



Insight

FALL 2023 | Vol. 7, No. 2



The New England Center
for Children®

Autism Education and Research

FALL 2023
Vol. 7, No. 2

A Letter from our CDO	1
Teacher Feature	2
Meet the New NECC Leadership	3
Acts of Generosity	5
Your Gift, Your Impact	6
NECC News	7



It is truly an exciting time at The New England Center for Children® (NECC®). In August, we entered our 49th year of providing award-winning autism services to our students. After 48 years of dedicating his life to helping children with autism, L. Vincent Strully, Jr., stepped down from his role as CEO, making way for Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, to lead the organization forward. Vinnie will remain as NECC's founder and executive advisor.

You can read more about the leadership changes and new Board of Director members in these pages, as well as the impactful expansion of NECC programs. In September, we welcomed our first students into the new Smigel Supersmile® Dental Clinic operated by New England Dental Group with great success. Meanwhile in the Gulf, the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education operated by The New England Center for Children (MRC-NECC) expanded its services by welcoming 32 new students and our global consulting team opened a pediatric specialty clinic in Dubai.

We wouldn't be where we are without your support, and we look forward to another academic year filled with growth, both for our students and our organization.

Sincerely,

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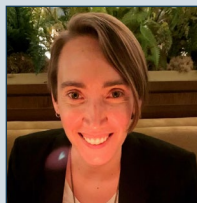


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 The New England Center
for Children®
Autism Education and Research

 Mohammed bin Rashid Center
for Special Education
The New England Center for Children

ACE®
ABA Software System



In Memory of
AMY POSOCCO
March 14, 1982 – July 7, 2023

We remember our dear friend Amy, a longtime NECC employee and member of our Public School Services team, who passed away unexpectedly in July. During her 19 years at NECC, Posocco contributed to many areas, including the residential program, MRC-NECC, and the PSS program. She was a bright, funny, and energetic person who was passionate about her work and who cared deeply for her students and colleagues. She will be missed by the entire NECC community.

Teacher Feature

JULIE LEBLANC

As a student at the University of Florida, Julie LeBlanc, MS, BCBA, LABA, was interested in studying animal behavior, leading her to sign up for any behavior analysis course she could find. Thinking she signed up for a course on primates, LeBlanc accidentally found herself learning about applied behavior analysis (ABA) and developmental disabilities.

"From there, I joined Dr. Brian Iwata's lab, learned about NECC, and here we are," LeBlanc said.

While she was initially attracted to NECC for the master's degree programs — she earned her master's in ABA from Western New England University — she has stayed because she loves her job. LeBlanc joined NECC 11 years ago as a teacher in the residential program, where she spent time coaching students throughout the week at both in-house and community job sites. "I loved being a job coach and supporting my students in the community," she said. "I got to know the Vocational Department pretty well, and in 2014 when they developed a position for a vocational coordinator, I was excited to move into a new role."

Now, as a vocational specialist, LeBlanc is responsible for developing and overseeing job opportunities within NECC and in the local community, as well as working with students and their teams to determine the best vocational work for them. She also conducts job site training for students and their job coaches and assesses what supports a

student might need to complete their job successfully.

"I love my job because not only do I get to work with the students and their teachers, but I have the opportunity to collaborate with people across almost every department in the school, in addition to members of our community," she said.

LeBlanc shared that NECC has students working in almost all areas of the school including in the cafeteria, where twice a day they prepare healthy snacks, clean, and restock food service items, snacks, and beverages. Students also collect recycling and confidential shredding, hang flyers, care for the Edible Schoolyard in the René Mansfield Courtyard, water plants in staff offices, and clean multiple areas of the school and team vans. In the Daniel Smigel Career Development Center (CDC), students are involved in every step of assembling and shipping materials for the Core Skills Assessment included with the ACE® ABA Software System, hand-making gift bags, and working in the School Store. Students also work and volunteer in the community in places like farms, libraries, conservation societies, and organizations that offer services for the community, such as food, clothing, and supplies. Paid job sites currently include J White's Automotive, Apex Entertainment, DN Van Lines, Greenwood Industries, and Walgreens.

"Vocational opportunities allow our students to explore activities with the



goal of identifying what they enjoy and excel at as individuals," said LeBlanc. "These opportunities also allow us to assess areas of need for each learner."

She added that community work opportunities in particular are incredibly important, as they enable students to continue the exploration process and refine their skills in a natural work setting. It's one of her favorite parts about her job.

"I love seeing our students demonstrate the skills they have learned in a community work setting and engaging in tasks that they enjoy," said LeBlanc. "I especially love watching our students interact with their supervisors, co-workers, and peers!"

MEET THE NEW NECC LEADERSHIP

JESSICA SASSI, PHD, BCBA-D, LABA *CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER*

In August, Dr. Sassi began her new position as just the second-ever CEO in NECC's history, succeeding founder L. Vincent Strully, Jr., who served as CEO for all of NECC's first 48 years.

Dr. Sassi has more than 20 years of autism education and applied behavior analysis experience. In her 16-year tenure with NECC, Dr. Sassi has served in several roles including program specialist, residential program director, and clinical director, before being named executive advisor in 2020 and executive director of NECC's Southborough campus in 2021. She has also been a member of the clinical adjunct faculty in behavior analysis at Western New England University and special education at Simmons University. Her research has been widely published in academic journals including the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* and *Behavioral Interventions*.

"For nearly two decades, through my work as both a clinician and an administrator, I have had the opportunity to work alongside and learn from some of the best researchers and teachers in the autism and behavior analysis fields," shared Dr. Sassi. "I'm proud to be part of an organization that offers premier educational services to children with autism, and I'm committed to holding us to the highest standards. Our commitment to staff professional development and forming the next generation of educators is key to achieving our vision of a world where autism is not a barrier."

NECC announced its succession plan in November 2020, allowing the NECC community to prepare for Strully's departure. Over the last three years, he has worked with Dr. Sassi and the executive team to ensure a seamless transition in leadership.

"I have worked closely with Dr. Sassi for many years and know she has the skills and experience to steer NECC to a bright future," shared Strully. "Her background in research enables her to lead from a unique perspective, and it is something from which our NECC students and staff will benefit."

Prior to working at NECC, Dr. Sassi served as a clinical specialist at the Kennedy Krieger Institute. She received her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from the University of Florida.





HEATHER MORRISON, MS, BCBA, LABA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NECC SOUTHBOROUGH

After seven years working as the director of administration, Morrison was named executive director of NECC Southborough. Upon graduating from Miami University, Morrison spent a year working in a group home for adults with developmental disabilities and found her calling. She joined NECC in 1999 as a teacher, earning her master's degree in ABA and becoming a BCBA along the way. During her 24 years at NECC, she has served in several capacities before her appointment as director of administration in 2016, including residential coordinator, day coordinator, program specialist, assistant program director, and program director of the Staff Intensive Unit (now ITT). Her research has been published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, and she has presented at regional and national conferences for behavior analysts.



PHIL LEONARD, MS

DIRECTOR OF ADMINISTRATION, NECC SOUTHBOROUGH

Succeeding Morrison as director of administration is Phil Leonard, who has worked at NECC for nearly two decades.

Leonard joined NECC in 2004 when he started his career as a teacher on the New Castle residential team before moving into the role of adapted physical education (APE) specialist. During his time at NECC, Leonard obtained his Master of Science in Physical Education at Bridgewater State University and a professional license in physical education. He held leadership roles in the APE department, most recently as assistant director.

NECC Welcomes New Board Chair, Two New Members

This fall, NECC announced a change in leadership with its Board of Directors. Elizabeth Wetherbee Klein was elected the new chair, and Laura Dudley, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, as vice chair.

Klein is a marketing consultant who has chaired the annual Children of Promise Gala Host Committee for the past two years. Dr. Dudley is an associate clinical professor and associate chair of the Applied Psychology Department at Northeastern University. She began her career in special education at NECC in 1994 and has helped educate the next generation of behavior analysts through faculty positions at Hamilton College, Northeastern University, and Simmons College.

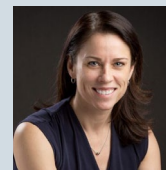
"All of us at NECC are excited that Elizabeth and Laura will continue to bring their expertise and wisdom to the table as Board chair and vice chair," said NECC CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA. "Their insights and experience have been invaluable in our fundraising and educational work. We

couldn't be more delighted to welcome two new members, whose deep business expertise will further our mission to transform the lives of children with autism."

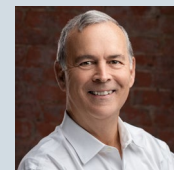
Two new directors joined the board in September: Dave Castellani, operating partner at Brewer Lane Ventures, brings more than 30 years of technology and operating leadership across financial services and startups; and Tom Pacheco, chief financial officer of Coretelligent, has a wealth of expertise in financial strategy and planning, accounting and reporting, mergers and acquisitions, capital structure and risk management.



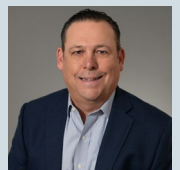
Elizabeth
Wetherbee Klein



Laura
Dudley



Dave
Castellani



Tom
Pacheco

Acts of Generosity

VINNIE STRULLY – A LEGACY OF SERVICE

As a young man, L. Vincent Strully, Jr. recognized that there must be a better way to help children with autism and their families. In 1975, he and his colleagues embarked upon this challenge, establishing the first program — which would become The New England Center for Children® — with \$30,000 in start-up funds at the Taunton State Hospital. Nearly 50 years later, that ambitious project has evolved into an internationally recognized leader in autism education, research, and professional development.

“Helping children with autism has been my life’s work,” shared Strully, who will continue to serve as an executive advisor and on the Board of Directors. “I am proud of the accomplishments NECC has achieved, and the thousands of children and families whose lives we have transformed.”

Over his 48 years, Strully helped grow the Center to include a day school, residential program, a partner classroom model within public schools, a global consulting practice, a research center, onsite graduate degree programs, and a patented technology division to deliver NECC’s curriculum to thousands of learners with autism around the world.

This past spring, Strully was recognized by the national organization Autism Speaks as well as the Massachusetts Association of 766 Approved Private Schools (MAAPS) for his decades-long leadership and dedicated career in special education. MAAPS renamed its annual Leadership Award to the L. Vincent Strully, Jr. Leadership Award as a way of recognizing his innovative leadership not only on behalf of NECC, but on behalf of the entire field.

And although Strully has stepped down as NECC’s CEO, his legacy as founder will live forever in the programs and buildings he has built, as well as through the L. Vincent Strully, Jr. Endowment Fund for The New England Center for Children. The Fund, which was announced at the 2022 Children of Promise Gala, was established to honor Strully’s accomplishments and to ensure his work and vision continue for generations to come by recruiting and training the best staff to serve children with autism both at NECC and throughout the world. Since its launch, nearly \$10 million in commitments have been secured and will be built upon over the next few years.



In 1975, Strully hired Kathy Foster as a teacher. For the next 42 years, the two would build NECC into the organization it is today. Foster, who served as a teacher and Chief Operating Officer, remains on the Board of Directors.



In 1986, The New England Center for Autism moved to Southborough, MA. Ten years later, it became The New England Center for Children. Strully is pictured with the late Michael F. Downey and the late Daniel Gould, PhD, BCBA, LABA, both of whom had a significant impact on NECC.



In 2007, NECC opened a school in Abu Dhabi, as a directive of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. It was renamed the Mohammed Bin Rashid Center for Special Education operated by NECC (MRC-NECC) in 2018 and currently serves more than 260 students.



In 2008, The Michael S. Dukakis Aquatic Center opened after a successful Capital Campaign. NECC continued to expand, opening the John and Diane Kim Autism Institute in 2016 and the Dillon Arledge Student Center in 2017.



In 2021, ACE® surpassed 10,000 learners worldwide. The platform published its first lesson in 2003 and continues to be utilized by teachers and students at NECC as well as more than 12,000 learners worldwide.



YOUR GIFT, YOUR IMPACT

When you give to NECC's Annual Fund, your gift provides students with opportunities to be a part of the community and to have fun outside of the classroom. Throughout the spring and summer, students enjoyed lots of fun activities, including Field Day in June, a Student Dance in July, as well as time in the pool and ice cream and pizza parties.



NECC OPENS SMIGEL SUPERSMILE® DENTAL CLINIC

The NECC community was all smiles on Thursday, September 21 at the grand opening celebration of the new Smigel Supersmile® Dental Clinic, a new state-of-the-art dental clinic on campus, operated by New England Dental Group (NEDG).

The new clinic provides on-site dental services for nearly 100 residential students, with future plans to expand to day students and employees. The clinic is an expansion of the Smigel Supersmile Dental Program — a dental desensitization protocol that helps prepare children with autism for dental visits.

"I truly cannot express how excited I am that our dental clinic has opened," said NECC CEO Jessica Sassi, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA. "I have been with the organization for 16 years and throughout that time, I can say that dental appointments have been a real challenge for our students. Dental appointments can be uncomfortable, but then you add the complexities of autism to that, and it is truly a wellness challenge. I have watched our students go through quite a bit and really struggle to get that care."

Dr. Sassi shared that while the dental desensitization program helped prepare students for the dentist, bringing students for appointments was still very resource intensive. The on-site dental clinic has been a game changer for both students and staff.

"So far, the clinic has served 19 students, some of whom I had accompanied to previous dentist appointments in Boston with significant challenges. Now I see them sitting in the chair, holding their teacher's hand, and they're getting through the appointment," said Dr. Sassi. "This just means the world to our students, our families, our staff, everybody. It's truly remarkable."

Robert Smigel, whose son, Daniel, joined NECC at the age of 12, attended on behalf of Supersmile, which was founded by his late father, Dr. Irwin Smigel.

"My dad would be so happy to see this clinic," said Smigel. "He made his name as an aesthetic dentist, but he always made the overall health of his patients the primary concern. My dad would tell us when we were younger that life is meaningless if you don't make a difference. It's an honor to be here among people who make a difference every day."

The Smigel Supersmile Dental Clinic services are provided by New England Dental Group (NEDG), which offers a full breadth of services and state-of-the-art technology for enhanced care in its nine locations throughout Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

"This is a special moment for us, too," said Mike Anastasi, chief operating officer of NEDG. "This clinic has been over a year in the making, and to see everyone gathered together to celebrate is surreal."



WORLD'S FAIR HISTORY ENRICHMENT PROJECT



In August, NECC students had the opportunity to travel the world without leaving Southborough when the Education Department hosted a World's Fair. The event, which was part of a history enrichment lesson, featured projects and maps reflecting the home countries of students and staff.

Students learned about holidays in Ethiopia; tasted baked Sandbakkel cookies from Norway; learned about Flamenco music in Spain; and the Tubbataha Reef in the Philippines.

"This event was an opportunity for teams to explore different cultures, and to share that information and experience with others," said Dominique Maribett, MEd, BCBA, LABA, a reading and academic specialist at NECC. "I hope everyone who attended learned something new about a different part of the world; whether that was a food item, a style of music, or a tradition that they didn't know about before."

DR. BECKY MACDONALD RETIRES AFTER 42 YEARS

After more than 42 years, Becky MacDonald, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, clinical psychologist and senior program director at NECC, retired.

During her tenure, Dr. MacDonald made her mark on the organization. Her ideas would often become curriculum, graduate courses, or books, while her research and publications helped shape the ACE® ABA Software curriculum. But most notable of her contributions to NECC is her work with the Infant Sibling Research Project, a study aimed at identifying early signs of autism in infant siblings of children with autism. Through this program, Dr. MacDonald and her team have developed an Early Markers of Autism (EMA) assessment tool that can be used with infants from birth to 18 months old. The project continues to collect key data that has implications not just for the immediate students and families NECC serves, but also for future generations of children with special needs.

The important work of the Infant Sibling Research Project continues after Dr. MacDonald's retirement. Erin Michaud, PhD, CCC-SLP, BCBA, LABA now leads the team as principal investigator, while Victoria Yarzebski, MS, BCBA, LABA and Sally Dupere, MS, BCBA, LABA continues to work on the project.



Dr. MacDonald delivers a talk at the 2023 Women in Behavior Analysis (WIBA) Conference in July. Below, she conducts a home visit for the research project.



NECC EXPANDS SERVICES IN ABU DHABI, DUBAI

Exciting things are happening for NECC in the Middle East. This fall, the Mohammed bin Rashid Center for Special Education operated by The New England Center for Children (MRC-NECC) expanded its services and welcomed a new group of 32 Early Years students into the program.

"This is a very exciting time for us here at MRC-NECC, and we couldn't be more eager to expand our programming," shared Pam Olsen, PhD, BCBA, executive director of MRC-NECC. "We are delighted that we can welcome more children with autism in the Abu Dhabi emirate who are in need of NECC's award-winning services."

The ages of the students in the new Early Years program range from 2.8 years to 7.6 years, with the average age of 4.8 years old. With the addition of the new Early Years students, MRC-NECC will boast a roster of 262 students, its highest ever.

Meanwhile, due to a growing need in the area, NECC opened the Allied Health Clinic in Dubai, which offers children one-on-one or group occupational therapy and speech and language therapy across a variety of diagnoses. The Allied Health Clinic (bottom photo) functions as an outpatient therapy center providing specific, direct services to clients in 30 to 60 minute sessions, versus the comprehensive treatment plans provided by NECC's other clinics.

"Our vision is to continue to expand services throughout the Middle East region," shared Kristin Buchanan, MSED, BCBA, executive director of Gulf Consulting at NECC. "The opening of the Allied Health Clinic is just another step toward providing much-needed services to children in these communities."



NECC GREEN COMMITTEE WINS SUSTAINABILITY AWARD



In October, NECC's Green Committee was honored at the Annual BABAT Conference in Worcester. The research arm of the Green Committee won the 2023 "Behavior Change for a Sustainable World" award, which recognizes and supports research that uses behavior analysis concepts and principles to promote sustainable practices and environmentally friendly behavior change.

During the three-day conference, which gathered thousands of Massachusetts's top behavior analysts, many NECC researchers and staff shared their work with colleagues in the field.

L to R: NECC Green Committee members Kelly McConnell, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA; Julie LeBlanc, MS, BCBA, LABA; and Kim Walter, PhD, BCBA, LABA celebrate the award with BABAT Board of Directors members Jill Harper, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA, and Joey Reyes, PhD, BCBA-D, LABA.

SPRING EVENTS RAISE NEARLY \$500,000

This spring and summer, NECC had a record-breaking fundraising season. Parents, families, staff, donors, sponsors, and the extended NECC community rallied around these events, helping to contribute to make NECC's most successful year of event fundraising.

In April, NECC Parent, **Mike McKenna** drove across the United States to raise money and awareness for autism and NECC. During his trip, McKenna, who raised \$83,200, spoke to classes at Marymount University in Washington, D.C., and met with former staff and autism advocates along the way.

On April 27, the **5th annual NECC Art Show**, hosted by David and Elizabeth Wetherbee Klein, a member of NECC's Board of Directors, raised more than \$14,000 while showcasing our talented students and staff.

On April 17, four runners took on the historic **Boston Marathon** on behalf of NECC. Together, Pete Mittelholzer (NECC friend), Dr. Kerry Egan (director of speech and language services at MRC-NECC), Emily McKenna (NECC sibling), and Courtney Howe Cotto (former NECC staff and current friend) raised more than \$52,100.

On May 13, more than 1,000 participants gathered for the **17th Annual NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism** presented by Erland Construction. The event raised nearly \$203,500.

On June 5, more than 100 golfers gathered to celebrate the **25th annual Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic for Autism** at the Franklin Country Club in Franklin, MA. The event raised more than \$100,000.

On August 20, a team consisting of 15 staff, family, and friends of NECC tackled the **Falmouth Road Race** and raised a record near \$38,000.





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BOSTON | ABU DHABI

SAVE THE DATES

4/25/24 NECC Art Show
5/11/24 NECC 5K Walk/Run for Autism
6/3/24 Carlos Placido Dunkin' Golf Classic

CHILDREN OF PROMISE

GALA

11 | 10 | 23

INTERCONTINENTAL BOSTON

www.necc.org/gala