as a scientist, I have learned what I would argue

is the most essential idea to trying to understand human behavior: It is not genetics alone, nor is it environment alone, that makes a human, but it is rather the interaction of the two. We know a seed has the potential to turn into a tree, and we know what it takes to make that happen. A seed needs soil, water, and sunlight to grow. Lacking just one of those three resources, a seed will never sprout, never grow, and never thrive. Without all three essential components, the seed is doomed to a life of wasted potential.

But of course, to bring out the greatest potential in a human is much more complex than planting a seed, passively providing resources, and letting it grow. There's a reason why the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" implies an enormous number of resources needed to bring just one individual to adulthood. And ASD only makes this more complicated.

The means and severity by which ASD impacts an individual is, truly, a spectrum. I must acknowledge that, in some instances, the condition can become enormously debilitating and does not provide benefits that could be actualized in different circumstances. But in other cases, given resources, care, and attention, those on the spectrum can live beautiful, independent, creative, fascinating lives. I know this because I have seen this, not only in myself but also in others. And further still, we have this condition, we acknowledge its afflictions, but we are not limited by them. Why shouldn't I be a raft guide, a guitarist in a band, a rock climber, and a teacher (all things I have done in my life ... so far)? Why limit myself? But here's the crux: those of us on the spectrum, like the seed, who have the potential to grow into incredible human beings, may never get the opportunity to do so without care, attention, and resources.



As I write this, the very nature of what constitutes "help" is being debated. I can never claim to know what's best for each individual; that responsibility is ultimately left to the parents until the individual can decide for themselves. But as someone on the spectrum, I know I was given access to resources and help early, and it has made a difference in dealing with the negative aspects of this condition so that I could later use the positives to my advantage. It is because of this kind of support that many individuals on the spectrum can now proudly say they're autistic. And I think being proud of autism is a good thing, for we on the spectrum must no longer feel ashamed of feeling like we don't belong in mainstream society, that we are somehow 'inferior' and 'broken.' Having felt this as an adolescent, I never want anyone to feel that way. This is why it is so important that we neither deny the resources nor the dignity that can make all the difference in the lives of thousands of individuals.

**"Those of us on the spectrum, like the seed, who have the potential to grow into incredible human beings, may never get the opportunity to do so without care, attention, and resources."**

So, to the parents, employees, and supporters of ABC of NC, I say this: When you lend us your support, do so with the knowledge that we desire to live life on our terms, for we are human, just like you. If you can grant us the resources to achieve this independence, that is the greatest gift, the greatest act of charity, that anyone could ask for. To do so may be easier said than done, but it is always worth doing.

And to my fellow individuals on the spectrum: To actualize our potential is not an easy task; very few things that are worthwhile are. But it is possible and very much worth fighting for.

*Hayes Brenner is currently pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut and is interested in researching the dynamics of rhythm and speech. He grew up in Winston-Salem and has previously volunteered with ABC of NC. He also identifies as being on the autism spectrum.*



# growing up at abc of nc

By **Stephanie Holladay** MA, BCBA  
Clinical Support Liaison  
Program Supervisor

When we think about ABC of NC, we immediately think of the children we serve and how much they grow up while receiving services on our campus. But, I grew up at ABC of NC too. Originally from Atlanta, Georgia, I came to Winston-Salem just after college to join my husband while he finished his medical degree. Soon after arriving, I read an impactful story about ABC of NC in the *Winston-Salem Journal*. I was so intrigued by the article, I applied and was hired for a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) position in 2007.

I remember the early months at ABC of NC being challenging, inspiring, and exhausting. Even as a young person, it took a lot of energy to keep up with my clients. As time went on, my endurance increased, and I no longer face-planted in my bed as soon as I got home. I also remember thinking that this job was a perfect intersection, where I was using my education and intellect in challenging ways, but then again, I was being paid to play and have fun. Sometime in my first



year, I was sitting in a meeting with my colleagues and program supervisor when I realized I wanted that job. I wanted to be a program supervisor.

At 22 years old, I began my career at ABC of NC without knowing that I would meet some of the most incredible and caring individuals who would mentor me for years. Over those years, I would go on to get my master's degree, become a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), and be promoted to program supervisor. I have been a part of ABC of NC's mission for almost 15 years now, and I am still just as passionate about what this organization is doing for young people on the spectrum as I was then. I am filled with a sense of gratitude for everything I have learned here and the unique individuals that I have supported through the years. I feel like I grew up alongside some of my clients.

One of my first clients was around the age of 9 when we began working together, and I had the pleasure of watching him

gain skills through his teenage years. He was complicated, silly, and deeply sensitive. His sense of humor was unparalleled, and I was often astounded by his ability to make connections with others through this humor. He was also nonverbal, which challenged me to relate to another human being without using words. I had the unique experience of being his teacher, lead teacher, and then ultimately his program supervisor, guiding him and his family to ensure his treatment needs were met.

This is what I mean when I say that I grew up at ABC of NC. As this young man gained life skills, I gained skills as a behavior analyst. He and other clients taught me many lessons. They taught me to be adaptive and flexible when things don't go as planned. I learned to admit when I was wrong and how to say, "You are right." Because of them, I am a much more well-rounded person. I will cherish these moments forever. I am the person I am today because I grew up at ABC of NC.

to our  
families

**Thank you** for entrusting your children to our care for 20 years and counting.

to our staff,  
board, supporters  
+ the community

**Thank you** for opening your hearts and arms to ABC of NC and sharing our vision that all people with autism spectrum disorder reach their full potential in a world where they are valued, accepted, and included.

#### VISION

Our vision is that all people with autism spectrum disorder reach their full potential in a world where they are valued, accepted, and included.

#### MISSION

ABC of NC is committed to providing high-quality, evidence-based diagnostic, therapeutic, and educational services to people with autism spectrum disorder; ensuring service accessibility to individuals from any economic background; offering support and hope to families; and advocating for inclusion and acceptance





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